



Alpentöne

Behind the stereotypes of yodelling and thigh-slapping, an innovative movement is taking hold of Alpine music. Thomas Burkhalter heads to the mountains to sample Switzerland's festival of Alpine sounds

Although it sits at the centre of Europe, Switzerland is still fiercely separate. According to the stereotype, the Swiss are against European integration, like to yodel and live in the provinces, where the mountains limit their horizons. Altdorf is exactly this kind of place: a picturesque town of 9,000 inhabitants in central Switzerland, beautifully situated between the mountains, the River Reuss and Lake Uri. There are two things Altdorf is famous for: the monument to the (fictional) national hero William Tell, and the environmental activists who demonstrate on the nearby motorway, causing huge traffic jams and embarrassment for the minister of transport.

But Altdorf is becoming increasingly well-known for something else – the extraordinary three-day Alpentöne Festival. Taking place every two years since 1999, musicians from France, Italy, Germany, Austria, Slovenia and Switzerland combine

Alpine culture with classical and contemporary music.

The music played at Alpentöne is primarily from the Alps, but it subverts the stereotypes of the genre. There may be cowbells and alphorns, but not as you have heard them before. Imagine musicians circling their alphorns round and round, blowing free jazz and funk patterns on the festival's main stage in the Wilhelm Tell Theatre. Or imagine the Mnozil Brass Band from Vienna parading through Altdorf the whole night, playing well-known melodies from pop, folk, even opera, and accompanied by giggling, cheering and beer-drinking fans.

Given the beautiful setting of Altdorf, the connection between music and landscape is always strong and at Alpentöne, an essential component. On Sunday afternoons there are organised 'sound walks' in the local nature reserve. Michel Portal has improvised on his clarinet in the

forest, Hans Hassler played his accordion sitting on a chair in a stream, while 'New Alp Music' pioneer Hans Kennel blew his funky alphorn by the local lake. Surely this is the best possible setting to hear the overwhelming diversity and modernity of today's Alpine music.

What makes Alpentöne different is that the Alpine music heard here isn't the sort that's been corrupted and castrated into a sterile national music beloved of TV shows and supermarkets. The Alps sound rather special in Altdorf. "The crowd loves crazy musical experiments," asserts Töbi Tobler, a member of Das Neue Original Appenzeller

Streichmusik Projekt from the Swiss canton of Appenzell. Tobler plays hammer dulcimer with fellow musicians Paul Giger and Arnold



Alder (violins), Fabian Müller (cello) and Francisco Obieta (bass). They create music that swims in slow motion through uncertain harmonies, finding

its way into traditional melodies and ending in a celebration of the idiosyncrasies of Appenzell music.

Tobler is right. People do seem to enjoy the 'crazy' concerts and tend to criticise superficial fusions. The collaborative community spirit is enhanced by the musicians staying in Altdorf for the duration of the festival, some of them practising or jamming together around the town. In 1999, Austrian saxophonist Wolfgang Puschnig and the Austrian brass band Mostviertler Birnbeittler, jammed in front of the William Tell monument for a whole afternoon. Tourists who had come to see Tell filmed and took pictures of the strange encounter: 17 Austrians playing marching songs under the monument of the Swiss hero, who – in Schiller's story – threw the Austrians out of the country.

Puschnig is enthusiastic about the festival. "The most important musicians working with alpine culture meet in Altdorf.



I hope and believe that this event will inspire more musicians to experiment with their roots." The past two festivals have witnessed some extraordinary shows: the unorthodox Swiss duo *Stimmhorn* mixing yodelling and alphorns with Mongolian overtone singing; Italian tambourine player Carlo Rizzo and the Swiss Jew's harp player Anton Bruhin creating sounds and beats you'd never dream of; and the Italian jazz musicians Gianluigi Trovesi and Gianni Cosca switching riskily but elegantly between folk and classical styles.

The festival's artistic directors – Mathias Rüegg (from the Vienna Art Orchestra) and his successor Urban Frye – have tried to organise exclusive projects for *Alpentöne* rather than presenting international artists from the festival circuit playing their regular programmes. Especially for the festival, the jazz tuba player Michel Godard has rearranged old chants from the

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impressive baroque Einsiedeln Monastery in the canton of Schwyz, north of Altdorf. Godard's tuba and an ensemble of flutes, clarinets, hurdy-gurdy, alphorn and bagpipes, will combine modern jazz music with music from *Codex 121*, an ancient manuscript written down by 10th century monks that is kept at the monastery.

This year, the festival focuses on the southern regions of the Alps. There will be music from Provence, from Turin and Friuli in Italy, and from Slovenia. And, according to Frye, a second focus will be the way people from outside have viewed the Alps, including poets like Wordsworth, and painters like William Turner. The festival has commissioned a multi-media piece from the British duo Mike and Kate Westbrook. Called *Turner in Uri* – the canton where the British artist painted in the 19th century – it will include British musicians, the local Uri Brass Band and a specially formed 24-voice Festival Choir.

Despite Switzerland's non-membership, the European Union has designated the Alps a cultural area and *Alpentöne* receives financial support from the EU. In the future it will work with organisers from Slovenia and possibly France, Italy and Austria. "Each partner will commission two new music projects, so that in the end we will have new



musical creations at *Alpentöne* every year," explains Frye. With this strategy, the festival is able to focus on its qualities: exclusive co-operations and new compositions. With a growing popularity and more and more outside visitors, the horizons are widening. Two years ago the Swiss minister of culture opened the festival, national television and radio stations broadcast concerts, and the press feasted on the spectacle. The people of Altdorf seem to love their festival: "Through *Alpentöne*, we try to resume the traditional open-mindedness of the commune of Altdorf," says Frye. Cultural Switzerland has found a festival that it likes and wants to support. █

This year's festival will be August 15-17
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OPPOSITE TOP: *Altdorf's flag*
 OPPOSITE: *Stimmhorn in 2001*
 TOP: *The Altdorf landscape*
 LEFT: *Hundsbaum in 2001*
 RIGHT: *Stimmhorn's Christian Zehnder during the lake hike*