“It’s inspiring to see how talented researchers are advancing new solutions”

by image supplied



The violin in Walter Fischli’s hands is a special specimen: this “biotech” violin was produced as part of an Empa research project using treated tonewood with the aim of creating an instrument with the same sound properties as antique master violins.

18 November 2022

Together with three colleagues, ETH alumnus Dr. Walter Fischli founded Actelion, one of Europe’s biggest biotech companies, in 1997. Today his foundation supports research projects and up-and-coming talents. In this interview, he talks about his time at ETH and what, in his view, adds spice to science.

What sticks out in your mind when you look back at your time at ETH Zurich?

WALTER FISCHLI – I mostly recall the high quality of the education. We had fantastic professors and were in close contact with Nobel prize winners – including those who would win the Nobel prize in the future.

What advice would you give to ETH students today?

I'd encourage them to pay attention to the broader context of their study programme and to consider where they can contribute with the knowledge they're acquiring. Often you can only see the bigger picture once you've got the basics down. You should never lose your curiosity for the fundamentals. Working across disciplines should be the goal – it's really something that spices up science.

What lessons did you learn at ETH that still stick with you today?

At ETH I learned how to properly analyse problems and find practical solutions for them. These solutions aren't always to be found on your own or in your immediate environment – but maybe they're "next door", so to speak. So don't give up on trying to find the right door!

How has your perception of science changed over the years?

My interdisciplinary work has helped me realise that sophisticated technology isn't enough on its own – it only truly begins to bloom when you have an application for it. This changed my worldview: I realized that it was the scientific questions that shaped the technology and not the other way around. Today I see science as a kind of orchestra in which talented researchers work in concert to advance new solutions and approaches.

How and when did you hear about the ETH Foundation for the first time?

I've had the opportunity to work together with amazing ETH researchers. Over time I got wind of the desire to receive financial support, which I was able to put into practice in a professional way via the ETH Foundation. This really opened the floodgates for new contacts and projects. Today I'm proud of being able to support my alma mater in a meaningful way and to give back part of what I've received.

Support research projects

Explore more puzzle pieces

https://ethz-foundation.ch/en/spotlight/awc-walter-fischli-cutting-edge-research/

PDF exported on 11/04/2026 18:31
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