Temporary exhibition 'Traditional Folk Music'
Forum of Swiss history Schwyz | 14.6.2025 – 3.5.2026

Tour of the exhibition

Introduction

There is no such thing as a uniform type of traditional Swiss folk music. Rather, it is made up of a variety of regional styles, instruments, and voices. From *landler* music, to experimental techno yodelling to the Ticino *bandella*, folk music always sounds different, migrates between different regions, keeps on changing, and so remains alive. The exhibition goes in search of its traces and reveals how the myth of Swiss folk music was, and still is, constructed, which instruments are typical, and what the music sounds like. Midway in the exhibition, there is a stage where visitors are invited to try their hand at 'playing the squeezebox' *(örgele)* or hitting the dance floor in a wild courtship dance referred to as *bödele* (stomping).

Tone and sound

Music conveys emotions and memories. This also applies to traditional folk music: there is much more to a yodel or an alphorn melody than its sound.

Thus, the alphorn became a national symbol in the 19th century, the melodeon (*Schwyzerörgeli*) turned folk music on its head, to the dismay of some, and yodelling is said to trigger strong feelings of homesickness.

Melodeon, alphorn, dulcimer, and yodelling stand as typical representatives of traditional Swiss folk music: how are they made, what do they sound like, and how has their sound literally become instrumentalized over time?

The melodeon – A revolution

The development of the melodeon (*Schwyzerörgeli*) around 1883 revolutionized traditional folk music. Simultaneously providing melody, accompaniment, and rhythm, and thanks to its rich sonority and polyphony, it supplanted the strings and brass bands common until then in many areas.

The makers Eichhorn, Nussbaumer, and Salvisberg successfully turned the originally simple instrument, often disparagingly referred to as 'cow mucker' (*Chuedräckler*), into a compact instrument in its own right.

The Alphorn – Herdsmen's Olympics

'In honour of the alphorn' was the motto of the first Unspunnen Festival in 1805. The aim was to bring Bern's urban and rural populations closer together by celebrating common old traditions. However, there were only two contestants for the alphorn

competition. Subsequently, alphorn playing was actively promoted: through offering courses and alphorns for hire, the aim was to strengthen the musical tradition, but initially with only moderate success. From 1920, the Federal Yodelling Association assumed the task of promoting the alphorn. Ever since, the instrument has ranked as a national symbol of Switzerland.

“When the Alpine snowfields glow red”

A herdsman playing an alphorn at the top of a mountain – ever since the 18th century a perfect marketing backdrop. During the Enlightenment, the Alps lost much of their threatening reputation; instead, untouched nature and a ‘free pastoral people’ became showcased and idealized, with the alphorn serving as the ideal symbol of such a setting. The image of Alpine folks playing the alphorn is used in tourist advertising to this day.

The dulcimer – Symbol of the Säntis region

The (hammered) dulcimer traces back to Persia and was probably brought to Switzerland by itinerant musicians. The first mention of this dance music instrument is to be found in council records from Zurich dating to 1447, when a musician was fined for playing a dulcimer at night. It disappeared again in the 19th century with the emergence of clarinets and brass instruments – with the exception of the Säntis region where it became the hallmark of dance music.

The zither – An instrument for at home

Unlike the dulcimer, the zither is not hammered, but plucked. It comes in different shapes and sizes: from the simple ‘witch’s log’ made from a single block of wood to the more mandolin-like neck zither.

Thanks to a low purchasing price and because it was quite easy to play, the zither was a popular instrument for music-making at home across all social classes from the 19th century onward, and often played by women. With the rise of radio, the zither gradually disappeared again.

Cattle calling and prayer calls

Alpine herdsmen and women make use of various calls in their daily lives. Using special ‘cattle calls’ (*Löckler*, lit. ‘luring call’) – formerly also known as *ranz des vaches* – they bring in their cattle for milking in the evening. In alpine blessings, people use prayer funnels to call on the saints and ask them to protect their mountain world.

