

## **A short history of Swiss instrumental folk music or how preservation can kill a musical tradition**

If you ask a Swiss about Swiss instrumental folk music you will get with the utmost probability the answer: “Oh yes, I know this clarinet and accordion stuff, but I can’t stand it!” An astonishing lot of Swiss people have a very ambivalent relationship to their instrumental folk music. A short overview on the history of this music will show the reason for this remarkable behaviour.

### ***Around 1800: single local musicians and duos; itinerant ensembles, miscellaneous repertoire, arbitrary instrumentation***

Let’s start with the situation after 1800: At that time, there were two kinds of instrumental music in the country in Switzerland: There were a few natives playing an instrument like violin, flute, clarinet, trumpet, shawm, dulcimer or zither. Sometimes two of these indigenous musicians joined and played as a duo, but there were hardly any bigger ensembles. Almost only itinerant musicians formed bigger ensembles. They were people without fixed abode that vagabond from village to village playing music for a warm meal, a cup of booze and a place to sleep – and if they were lucky, they earned a few coins. Since Switzerland was the poorhouse of Europe at that time it were of course not the best and biggest bands touring through Switzerland. The Swiss alpine explorer Heinrich Szadowsky describes this kind of ensembles like that still in 1867:

*«The clarinet, the violin and the double bass, in fact the „basset“, a hybrid between a cello and a small double bass. In this compilation, some times also with a trumpet, they build the most excellent dance music ensemble in many villages in the mountains. One can find for this purpose also only three brass instruments: Lead trumpet, a bigger trumpet and a trombone. The players are usually itinerant musicians that practise their profession alternating with boozing, depending on occasion. With the basset on the back, the fiddle by the side and the clarinet in the pocket of the ragged coat they rove from tavern to tavern and they find from time to time a music-lover whose enthusiasm for the arts is not restricted to one puny bottle...»*

*[Szadrowsky 1867/68:347]*

Others give account of bands from Bavaria and Austria with harp, violin, Flute, clarinet or trumpet, of orchestras from Eastern Europe with dulcimer and violin or from southern Europe with flutes and shawms. If we imagine, how these itinerant bands may have sounded, we shouldn't expect much. The quality of the instruments – at this time without keys or valves – made it impossible to play exact in tune. Never the less, those orchestras were popular, even if the musicians themselves were society's misfits. There was no other opportunity to listen to music at all.

### ***Since the 1830ies: Brass bands and accordions***

In the 1830ties happened two things that were significant for Swiss folk music. First, there was a reorganisation of the militia army. On this occasion, the government founded military brass bands and equipped them with modern wind instruments with valves and keys. When these army musicians quitted the service, they could keep their instruments and so they founded in their villages civil brass bands or wind orchestras –woodwind instruments were always included in these bands. In the most villages, this was the only opportunity to get an instrument and a basic musical education. These orchestras played on several festive occasions but soon, the best players of these local brass bands started playing dance music with four or six brass instruments and a clarinet. This was the first time, when sedentary, native musicians joined in dance bands. This was an important condition to develop an indigenous musical style because the roving musicians played a wide repertoire with pieces from every region they toured.

The second important thing happened 1829 in Vienna. A new instrument was invented: the accordion. Already seven years later, the first accordions were produced in Switzerland. This shows how successful this new instrument was and how fast it spread itself over Europe. There were two reasons for the popularity of this new instrument. First, it was cheap. To make a trumpet one need brass, an expensive material and one need to weld and to solder, two operations that need a special equipment and training. Who wants to build a violin or a clarinet that sounds somewhat conveniently, needs a huge specialised knowledge. Whereas every handy joiner can recreate an accordion if he has an original and enough time. (And time was cheap then.) Only the metal reed tongues he has to buy.

Second reason is that the accordion is very easy to play for beginners. On the then common early diatonic Swiss accordions with its two to four bass keys and eight to ten treble keys a talented beginner could play a simple piece in a few hours only by pulling and pushing the

instrument rhythmically. On the clarinet, the trumpet or the violin you have to practise a few days to produce a single note and one or two years to play in tune.

However, the greatest advantage of the accordion is that one player can play melodies and accompaniment. Especially on the remote farms and villages, the chance was small to find other musicians to play with. That's why the accordion prevailed so fast in the music-making in the home. For the ballroom, however it was too simply constructed. Playing dance music a whole evening in one or two keys was too boring.

