HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SYNFORM – An Interview with SYNFORM Editor Matteo Zanda (University of Aberdeen, UK)

Ten years ago – in May 2007 – SYNFORM started as a new adventure and collaboration between Thieme Chemistry's journals department and Professor Matteo Zanda. The project was initiated in order to "serve the international chemistry community by publishing timely information about new scientific advances in organic chemistry and related fields of research," as Matteo Zanda wrote in his inaugural editorial. SYNFORM was and is meant to inform you, our readers, about facts and people from the world of chemical sciences – all this in a stimulating and thought-provoking manner. Starting with only two sections – **Inside Stories** and **SynStories** – content, format, layout, and publication frequency have been developed and changed during the last decade. In addition to pieces covering interesting articles from the current literature, nearly every issue now contains an interview with a member from the younger generation of chemists – the **Young Career Focus**. These regular sections are spiced up with **Conference Reports** and **ChemSites** (specifically presenting departments or institutions). And there are plenty more ideas for the next ten years!

On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of SYNFORM, the tables were turned for this interview: Matteo Zanda was happy to answer some questions from the Thieme Chemistry team.

Prof. M. Zanda

INTERVIEW

Thieme Chemistry *Matteo, it's been ten years since SYNFORM was launched and the first articles were published. You have been the Editor since the very beginning; looking back at all these years, what have you enjoyed most about being SYNFORM Editor?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda Honestly? It was fun all along! I wouldn't do it if it wasn't, I am a very busy academic, you know (if there was a video I would be winking at the camera at this point)? My pick, however, is being a member of the Thieme Chemistry family (because it really is like a family!) and Editorial Boards, together with all those big names of organic chemistry. I remember I was a bit scared at the first Editorial Board Meeting, sitting next to folks like Steve Ley, Dieter Enders, Paul Knochel, Peter Vollhardt and Vic Snieckus who are in all the textbooks (when they don't write them…). But they are all really nice guys, you know? Nothing to be scared about!

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Thieme Chemistry *Despite all the fun, what challenges were you confronted with during the last ten years as SYNFORM Editor and how did you respond?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda Naaahhh… no real challenges. At some point, I was struggling a bit to keep the tight editorial deadlines required for a timely monthly publication of SYNFORM because of all my other academic duties. Susanne [Haak, *editor's note*] can be tough, you know, if you are late on a deadline! But now that Alison [Sage, *editor's note*] – our fantastic editorial assistant – is with us, I am no longer struggling with deadlines. She does most of the work, you know, so I can sit back and relax! Easy life for me!

Thieme Chemistry *Now that we know that you have helping hands in the background, could you give us an overview of what your daily SYNFORM business looks like?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda I mostly work evenings and weekends for SYNFORM. The first thing is browsing the literature in depth, of course, which sometimes can be challenging owing to time constraints. I follow my instinct when it comes to selecting articles and authors for SYNFORM, if something catches my eye I simply go for it, no hesitations. I also do my best to diversify the pool of prospective authors; we don't want to feature always the same people – that would be very boring. SYNFORM has a preference for younger up-and-coming scientists, who are still trying to establish themselves in the tough world of research. I think they are the ones who deserve and need to get more visibility for their work, which is what SYNFORM does. Once a paper has been selected, I inform Alison – our super-efficient editorial assistant – who takes care of inviting the authors and liaising with them, for collecting all the necessary material, ideas, opinions, thoughts, text, photos, images, drawings. Once everything is in, Alison and I edit the article in the form of an interview. We don't do real interviews because that would be logistically challenging, plus we want the selected authors to be absolutely confident about the content of their SYNFORM article – we need to be reliable and they need to be happy with it. Once the draft is approved by the authors, all the material is sent to the Thieme Chemistry editorial office, and here is when the magical Susanne kicks in. I have been working with Susanne for more than ten years now, and believe me: she has editorial superpowers! Humans cannot be so efficient, reliable and timely. So, I am pretty sure Susanne is a mighty editorial superhuman entity, in fact – this is a little secret I am willing to share with you – she has been looking exactly the same for the last ten years, she doesn't seem to get older, and she never gets tired! Susanne is able to spot every single tiny typo in a draft. I challenge the readers to spot a typo in any of the SYNFORM articles published in these ten years: if you can do it, Thieme Chemistry may be prepared to offer you an all-inclusive two-week holiday for the whole family in a five-star hotel, first-class travel included! That's the Thieme Chemistry style! After one week of cooking of all the crude editorial material in her mysterious editorial cauldron in Stuttgart, Susanne gets back to us with the SYNFORM galley proofs, which are always super-good looking and ready to go online! Abracadabra!