These vocal traditions fascinated early foreign travellers. The Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau even spread the tale that mercenaries, stricken by homesickness, would often desert when hearing a ‘cattle call’.

Organized yodelling
Around the turn of the century, numerous yodelling clubs were established, followed by the foundation of the Federal Yodelling Association. Its aim was to safeguard the Swiss tradition from outside influences.

Yodel festivals include, amongst other things, a yodelling competition, which is rated according to a strict set of rules. Apart from intonation and articulation, the correct wearing of the traditional costume is also judged. This leads to the question of whether music can be regulated at all.

Natural yodelling
Yodelling is a form of singing that involves frequent switches between head and chest voice. One distinguishes between yodelling songs with sung verses and a yodelled chorus, and textless, natural yodelling. The latter not only varies from region to region but also goes by different names, such as *Juuz*, *Juiz*, *Zäuerli* or *Ruggusseli*.

Yodelling is not a Swiss invention: yodel-like songs are found across the entire Alps, in Scandinavia, in Georgia, as well as in central Africa.

'Tinder' on the dance floor
Folk music is dance music. Whether *Schottisch, polka, mazurka,* or *ländler*: the styles differ in terms of rhythm. Nightly dance events provided the rare occasion of getting to know a potential future spouse and dancing together, often until the early hours of the morning.

The dancers paid for the tunes that were played, either for individual pieces or they purchased so-called dance ribbons, which, rather like a multi-trip ticket, included several tunes.

Different everywhere – Regional variety
When the instruments come together in a formation, traditional Swiss folk music becomes a bonding experience. Each region has its distinct peculiarities. While in Central Switzerland, the melodeon and clarinet are mainstays, the dulcimer is a key element of folk music in Appenzell. Different ideal line-ups, sounds, rhythms, and styles are not only hallmarks of specific regions, they also mutually influence each other – even beyond musically similar regions – and thus keep on developing. What does folk music in your region sound like?

Central Switzerland – From brass bands to ländler
The rise of brass bands in the mid-19th century had an impact on traditional folk music. The members of the military-style brass bands were used to playing by score and then imparted this way of playing to the much smaller folk music formations. This meant that traditional music was no longer exclusively learnt and played by ear.

In Central Switzerland, people originally danced to strings and brass bands. With the rise of the popular melodeon around 1900, the old instruments went out of fashion, turning the region into a *ländler* stronghold.

Musica populare Ticinese
The term *bandella* refers to small, informal brass bands which are formed from larger brass formations (*bande*), marking a special feature of the Ticino. They perform at folk festivals, where they provide the dance music, spontaneously and without the help of scores.

Vocal music is also very popular in the Ticino. Based on shared cultural and linguistic features, songs from northern Italy and music from the Ticino mutually influence each other. As a case in point, typically Italian instruments like the mandolin are also to be found in the Ticino.

Appenzell – String music lives on
In Appenzell, strings held their ground in folk music, while elsewhere they were supplanted. In 1892, the 'Original Appenzeller Streichmusik' was established, a quintet with two fiddles, dulcimer, cello, and bass. Originally, the formation wore their best Sunday dress when playing, but with time this was replaced by the traditional Appenzell costume, including decoratively studded braces and a red waistcoat. Tourists visiting the area around the turn of the century were delighted by such folkloristic elements.

Grisons – of 'Fränzlis' and 'Sepplis'
Up to the early 20th century, traditional folk music in the Grisons was referred to as 'Fränzli' or 'Seppli' music. The 'Fränzlis', with Fränzli Waser as the defining figure, were Yenish people from the Engadin, who introduced many north Italian elements into traditional Swiss folk music.

The Grisons style as known today has its origins in exile in the Bern region. From 1940, Josias Jenny and Luzi Bergamin, migrants from the Grisons, created the typical Grisons line-up with their 'Bernese Ländler Quartet', consisting of two clarinets, melodeon, and bass.