Nevertheless, the accordion had despite – or maybe because – of its popularity in the country a very bad reputation among musicians and educated people.

*«The accordion gives great pleasure to the alpine herdsmen and the farmers. They squeeze the instrument with perseverance and patience; you can't call that kind of handling "playing" or "making music". Soon there will be no place in the Alps where you will be spared of these painful sounds. Our present young people in the mountains find it more comfortable to pull the accordion or to blow the purring mouth organ instead of turning towards more efficient instruments. They waste their time inglorious with the accordion and the mouth organ but they remain nothing but fumblers...»*

*[Szadrowsky 1867/68:284f.]*

### **Since the 1850ies: from Brass Dance Bands to String Dance Bands**

Around 1850 there were in Switzerland still itinerant musicians and an increasing number of sedentary indigenous brass dance bands that played with various brass instruments and clarinet on carnival, parish fair, weddings and baptism. This was for the poor rural population an appreciated possibility to ensure an auxiliary income. With these local bands, dancing was not any more restricted to the rare occasions when travelling musicians came by. So people began to organise dance evenings where the dancers had to pay for dancing. Because of the commercial success of these events, more and more semi-professional and professional bands were founded. Soon appeared beside the brass dance bands so called string dance bands that played with clarinet, trumpet, one or two violins and double bass. These string bands began to displace the pure brass bands because they produced more rhythm.

These bands played a wide repertoire of different dance tunes. We know from contemporary witness that many of these bands played from sheet music, as they learned it in the local brass-orchestras. Unfortunately, we have almost no scores from that period, but we can assume that they played more or less detailed and professionally elaborated arrangements.

### ***After 1900: Integration of the accordion in the string and brass dance bands***

However, a new style competed soon with this kind of professional dance music. Albert Bachmann, who played clarinet in one of the most famous bands around 1900 said:

*«In the 1880ties the accordion was not yet mature for the public ballroom and unimaginable in a professional dance band. Nevertheless, when the accordion left the cowshed it tooted mostly parts of waltzes without theme very fast. Astonishingly the audience liked it... As far as I know, it was 1903 when a professional dance band used the accordion for the first time. In the improvised domestic music, it was common practice for a long time.» [Bachmann 1936]*

It seems, that the self-educated accordion players – who had better instruments since the late 1880ies, the so-called «Schwyzeroergeli» a half-chromatic Swiss type of accordion – stood in keen competition to the professional musicians. At first, the string and brass bands tried to copy the new style the audience loved so much with its habitual instrumentation – clarinet, trumpet, violins and double bass. After 1900, the accordion increasingly displaced the two violins in the professional bands. One accordion player was cheaper than two violinists were. With this, two traditions were conglomerated: the clarinet and brass players were used to play from sheet music as they were educated in the local brass bands, the accordion players were self-educated and couldn't read music. So a new form of playing became common practice: while the leading clarinet player had a music stand with the sheet music of the melody the rest of the band was improvising an accompaniment.

### ***Since 1920ies: Country dance music became popular in the cities; saxophone and foxtrot***

In the First World War, many bands were torn apart because many people died by a flu epidemic. After the war, many people moved from the country to the cities looking for work. So new bands were founded in the cities, especially in Zurich. These new country style dance bands became an attraction in the cities. Bands playing without sheet music fascinated people at that time. The new rousing country style with its impulsive, hard drinking musicians that were always in a good humour became the most popular genre for the lower and middle class. One man was mainly responsible for this success in the cities: Joseph Stocker, called Stocker Sepp – he used always family name before given name in accordance with the ancient custom in the country. Stocker was a good clarinet player, a gifted entertainer and an exceptionally gifted businessman. Born in 1898 in the central part of Switzerland he came to Zurich in 1921. He founded a band called «Stocker Sepp and his first Unterwaldner Farmer Band»

although he and his band neither were from Unterwalden nor were they farmers. He just snapped at the chance to buy a batch of traditional costumes from Unterwalden (one of the founding cantons of Switzerland) at a good price because he realised that the audience in Zurich liked this exotic masquerade. He was the one that invented the traditional costumes in this music that was now called «Laendlermusik», the Swiss-German equivalent to the English term «country music». In the past, musicians in the country used to play in their best suits, that means black coat and trousers and a white shirt and tie. Stocker also comprehended how important the new media of broadcast was. He played free for the national broadcast and he and his music became famous all over Switzerland.