Thieme Chemistry *Thank you for the compliments that we are happy to give straight back! As we all work on SYNFORM as a service to the community, what is the best feedback you have received regarding SYNFORM from authors or readers?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda Oh that's easy! It is when readers write me or tell me that they enjoy browsing/reading SYNFORM and just can't wait for the next issue to be published, to see who's featured in it. It really happens, you know? That's really rewarding for me!

Thieme Chemistry *Amazing! That is a great reward for us as well. One regular input to SYNFORM from your side is the editorials. The covered topics are always very interesting: informative or inspiring, sometimes funny, at other times critical. How do you develop the ideas?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda Thanks, I am flattered! I always pick up the first idea that springs to my mind, whatever that is. I try to avoid politics or overly 'difficult' topics in my editorials, and I always strive to be light and ironic without being (too) silly. Sometimes it works well, sometimes less, I guess. It would be very rewarding for me if our readers did recognize themselves – at least a bit – in those editorials, as I consider myself as the average academic, who is lucky enough to do this fantastic job, with all its highs and lows. What I do is really just write about my professional experience, without taking myself too seriously. If I start writing pretentious editorials, please show me the door immediately!

Thieme Chemistry *Alright. Now let's talk a bit about your research. Besides being an editor, you have held the position of Professor of Medical Technologies at the University of Aberdeen, UK, since 2009. Could you tell us more about the focus of your current research and its aims?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda My background is in synthetic organic chemistry, but I have been working at the interface with

biomedicine for many years now. Quoting my website: "My group's mission is the use of Chemistry for finding innovative solutions to translational biomedicine and imaging problems. We work side-by-side with biologists and clinicians, and we believe that Chemistry offers powerful tools for addressing unmet medical needs and we strive to support biomedical research from lab-bench-to-bedside." In a nutshell, I hope one day – possibly 50 years or more down the line – I'll look back and think: OK, it was worth it, I have done something useful with my life and my chemistry.

Thieme Chemistry *Turning to the past for a moment: you have been involved in many projects, with co-authorship of over 185 papers including eight patent applications. Looking back at your career so far, what do you consider to be your most important scientific achievement to date and why?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda I think it was the intuition that stereodefined trifluoroethylamines can behave as peptide bond bioisosteres. That concept was then picked up, used and validated by many other researchers and a few pharma companies too, which is very, very rewarding for me, as well as for my group members.

Thieme Chemistry *That's a remarkable achievement indeed, congratulations! Considering all the research that has been done in the field to date, which major problem in the world might one day be solved through medicinal chemistry?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda I hope all of them! Too ambitious? Maybe not! It will necessarily have to be a co-operation with other areas of research, such as biomedicine, engineering, materials science, but one day we'll find a solution to all the major problems currently affecting humanity. Unfortunately, some other problems will likely come to light… Clearly we have to believe in science. There are too many people around these days – also in very prominent political positions – who think that scientific evidence can be ignored – we all know who those enlightened folks are. However, I think that we, scientists, need to be better at communicating science. What's happening out there is partly our fault; we are not good enough at explaining our results and what we do. On the other hand, politicians and the general public sometimes are just not prepared to listen. This needs to change, on both sides.