New arrangement or stolen?
Copyright has always been a controversial issue in traditional Swiss folk music. Some believe that borrowing melodies from others, adding bits of your own, and rearranging the pieces is part of the spirit of folk music. However, many Yenish musicians feel that they have been cheated out of their melodies, claiming that often tunes were shared for a glass of wine, noted down and then published without reference to their original source.

French-speaking Switzerland – The Reformation put a stop to folk music
We do not know what traditional folk music originally sounded like in this part of Switzerland because much of it was lost as a result of the ban on dancing during the Reformation. Scores rediscovered in archives today provide vague clues as to the range of once popular melodies. They show that it was not cantonal and national boundaries that defined the type of music, but geographical proximity and cultural similarity. It is by no means a coincidence that the *Monferrine* – a dance in 6/8 time – was popular in the Rhone Valley, in Piedmont as well as in the Provence.

Standstill and new start – Folk music since the 20th century
Originally, *ländler* music was dance music for the common folk. During the Second World War, *ländler* music was aired on the radio across Switzerland in an attempt to strengthen national cohesion, leading to a musical standardization. From the 1960s at the latest, we see a number of counter and innovative movements seeking to revitalize folk music. This gave rise to 'new folk music'. Folk music is constantly adapting to societal developments and is often torn between preservation and innovation.

The golden years – Ländler goes urban
Ländler music had its heyday in Zurich. From the 1920s onward, musicians from Central Switzerland introduced the new, pacy melodeon style to the pubs of the Niederdorf, spreading a boozy, exuberant atmosphere. Legendary figures such as the conductor Stocker Sepp and the clarinettist Kasi Geisser left their mark on the scene.

The national exhibition of 1939 elevated Central Swiss folklore to a national tradition, not least with the help of radio broadcasts to all parts of the country.

Collecting and preserving
In the middle of the 20th century, Hanny Christen travelled across Switzerland, equipped with a recorder and her notebook and documented old dance music in conversation with rural folk. Her aim was to collect and preserve 'real' traditional music, but preferably without the innovations recently introduced by the new *ländler* music that annoyed her.

Numbering around 12,000 melodies, she left behind a huge collection of instrumental folk music, a true treasure trove for musicians today.

How folk music made it to the TV screen
From the 1960s on, folk music was shown on Swiss-German television. Host Wysel Gyr celebrated folklore in front of mountain backdrops, in pubs, and in village squares. Known as the 'king of folk music', he made national stars out of local musicians, discovered new talents and novel line-ups.

Gyr's TV-folklore remains a controversial issue to this day: some people owe him their musical career, others see in him a collector and preserver of traditional cultural heritage, yet others believe that he presented folk music in a too clichéd manner.

Folk with F
Between 1972 and 1980, Lenzburg Castle hosted a folk festival. The focus was on making music together, including the attempt to merge social-critical folk music from the Anglophone world with traditional Swiss folk music. Invitees included Blues bands, local dialect chansonniers, and string ensembles from Appenzell. The fusion was only partially successful: some urban 'folkies' found inspiration in Swiss folk music but more traditional folk musicians preferred to stick to what they had.

Who calls the tune?
Societal developments tend to shape folk music. While the lyrics of old yodel songs occasionally convey outdated values, some political parties make use of folk music to strengthen the sense of Swiss national identity.

Folk music has polarizing potential. While some people would like it left unchanged, others attempt to break new ground. They yodel to techno beats, re-write old song texts or seek inspiration from jazz.

Studying folk music
Since 2007, folk music has featured in the curriculum of the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. The course, unique in Switzerland, conveys broad and in-depth knowledge of Swiss folk music and teaches both traditional and new musical styles.

Especially in the early days, the new branch of study was the subject of heated debate. Some feared that amateur music might lose out in significance, others considered the professionalization of Swiss folk music a benefit. Today, interest in the study course is steadily growing.