



HANS HASSLER

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Hans Hassler Akkordeon
Gebhard Ullmann Bassklarinette
Jürgen Kupke Klarinette
Beat Föllmi Perkussion

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LINER NOTES BY PETER RÜEDI

Is there such a thing as 'progressive folk music?' The question seems pointless; to link the two notions paradoxical. In German the word 'Volk' still carries so much baggage that the only people who can use it without batting an eyelid are politicians – at least when referring to an ethnic unit. In the case of an 'elective nation' such as Switzerland, this is impossible from the start: the joint name for German-speaking Switzerland, Romandy and Tessin certainly has nothing to do with ethnicity. It is something else which "holds the world together in its inmost folds" – pragmatic sense ultimately. (Dürrenmatt, who gave some thought to the matter in Neuchâtel, came to the conclusion that the relationship between German and French Switzerland was neither good nor bad; there was no relationship, simply coexistence. He appreciated the fact that the Swiss ethnicities were neither flinging their arms around each other nor fighting, simply leaving each other in peace.) The 'Swiss folk' is a mystical formula which still sometimes drifts unquestioned through the odd speech on the national holiday, 1 August.

Can 'folk', or 'Volk', be understood 'the ordinary folk', the people, the opposite of the elite, as in Brecht ("das Volk ist nicht tùmlich") or Rühmkorf ("Über das Volksvermögen")? More likely. But, seen in the cold light of day there is no such thing as 'folk', certainly not 'folk music'. Is it music by the folk, music for the folk, or both? For which folk? What is 'folk music' and what is 'folklore'? Is folk music necessarily 'popular music' and does popular music always become 'folk music'? The closer you get, the denser the fog. In the end it dissolves into assumptions, presumptions and idealisations

The difficulties don't get any less when we turn to the increasing interest of improvisers, jazz musicians, in 'folk music' (sticking with both anti-concepts for the time being). This interest began in the 1970s, throughout Europe, above all as part of a new regionalism, everywhere where resistance to centralised power was rising: in Catalonia and the Basque country, in Scotland and Ireland, in Brittany, Occitania, Corsica and Alsace, Sardinia and Sicily.

In Switzerland where, in the form of federalism, regionalism is part of the state's *raison d'être*, it is no coincidence that the French label Le Chant du Monde released the ethnologist Hans Zemp's field researches in Chrachen in the depths of the Canton of Schwyz as part of the series 'Collection Musée d l'homme': Jüzzli et Yodel du Muotathal – musical ethnology as practiced by the ex-colonial French throughout the world, above all in Africa however. Zemp's work initially triggered Hans Kennel's folk-music research and fusion, in the Alpine Jazz Herd with Jürg Solothurnmann, then in his group Habarigani. It led to a fully-fledged yodel-, alphorn- and hammered-dulcimer-boom in contemporary Swiss music: Christian Zehnder and Balthasar Streiff, Albin Brun and Paul Haag; the group Schildpatt, formed by the Schildknecht brothers from the Glarus Alps; George Gruntz, Mathias Rüegg and Christoph Baumann, who all reinterpreted the beautiful old Guggisberglied; the Appenzeller Space Schöttel (Töbi Tobler and Ficht Tanner); Heiri Känzig and Mani Planzer with the MorschAchBlasorCHester; Daniel Schnyder (a particularly sharp critic of the anti-concept of 'folk music'); Lucas Niggli with Roots of Communication; boundary-testers like the violinist Paul Giger (Alpstein); Robert Morgenthaler; the singers Erika Stucky, Betty Legler, Corin Curschellas and Christine Lauterburg – the list could be continued almost at random. Despite the differences and the varying approaches and aims, added together they produce something which if not precisely, then certainly in practice, could be defined as 'progressive folk music'. All those named above, and many more, have one thing in common: they came from other musical genres, from jazz or rock or electronic music, to 'folk music'. It is precisely this distance which allows them to discover the *Volksvermögen* (folk heritage) afresh.

After the late 1980s it is impossible not to think in terms of this 'movement': Hans Hassler, accordionist, was born 1945 in Chur, and has lived since 1978 in lowland exile in Hagendorn in the Canton of Zug. Right at the heart, yet left of centre, and always at one with himself. Unlike all the others, who discovered 'folk music' as their 'roots' (very much in the sense of an emancipation from the strict alignment to the dominant American models) Hassler came from precisely the opposite direction. He didn't discover 'folk music' as an exotic phenomenon 'in his own backyard' (Jan Garbarek); he didn't have to discover it at all. He was born into it, more precisely: into the Grison Alps Ländler music. He grew up with it. As his biography confirms (outlined in the excellent liner notes by Pirmin Bossart for Hassler's first release, Intakt CD 147), this is without doubt his authentic music, his 'Ur-Musig'. If the attitude of all new folk music enthusiasts is one of 'sentimentality' (in the sense of Schiller's aesthetic, which is in no sense 'sentimental', more a 'broken' stance towards one's origins caused by distance), epitomised by Cyril Schläpfer's hymn-like film *Ur-Musig*, Hans Hassler's attitude is at least 'naive'. Grison Ländler music was his father's music. Hassler's father worked for the local authority in Chur, but above all he was the bass player in the Ländler band Calanda.

