

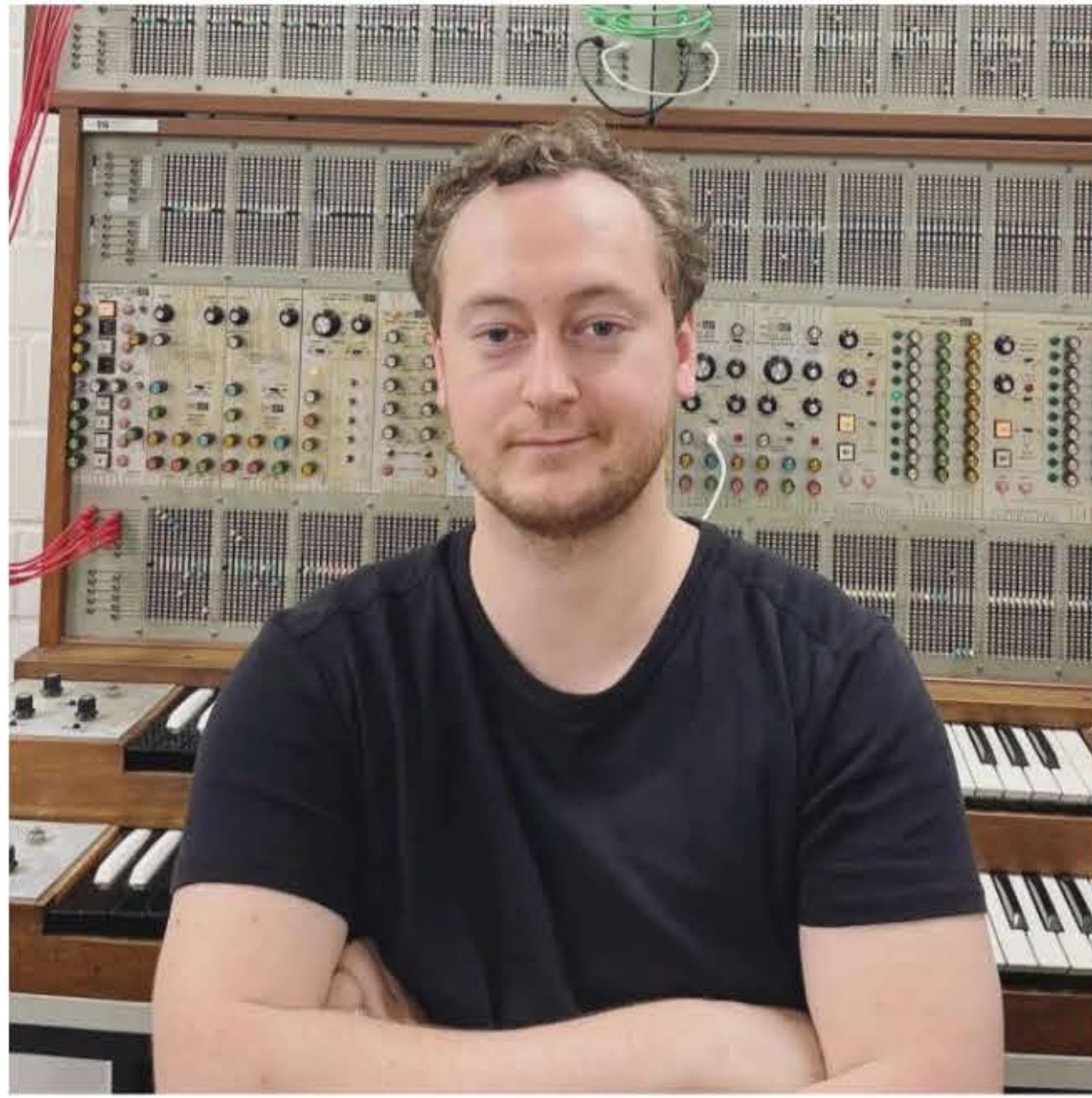
The Musical "Collision" of Composer Slam Europe's Alexander Held

COREY MATTHEWS • MAY 26, 2023



Alexander Held

Alexander Held is somewhat amused by the notion I've proposed to him that he has something in common with contestants of shows like *The Voice* and *American Idol*. Though he's from Germany, Alexander knows of these shows and their "judge meets public popularity" formula. While Mr. Held is a successful composer whose original works have been performed at historic venues in his homeland such as NYC's Merkin Hall and the Soundlinks Festival in Cologne, it wasn't that long ago that he took part in the Composer Slam Europe. Alexander represented Germany in this event which also featured works by composers from Belgium, Serbia, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. In addition to the judges, an online voting system allowed the general public to express their affinity, or lack of, for these original works and their creators. The original compositions featured in this major televised event were performed by the Orchester im Treppenhause. We've asked Alexander to give us his personal perspective from the inside of a music competition of a markedly different tone than that of coifed singers belting out pop tunes.



Having spent a little bit of time with you and researching your work, I'm pretty sure that you are not into the competitive mindset when it comes to being an artist. So how is it that you came to be a part the Composer Slam?

Alexander Held (AH): *A friend told me about it and, after looking it up online, I actually became quite excited about the opportunity to write for a large scale ensemble and work with the Orchester im Treppenhause, a professional and touring large ensemble that is well known in Germany. While popular songwriters typically need just a few musicians to hear their work played live, composers like myself need a much larger pool of performers. We all live to hear our work performed and I'm no exception. It's a beautiful experience to hear a large ensemble manifesting the ideas that once lived only in my head. Hearing your own music live on stage is always a memorable experience. Every time it happens to me, I think back to when I wrote the piece and remember the details and phrases that I worked into it at that time. It is a very humbling sensation to hear so many professional musicians demonstrate their skill performing my work.*

You obviously brought something unique and exciting because you won a commission as a result of your work. It's a hard question to answer but, what do you think it was about your composition that led to this recognition?

AH: *The piece that I sent in was a short violin solo. This appealed to the representative of the Composer Slam and I took a minimalist approach on what I created for the actual TV airing/audience voting part.*

You are known for using electronics partnered with traditional instrumentation. In your own words, describe the composition that you created for this competition.

AH: *The piece that I wrote for the Composer Slam is called "Collision." My original concept of the piece was to create two parts; the written out orchestral part and a backing track that only consists of synthesizer sounds. The result would be for these two parts to 'clash' together. I was leaning more towards a minimal style, writing out patterns that would be overlayed, stretched out, and compressed. The ensemble performing it is a chamber orchestra/large ensemble and can therefore generate very dense and interesting textures.*

One requirement of the competition was for the composer to also perform with the ensemble. Once again, you took an unorthodox approach.

AH: (Laughs) *Yes. I do play different instruments (Alexander is well known for his guitar and keyboard skills) but since I am not very comfortable playing an instrument on stage, I had to get creative on how to bring myself into the piece with the skillset that I have. Adding to my nerves was the fact that my piece and my performance opened the show. My active role with this setup was to live mix the playback that I had created so it would blend well sonically with the rest of the ensemble.*

How was the mood amongst yourself and the other competitors?

AH: *It is difficult to put art and music into a competition since it is so subjective. What the judges were mainly looking for was diversity in the program, being able to create an exciting evening with many pieces as different as possible. It was wonderful to see my colleagues write in their unique style while I was staying true to mine. Once the evening was over and the other participants had their pieces played, we all met at a bar and exchanged the thought process of how we each composed our pieces. It was thrilling to hear how many different approaches were being used to write music in different countries, from working on it intuitively to having everything strictly planned out.*