Thieme Chemistry *Indeed, that's quite a fundamental problem that scientists but also publishers should be aware of. Now we would like to know more about you. When did you first become interested in chemistry?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda During secondary school. My uncle Giovanni handed me a 'Piccolo Chimico' box (a chemistry set for kids) as a birthday gift when I was 13 and that was it, I was doomed… That literally cast a spell on me; I couldn't imagine doing anything else in my life. However, when it came to deciding on a university course, I actually had a bit of hesitation, because I was very attracted by biology too. Eventually I opted for chemistry, and I never regretted that choice. My unsolicited advice to younger people? Trust your gut, do what you really like, if you are good enough you'll find your way and the perfect job for you.

Thieme Chemistry *You did your PhD in industrial chemistry. Why did you choose to focus on medicinal chemistry afterwards? What is it about bioorganic/medicinal chemistry that fascinates you?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda The truth? I never really cared about industrial chemistry, but that was the only option at Politecnico di Milano, when I finally got a chance to enroll in a PhD course. Please, don't make me comment further about the Italian academic system… I had to take industrial chemistry courses though: plants, processes and so on. With all due respect for industrial chemistry, it is not my kind of stuff…

Thieme Chemistry *Given the chance to meet any chemist (living or dead) who would it be and why?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda I would really like to meet one of those pioneers of synthetic organic chemistry, like Cannizzaro or Beckmann, and ask them: how did you manage to achieve all that without NMR and Mass Spec? Who knows what people like that would achieve with all our modern instruments and facilities…

Thieme Chemistry *That's right, all those techniques are considered as being evident nowadays. Now, we have two more personal questions. What kind of hobbies and interests do you have outside of the lab?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda I have very little time for hobbies unfortunately, but I love horror/thriller movies and I am a football (or soccer, if you like) fan, I support my city's team: Atalanta BC, which is having a great season. I also follow the Scottish

League with great interest; I go to the Pittodrie stadium whenever I can and watch The Dons (Aberdeen FC). My son Simone plays in the AFC youth academy, so – together with my wife, and sometimes my daughter too – I often embark on long car drives to follow his away matches around Scotland. That takes up most of my spare time!

Thieme Chemistry *Finally, what's one thing most people don't know about you?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda Something that my family knows very well: I am not a patient guy! Actually, I am not patient at all. I do my best to hide it, particularly when I am at work, but the consequence is that I am even less patient when I am NOT at work!

Thieme Chemistry *Getting back to SYNFORM: Are there any future projects or developments that you are currently planning? Have you any particular wishes for SYNFORM?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda Yes, definitely. Although I am not a 'social media guy' (actually I don't even have a personal Facebook or Twitter account), my plan would be to make SYNFORM more shared, more interactive, more 'social', with a more active role for the readers. This is already happening: SYNFORM started as a traditional online pdf monthly supplement to SYNLETT and SYNTHESIS, but now we have a more dynamic platform whereby articles are also published individually online on the SYNFORM website and the Thieme Chemisty Facebook page. Articles are advertised and posted on LinkedIn, and I believe this is further increasing SYNFORM's visibility. Although technically not a section of SYNFORM, we are also producing brief News articles on the top e-first articles published in SYNLETT and SYNTHESIS (and soon in SynOpen too). This concept will be implemented further, we want to be very dynamic, timely, 'social' and we really want to involve the Thieme Chemistry readership in SYNFORM – before, during and after publication. And let me take advantage of this 10th anniversary interview to invite all our readers to get in touch with us by email or through the website: please share with us your thoughts and opinions on the articles we publish and the topics we should cover in SYNFORM. Your opinions – dear readers – do matter to SYNFORM!

Thieme Chemistry *Thanks a lot for this exciting outlook! Now that we have almost come to the end of this interview, is there anything else you want to tell your readers?*

Prof. Matteo Zanda Just one thing: that being the editor of SYNFORM for these ten years has been an immense pleasure. I am looking forward to the next ten years!

Thieme Chemistry *Thank you very much for this interview! We are very excited to continue our successful cooperation in the same great spirit as always! We wish you all the best for the future, and look forward to hearing about further developments in your laboratories.*

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