Hans Hassler came only later to improvised and composed electronic music – to which sentimental approaches to folk music can reasonably be ascribed – only after meeting the Danish accordion pioneer Mogens Ellegaard (1935-1995). Ellegaard showed him whole new sides to this technically limited instrument – technically through a single-note bass manual, in terms of repertoire by freeing it from its catastrophic imprisonment in transcription. "They even played Liszt on the accordion, the proponents of the Russian school I mean. Absurd. With an accordion, whenever you start to think 'how nice that would sound on a piano' something is already wrong." Before the 'meteorite-landing', his encounter with Ellegaard, Hassler too had played Bach's Toccata and Fuge in D minor on the accordion. "It does sound very unusual, if your background is the 'Schneewalzer'. In comparison with a church organ it sounded a bit pathetic however."

Hassler too lost the innocence of his early years at some point. "I knew nothing about the dominant system" he says, meaning the entire theory of harmony; he grew into it instinctively. During his days in the Canton school he learned the clarinet and the drums, while preparing to study as a recording engineer in Detmold he learned the piano in six months (up to "intermediate pieces" such as the Well-Tempered Clavier, no less). He also acquainted himself with his father's double bass. Later, at the Musikakademie in Zürich he studied piano and clarinet to teaching-diploma level. It was his clarinet lecturer who insisted he didn't ignore his accordion. In the 1970s the clarinetist Hans was just as much part of the Schanfigger Ländlerquintett as of Jimmy's Brass Band.

Even after his accordion-enlightenment by Ellegaard, Hans Hassler never wanted drop Ländler which, as tonal music, was dismissed in the fundamentalist eyes of alphorn-fa and natural yodelling enthusiasts as a (degenerate) late form of 'folk music'. But for his part he developed a 'sentimental' attitude to his beginnings. Even the evocative title of his first production signals his strategy: *Sehr Schnee – Sehr Wald*, sehr ('very snow – very woods, very', Intakt 147) incorporates the good old 'Schneewalzer'. This epitomises Hassler's technique of taking simple, even banal situations and deriving poetic value from them.

Hassler would certainly object to the word 'value' however. "The last thing I want to do is spoil Ländler. But I enjoy playing with the material, isolating individual elements, expanding, inverting them; on my new CD I start with original ideas by old Ländler composers. But I don't want to just play them straight. Without looking down on people for whom that would be enough, for me that's not quite enough." To put it simply: the Ländler are not being sent up (even if Hassler's versions might seem a little strange to a normal 'Ländler audience'); they just evoke sense of the familiar, or a concentrate of individual elements or aspects from the familiar prototypes.

Hassler recalls that once they had looked down a little on the Grison Ländler music, with its basic formula of two hand organs or Schwyzerörgeli, two clarinets and a double bass; they wanted nothing to do with yodelling or Appenzeller string music. They admired the virtuoso Central Swiss musicians such as Edi Bär or Jost Ribary. Only over time did they realise that virtuosity carried with it a loss of original strength, and that the power of the simple and blunt could be a quality too.

On the CD HASSLER, the heroes of his *Ur-Musig* are:

- Paul Kollegger (1872-1927), forester, logger, postillon on the Stecke Chur-Tiefencastel. Above all clarinetist and composer. Unacquainted with writing and still less musical notation, his works were passed on orally, notated by others (and occasionally appropriated). In 'Paul, Where Are You – and Why Not?' (1) Hassler writes the 'Kollegger Marsch' for Jürgen Kupke's clarinet, "actually interpreting the piece pretty traditionally," apart from an introduction or prelude. But the accompaniment is now decidedly untraditional, it's something along the lines of my solo. There are stumbling blocks and irritations. I was once involved in a performance of Mauricio Kagel's *Zehn Märsche um den Sieg zu verfehlen*. This is not quite as sophisticated, but it does involve similar disturbances." The 'Kollegger Schottisch' is played in a similar way to the original, becoming 'Ach, hier bist du' ('Oh, here you are', 6). The initial spark for the CD was Kollegger's 'Brantenweirauschwalzer' (sic! 'brandy intoxication waltz', 14): "so heavy, it's so powerful. It's simple and strong; ok it isn't Mozart, but certainly impressive how he always manages to make something unique from the same elements."

