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Switzerland sways to the sound of music

As soon as summer approaches, Switzerland's music scene starts to heat up: not surprisingly, since the country hosts the largest number of music festivals in Europe. A status report.

BY ALAIN WEY

HOW DYNAMIC is the range of cultural offerings in Switzerland? To find the answer, you only have to look at the hundreds of music festivals staged in summer here in Switzerland. They range from classical music to jazz, rock and all the latest genres. Every year countless open-air festivals that owe their existence to the dedicated efforts of volunteers and music lovers are added to the series of established events that attract hundreds of visitors. The idea behind them is not so much to launch another major happening as to set aside a few days for soaking up music against an attractive backdrop: be it by a lake, in the middle of the

forest, surrounded by majestic peaks or in the nostalgic cobbled streets of an old town. Each weekend some ten events attract fans of every type of music.

With more than 150 music festivals devoted to every genre (including jazz) and over one million visitors (including those attending free festivals hosted by cities), Switzerland has the largest number of festivals in Europe. Events such as the Montreux Jazz Festival and the Lucerne Festival long ago earned a world-wide reputation. What artist would turn down the opportunity to appear in the Stravinski Auditorium, the Miles Davis Hall or the Culture and Congress

Centre (KKL) in Lucerne? Once summer has arrived, our country echoes to the most diverse range of musical tones. The following is a summary of the best-known festivals.

The children of Woodstock

Modern genres account for the lion's share of this fascination with music. The concept, which dates from festivals like Woodstock in the 1960s, still dictates many concert initiatives. What lies behind this success? For a few days, time stands still, spontaneous communities are forged, tents are raised, and the spirit of the hippie culture reigns over venue locations. The Paléo Festival in Nyon, for example, owes its reputation to the famous "Village du Monde", which is set up on the festival complex. The aisles are named after major cities throughout the world, and some 10,000 music-loving campers set up their tents for the week-long happening. This year the Paléo Festival celebrates its 30th birthday, with highlights including an appearance by Ravi Shankar, the long-standing master of Indian sitar music who performed at Woodstock back in 1969. The organisers expect 35,000 visitors every evening, of which a good 10 percent will have travelled from as far afield as France, Belgium, Italy and the UK.

The venue for the Gurten Festival is a hill in the south of Berne. This highly popular event attracts 16,000 visitors a day, of which a good three quarters stay overnight in tents. Founded in 1977, the festival was originally devoted to folk music and the anti-war movement. In 1987 the festival underwent a transformation when it was taken over by professional organisers who expanded the concept to include a variety of musical genres.

The open air festival of St.Gallen in Eastern Switzerland is also primarily for visitors who like to camp on site. Row after row of tents are set up on an extensive clearing in the forest. The 29th festival has another attractive programme to offer its 72,000 visitors, including an exclusive appearance by R.E.M., one of the world's most popular rock groups. A newcomer to this year's festival calendar



Gem in the summer of festivals: Symphony concert in Lucerne's "Salle blanche".

year is the Greenfield Festival, which will be held in Interlaken and will be offering an attractive mix of new and alternative rock. Finally, the unique Rock Oz'Arènes, established in 1992, is held in the oldest venue in Switzerland: the amphitheatre of the famous Roman ruins of Avenches.

Mozart on the lake

While the biggest rock festivals have their origins in the 1970s, classical music festivals date back to the post-war years, and in some cases even to the 1930s. Since 1945 the month-long "Septembre Musical" festival in Montreux has been staging symphonies, concerts and chamber music. Although the event filed for bankruptcy in 2001, it was rescued and has since been endeavouring to regain its former lustre. But the competition is tough, since many music lovers prefer the Rolls Royce of classical music festivals: the Lucerne Festival, which ranks among the world's most important events for symphonic music. Founded in 1938, it has been held since 1998 in the famous KKL (Culture and Congress Centre of Lucerne), a modular concert hall designed by French star architect Jean Nouvel and American acoustic engineer Russel Johnson. The building is regarded as one of the world's best concert halls for classical music. During the festival's four weeks, Lucerne plays host to no less than 35 symphony orchestras and chamber music ensembles, attracting around 80,000 visitors. To date, the most memorable concerts in the KKL have starred the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonica as well as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, all of which are scheduled to appear again this coming summer.


