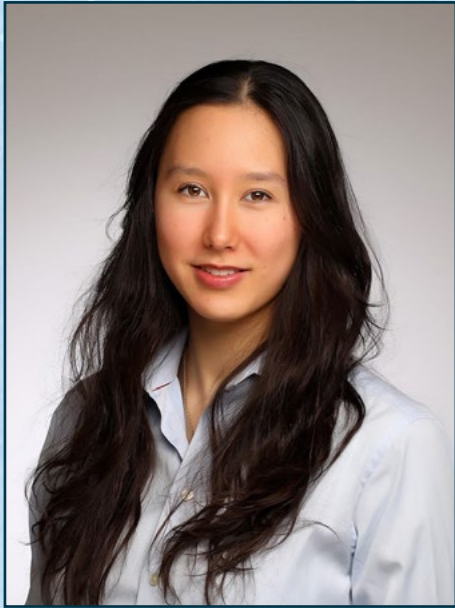


An interview with Clara Cossin, a former participant in the SPRING and ATHENA programs at UNIGE, recently admitted to Stanford. An inspiring journey, marked by doubts, discoveries... and a genuine passion for mathematics.



When Math Started to Make Sense
What made you want to pursue mathematics?
“At first, I thought of math as something very abstract... I didn’t really see how it could be useful in real life. But after spending some time at EPFL and reading a lot, I realized just how fundamental mathematics is to the structure of our society. I’ve always loved logic, and this realization changed everything. I wanted to dive in seriously.”

Helping People Appreciate Math: the Essential Role of Teachers
In your opinion, what could be done to help young people discover mathematics better?
“For me, it all starts with the teachers. I was lucky to have teachers who encouraged me to go further, to read more advanced books even when I didn’t understand everything. School often gives a very misleading impres-

From SPRING to ATHENA: A Journey into Mathematics

sion of mathematics as a difficult, abstract, and stressful subject. We need to help curious students get beyond that first impression.”

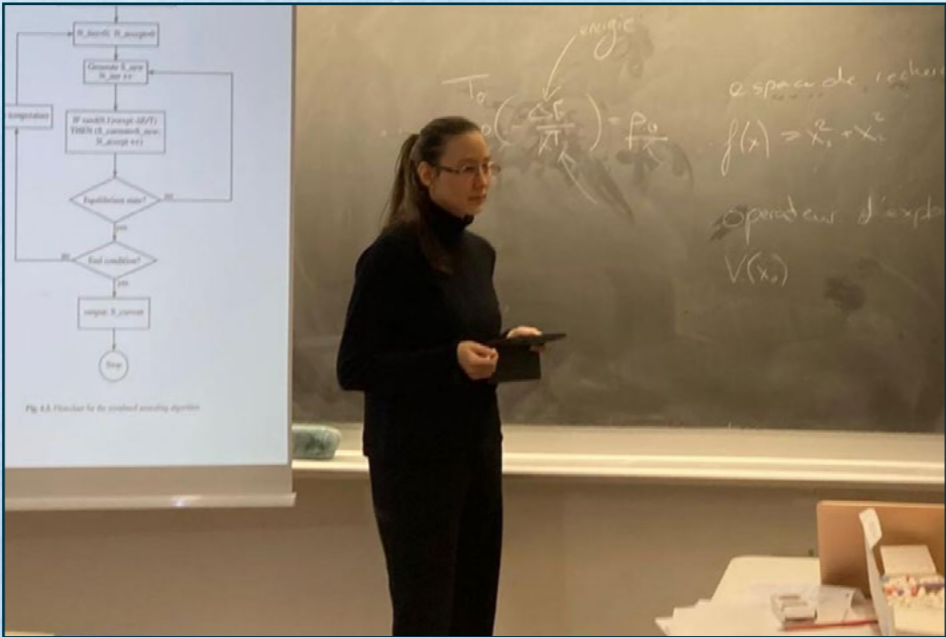
Two Programs, Two Approaches: One Shared Momentum

When Clara discovered that UNIGE offered the ATHENA and SPRING programs, she didn’t hesitate. “I knew I liked math, but I felt I needed a structured environment to make progress. For me, it was a real opportunity... almost like opening a door to another world.”

Both experiences were very different but deeply complementary.

With ATHENA, Clara got a concrete taste of university life. She attended undergraduate math courses with personalized support in the form of tutoring. What stood out for her? The chance to talk with university students, share their daily life, and above all, gradually feel that she belonged in the mathematical community.

“Before, I thought of mathematicians as inaccessible geniuses... At UNIGE, I discovered kind, passionate, and very human people. Conversations with professors, students, and teaching assistants showed me that math isn’t just about theorems and numbers. It’s a way of thinking that also shapes how we see the world.”



SPRING, on the other hand, gave her a different kind of learning experience, freer and more collaborative. At first a little skeptical about this approach, based on collectively reading a mathematics book, Clara quickly got into it. The weekly discussions, the exchange of ideas, and the freedom to explore concepts in depth allowed her to go much further in her understanding.

“ATHENA gave me a glimpse of university life, while SPRING taught me to think differently and to talk about mathematics freely. Both brought me so much, in very different yet perfectly complementary ways.”

Being a Woman in Mathematics...
Did being a woman in a field still dominated by men affect your journey?
“At UNIGE, I always felt very welcome. I never felt I was treated differently because I was a woman, and that really helped me feel like I belonged in the mathematical community. But it’s true that in other settings, being the only woman among 30 men... even if no one said anything negative, you inevitably feel a bit different, a

bit scrutinized. I think it’s important to say: it can be intimidating to be a woman in a field that’s still very male-dominated, but experiences like ATHENA and SPRING gave me the confidence I needed to keep moving forward.”

Inspirations in Math and Beyond
Were there people who particularly inspired you on your journey?
“Yes, first and foremost, the mathematical community at UNIGE really left its mark on me. It gave me confidence and helped me feel legitimate, even though I knew I wasn’t at the same level as many others at the university. There’s a lot of kindness, and above all a contagious passion for mathematics. I was deeply impressed by the teachers, people who know an extraordinary amount yet remain very humble and approachable. My faith also supported me throughout my journey. It gave me the strength to persevere, the confidence that things would fall into place, and the sense that I was not alone in facing difficulties.

In life, Steve Jobs particularly inspires me, not necessarily for his ethics, but for his audacity, his ability to seize

opportunities, to jump in without hesitation, to fall and then get back up. I admire this idea of moving forward without fear of the unknown, of taking risks. One of his quotes that inspires me deeply is this one: “The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.”

A Mathematician... and a Musician
Have you always known you wanted to study math?
“Not really. If I hadn’t participated in SPRING and ATHENA, I might have chosen music, I’m a violinist, or perhaps fields like mechanical engineering or robotics. But those two programs really confirmed my desire to pursue mathematics. Now I’m heading to Stanford, where I’ll be able to combine both: studying for a bachelor’s degree in mathematics while continuing with music.”

A New Adventure at Stanford
How did you react when you learned you’d been admitted to Stanford? And what excites you most about this next chapter?
“When I got the reply, it was incredible. For me, it was a bit like reliving the excitement I felt when I joined ATHENA... but on a whole different scale! It felt like a door opening onto a new world. What excites me the most is being able to keep studying mathematics while also continuing with music, which has been a big part of my life for more than thirteen years. At Stanford, it’s very common to pursue multiple tracks in parallel, and that will allow me to keep pursuing both of these passions.”

Conversation with Clara Cossin
Former participant in the SPRING and ATHENA programs at UNIGE

Interviewed by: Mayra Lirot
NCCR SwissMAP