Even the competition between folk and popular music in the cities was very prolific. The country style dance music soon begun to mingle with the other then popular style in the cities: the early jazz music. In the end of the 1920ties the soprano saxophone established as an alternative to the clarinet and the country style foxtrot – a kind of country-swing – appeared as a new dance.

### ***1930/40ies: Heyday – «Laendlermusik» was popular music***

The thirties and forties of the 20th century were the times of the so-called «mental national defence» when the government propagandised a self-contained Swiss identity that distinguished Swiss culture from Germany. In this period, Laendlermusik became from hilarious dance music for the middle class to a national style. In every city and every village, there were taverns, pubs and ballrooms where this kind of music was played. The national broadcast played hours and hours of this music. Listening to Laendlermusik became a civic duty, even for the upper class. In this period, «Laendlermusik» was folk music, dance music and popular music all in one. People identified with that kind of music in the country as well as in the cities and they believed that it was an old and typical Swiss tradition.

### ***Since the 1950ies: Standardisation of instrumentation and repertoire***

After the war, when the period of mental national defence was over and foreign music was again available, Laendlermusik quickly lost its popularity. People wanted something new, something international. However, there were also musical reasons for this loss of popularity. So far, Swiss instrumental folk music was a multifaceted genre with bands of almost every kind of instrumentation: clarinets, every kind of brass instruments, accordions, saxophones and double bass. In the fifties, the bands were standardised. Stocker Sepp for example always had trumpets, trombones and tubas in his band. In other bands, there were still violins. The bands were assembled in the traditional pragmatic way: one took, what one could get. After

the Second World War there were only two kinds of instrumentation: Either a clarinet or a saxophone, an accordion, a piano and a double bass or two clarinets, two Swiss Accordions and a double bass.

The repertoire was standardised as well. In former times, there were quite a number of different dances. After the war remained four or five: *Laendler* (fast round dance in three quarter time), the *Polka* (in Switzerland a slow dance in two quarter time), *Schottisch* (fast two quarter time), *Laendler-Fox* (ternary, “swinging” two quarter time) and rarely *Mazurka* (a slow three quarter time).

### ***Since the 1960ies: Perfection and stagnation***

In the sixties, the Swiss accordion duos («Schwyzeroergeliduos») and trios could establish as the third possible instrumentation. (NB: A duo consists of three persons: two Swiss accordions and a double bass, but one doesn't count the double bass...) This was the last change in Swiss instrumental folk music. Musicians and the remaining audience were – and most of them are still – convinced that it was their task to preserve this national style unmodified and that every change would be an adulteration or commercialisation of national heritage.

That doesn't mean that nothing happened since then. On the contrary, a lot of great new tunes and great new bands came into existence. Musicians like Carlo Brunner, Dani Haeusler, Res Schmid, Markus Flueckiger or Willi Valotti perform with such virtuosity on the clarinet and the accordion one can hardly improve. However, in the last 40 years no new forms, rhythms, instruments or instrumentations were generated. It depends from the perspective whether you call this a period of perfection or of stagnation, both is right to a certain extent.

This led to the paradoxical situation we are in today in Switzerland: On the one hand, the «Laendlermusik» is as virtuoso and perfect as it has probably never been before. On the other hand, nobody cares. The number of enthusiasts constantly decreases. Fifteen years ago, most Swiss People knew Laendlermusik, but they didn't like it anymore. Today the youngest generation doesn't even know this kind of music because they consider it as boring and outmoded.

Let me summarise shortly what we have seen:

Swiss instrumental folk music has been a vital genre that developed continuously up to that point, when it got the status of a national music during the Second World War. The estimation as a national heritage stopped every development because both, audience and musicians believed that this was a very old tradition that should be preserved without any change.

Indeed, they were able to conserve the musical style, but the price was high. They abandoned

the only really old tradition in this genre: permanent changes and permanent adjustment to new circumstances and requirements. In the past, this turned traditional music consistently into an updated part of everyday life and an important component of Swiss identity.

Nowadays it is just a moribund habit. Indeed, today the music still exists, but most of the Swiss are jolly well fed up with it because it is the very same since forty years. We see, one can kill a tradition by holding tight to its past, by keeping it from moving until the time to move has run out. Tradition needs to stay abreast of changes otherwise it dies.

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