In Zurich the Opera House and Tonhalle organise a three-week festival (Zürcher Festspiele) during which some 30,000 visitors can enjoy opera, ballet and symphony concerts.

Interestingly, the largest classical music events are held either in lakeside or mountain venues. The well-known Festival & Academy of Verbier in the Valais is a particular magnet for classical music fans. First held in 1994, the event specialises in performances by reputable soloists and stars of the classical music world. For two whole weeks, the festival also holds master classes featuring major conductors and artistes as well as students from the world's most famous conservatories. A few valleys further on, Gstaad

is the venue for the Menuhin Festival, founded in 1956 by Sir Yehudi Menuhin, the "Violinist of the Century". Every year some 18,000 music lovers make a pilgrimage to Gstaad to enjoy performances by chamber musicians and symphony orchestras. Among this year's guests are the London Symphony Orchestra, world-famous for more than 20 years for its interpretations of the film music of John Williams – from "Star Wars" to "Indiana Jones".

Jazz and Java

Whether traditional or modern jazz, more than 20 festivals are devoted to the music of Armstrong and Coltrane. Although the term "jazz" has been indelibly imprinted on the Montreux Jazz Festival for decades, the festival now covers all musical genres right up to hard rock. First held in 1967, this major event attracts 220,000 visitors every year to its 100-plus concerts on the Vaud Riviera. As far as traditional jazz is concerned, the Jazz-Ascona New Orleans & Classics festival plays host to almost 80,000 visitors. Since 1985 the shores of Lake Maggiore have echoed to the swinging sounds of more than 200 concerts. Picturesque old-town buildings form the backdrop for the annual Jazz Parade in Fribourg, which has been held for the past 15 years. To the delight of its 200,000 visitors, all concerts are free of charge and held in the open air. The Lugano Estival Jazz, also dubbed "the smaller, free version of the Montreux Festival", features well-known giants of jazz and modern music. The 27th festival programme includes the McCoy Tyner Allstars with saxophonist Ravi Coltrane, an offspring of John Coltrane. And the Jazz Festival Willisau in the canton of Lucerne has made a name for itself as an important venue for modern jazz. Among this year's acts are French trumpeter Erik Truffaz, who just happens to live in Switzerland.

The range of music festivals is too vast to provide an exhaustive list here, but the adjacent list should give an idea of the diversity and quality of the events on offer, and provide ample proof of the Swiss summer motto: A feast of music for all tastes – rock, pop, classical, folk or jazz! 

Translated from German.

Festival information

Rock

Greenfield Festival

24–26 June, Interlaken
www.greenfieldfestival.ch

Openair St.Gallen

1–3 July, St. Gallen
www.openairsg.ch

Gurten Festival

14–17 July, Region Berne
www.gurtenfestival.ch

Paléo Festival

19–24 July, Nyon
www.paleo.ch

Rock Oz'Arènes

17–20 August, Avenches
www.rockozarenes.com

www.guide-festivals.com

70% Swiss festivals
30% European festivals.

Classical

Zürcher Festspiele

17 June to 10 July, Zurich Opera House
www.zuercher-festspiele.ch

Lucerne Festival

11 August to 18 September
www.lucernefestival.ch

Septembre Musical

24 August to 12 September, Montreux
www.septmus.ch

Verbier Festival & Academy

22 July to 7 August
www.verbierfestival.com

Menuhin Festival Gstaad

16 July to 3 September
www.menuhinfestivalgstaad.com

Jazz

Jazz Ascona New Orleans & Classics

24 June to 3 July
www.jazzascona.ch

Montreux Jazz Festival

1 to 16 July
www.montreuxjazz.com

Jazz Parade

1 to 16 July, Fribourg
www.jazzparade.ch

Lugano Estival Jazz

1 to 2 July in Mendrisio and
7 to 9 July in Lugano
www.estivaljazz.ch

Jazz Festival Willisau

1 to 4 September
www.jazzwillisau.ch

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