- Hans Fischer (1903-1986), Schwyzerörgeli player, known as the 'Grand Mufti' of Grison Ländler music, was leader of the band Calanda, in which Hassler's father played double bass. 'Der vergessene Stier von Thusis' (2) is based on a motif from the trio in Fischer's 'Am Stiaramarkt'; 'Bündner-Stübli-Destillat 1' (3), 'Bündner-Stübli-Destillat 2' (13) and 'Bündner-Stübli-Destillat 3' (15) on motifs from his Ländler 'Im Bündner Stübli'. 'Ampf Lumas Unn Tig' (5) takes the initial motif from Fischer's 'Am Pfluma Sunntig' as it's point of departure. Hassler uses another motif from this piece to develop his accordion solo in 'Pfluma-Sunntig-Nachlese' (9). 'Gruss an Tschierschen' (11) is a homage to



- Luzi Brüesch (1866 -1945), sometime (before Calanda) partner of Hans Fischer, as clarinetist the composer of around 150 works, joiner by trade. In terms of discography he was the pioneer of Grison Ländler music: he was the first to stand in a recording studio with his band – on 29 April 1929. The 'greeting' stays very close to the original but, according to Hassler, "the cognoscenti will notice immediately how strange it is. No-one normally plays it like that."

- Kasi Geisser (1899-1943) came from Central Switzerland, not the Grison Alps, the sole exception. Hassler has added isolated motifs of his own to Geisser's wonderfully titled piece 'Die ruhigen Weiber in der Waschküche' ('peaceful women in the laundry'). "I've renamed it 'Nervös vor dem Tumbler'" ('nervous by the tumble dryer') Hassler says. "A fine piece, with many elements you can do something with. I already tried it several years ago with Beat Föllmi."

'Berliner Scarnüzzi' (4) is a collective improvisation between Gerhard Ullmann's bass clarinet and the accordion (Scarnuz means 'paper bag' in Romansh). 'Das lange Warten auf Godot's Waschküchenschlüssel' ('the long wait for Godot's laundry key', 7) and 'Nervös vor dem Tumbler' (8) are dialogues between Hassler and Föllmi; Trio à trois (12) is a three-way conversation between Hassler, Ullmann and Kupke. 'Kein Schnee' is an elaborated piece by Hassler, already heard on Hans Kennel's Habarigani 2 (Habarigani was a line-up Hassler belonged to for three years (1991)). As accordion solos, 'Pfluma-Sunntig-Nachlese' (9) and 'Fallobst' (16) take up where 'Sehr Schnee' left off; the latter is a veritable virtuoso tour de force, with the energy of an Offenbach cancan.

The musicians with whom Hans Hassler creates this consistently surprising music on his second CD for Intakt, at times fine, wild, strange, but always humorously eccentric, a *recherche du Ländler perdu*, a personal kind of chamber music, are old friends and peers. He has worked on various projects with the percussionist Beat Föllmi since the early 1990s. Like Hassler, Föllmi lives in Central Switzerland (his 'percussion atelier' is in Hünenberg, in the Canton of Zug). A jazz drummer originally, he is highly knowledgeable about African and Asian percussion cultures (Gamelan), a 'world musician' in the best sense of the word. Hassler has worked with Gebhard Ullmann, 56 (Berlin/ New York), since 1991. In 1998 for instance, on his project Ta Lam 10 (nine wind instruments and Hassler's accordion). Ullmann is one of the most diverse and creative figures on the progressive Berlin scene. He has been involved with fellow Berliner Jürgen Kupke, 53, in various projects (from Ta Lam 8, 1994, to the Mingus project with Ta Lam 11 in 2011 at the Jazzwerkstatt). In 1998 Ullmann and Kupke also recorded the CD *The Clarinet Trio* (Leo Records) with Theo Nabicht.

The music the four play here is extremely free, poetic and playful, and a long way – at times, before they search cautiously for it again – from Grison Ländler music (which is exotic to the two Berliners). Hans Hassler shows something akin to a hidden, half acknowledged, almost shameful longing for the time when he didn't know, about the 'dominant system'. The distance from the beginnings, from Ländler in other words, involves a loss. Just as the experiences throughout a life involve gains. He has to live with this dilemma, Hans. We all have to. But in his case it results in beautiful, exciting music.

Peter Rüedi, July 2013

Translation: Steph Morris



Hans Hassler

Sehr Schnee, sehr Wald, sehr

Hans Hassler: Akkordeon solo

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