

Old World Hillbillies: Swiss Music Entertainers on Tour through the United States during the 1920s

by Christoph Wagner

If you look through the pages of the Swiss immigrant press in the United States from the late nineteenth century—such as the *Amerikanische Schweizer Zeitung* published in New York or the *Schweizer Journal* published in San Francisco—you get an idea of the public face of musical life of Swiss-Americans in those days.

In a section headed “Schweizer Vereins-Direktory” (Swiss Clubs Directory) you find announcements of the weekly rehearsal times of the different singing clubs. They are mainly mens’ choirs, like the Jura Männerchor New York, the Wilhelm Tell Männerchor in Brooklyn, or the Schweizer Männerchor in Philadelphia. More rare are mixed choirs like the Helvetia Gemischter Chor New York, but their short announcements read very much the same: “*Gesang Abend jeden Freitag Abend in No. 64 Ost 4. Str. Anfang um 8 Uhr. Sänger und Sängerinnen, sowie Freunde des Gesanges, sind herzlich zum Besuche eingeladen.*” (“Singing every Friday evening at No. 64 East Fourth Street. Begin: 8 o’clock. Singers, and friends of singing, are very welcome.”)

The highlights in the life of these singing clubs were public performances that were mostly part of larger events like patriotic, religious, or traditional festivals, such as the so called *Grütli-Fest* or the *Schweizerfest*, on Christmas and New Year’s Eve, or the *Basler Fastnacht*, the Carnival of Basle.

For these events every effort was made and all strings pulled to create a memorable event that followed a well-defined pattern. Apart from the speeches, which evoked patriotic feelings, national pride, and nostalgic emotions for the homeland, these events were a potpourri of *gemütlichem* family entertainment that included vocal performances by a choir presenting songs from the homeland, plus a vocal soloist (perhaps a yodeler), comical sketches in Swiss dialect, sometimes a burlesque amateur play or an additional musical feature such as an ensemble of zither players, and maybe even a magician. There was always traditional Swiss dancing after the official program had ended.

Depending upon the importance of the event, sometimes guest choirs would also give a display of their abilities. Everybody would be dressed in regional costume, there would

be traditional Swiss food to enjoy, and sometimes some special effects. On November 17, 1894, at the *Schweizerfest* organized by the local Grütli-Verein and Schweizer Männerchor in Portland, Oregon, a young lady dressed as “Helvetia” in red with a white cross appeared surrounded by fireworks while the national anthem was sung.

Audiences were usually quite large (some reports talk of around 1,500 people in attendance) and would come from far away; they might consist not only of Swiss people but also of “a sizable number of our neighbors from the other side of the river Rhein,” as a report on the 1894 *Novemberfest* sponsored by San Francisco’s Helvetia Verein put it. A part of the massive profit from the sale of tickets, food, and drink at such an occasion would be donated to the Swiss Relief Fund or another worthy charity.

Such events were usually created by a homegrown do-it-yourself culture utilizing local talent. This pattern was breached only for a very special occasion. One such occurred in 1895, when all the Swiss Clubs of New York combined their efforts to stage a week-long festival from April 1–7 to raise money to build their own Schweizer Hall. They booked the famous Mühlemann Schweizer Jodler-Terzett from Berne, Switzerland, as the headline act. In support were several choirs, baritone singers, female sopranos, dance bands, and the United Social Mandolin Club.

After World War One the rise of the recording industry brought about considerable change. Large advertisements would begin appearing in Swiss-American newspapers offering a variety of gramophones and talking machines and a good number of “Schweizer Records.” Two mail-order businesses dominated the Swiss phonograph market on the East Coast at that time, both based on Third Avenue in Manhattan not far from each other. There was the Schweizer Gramophone-Geschäft E. De Witt & Söhne and its rival Riedlbauer & Co, which claimed to be “*das einzige wirkliche Schweizer Phonograph-Geschäft in New York*” (“the only real Swiss Phonograph company in New York”). “*Lassen Sie sich nicht irreführen durch andere Geschäfte,*” said their advertisement. (“Don’t get confused about what other companies tell you.”)

The two companies sold basically the same range of 78 records, derived from the E-series (ethnic music series) of Columbia Records. They even used precisely the same wording in their advertisements, suggesting that their promotion efforts were part of a larger campaign orchestrated by Columbia Records, which at that time was trying to break into the ethnic music market. The advertisements focused on just a handful of artists: the tenor

and yodeler Fritz Zimmermann, a duo consisting of yodeler Jakob Jost and the zither player Constantin Wunderle, the Schweizer Äpler-Orchester of Albert Bachmann, the tenor Max Bloch and the New York Schweizer Männerchor. Their recordings were praised as “*Musik des Vaterlandes, voll Heimatstolz und Heimatsehnen, wie es im Herzen eines jeden Schweizers klingt und singt*” (“music of the fatherland full of pride and yearning for the homeland as it sounds and sings in the heart of every Swiss”). One advertisement underlined that message visually by using a picture of Alpine mountains with a Swiss flag in the foreground, which implied that the music had grown out of this landscape.

Despite this strong emphasis on authenticity and references to the music of the old homeland, it is interesting to learn that, in fact, none of the musicians mentioned were actually residents of Switzerland. All of them lived in America. Furthermore, with the exception of only one—Albert Bachmann, who had played with the Fuchs Musik of the town of Einsiedeln before he emigrated—they were totally unknown within the traditional music scene of Switzerland.

As the phonograph business became a growing market, other record shops and mail-order specialists joined the battle for Swiss-American customers. For example, in 1902 the Chanteclair Music Store in Paterson, New Jersey, offered the “most complete stock of Swiss Folk Song and Novelty records” in the state. Arion Record Import of Philadelphia announced around the same time: “*gerade eingetroffen—eine ganz neue Liste der schönsten und populärsten Schweizer Sprechmaschinen-Rekords*” (“just arrived—a whole new list of the nicest and most popular Swiss talking machine records”). Arion exclusively offered the releases of the Polyphon label from Berlin, Germany. Edmund Frey’s company of West New York, New Jersey, sold “*importierte Schweizer Platten*” of dozens of different artists, as did B. M. Mai in Chicago, Illinois, who stated that they had a “*sehr grosse Auswahl Original Schweizer Schallplatten für ihre Sprechmaschine, alle Records von Zimmermann, Jost und Wunderle und anderen*” (“a huge selection of original Swiss records for your talking machine, all the records of Zimmermann, Jost & Wunderle, and others”).

In 1921 the Ferdinand Ingold Import Company of Monroe, Wisconsin, became the first Swiss record company in the United States by launching the “Helvetia” label; they sold “Original Schweizer Phonograph Records” and widened the range of available performers. They did not, however, produce many of their own records, but rather

replaced the label of records by other companies with their own “Helvetia” label. All these factors indicate that the Swiss ethnic music market in the United States was rapidly expanding.

The rise of the record industry changed the musical life of the Swiss immigrant communities. Apart from the fact that individuals could now hear Swiss music in their living room, the new medium also broadened the economic base of the performers. It therefore created the professional ethnic music entertainer, by spreading the name of a singer, making him or her famous and widening the geographical radius of his or her activities from local to regional to potentially nationwide or even transatlantic. The phonograph industry gave birth to the ethnic music star.

1. Fritz Zimmermann, *Lueget vo Berg und Tal*
Columbia E 3401, April 1917

Tenor and yodeler Fritz Zimmerman was the first person to become “the darling of his listeners,” to quote an advertisement. By the end of 1918 he had about a dozen records for sale. The two largest mail-order companies of Swiss records in the United States both claimed to be “the only agency” to sell his song books, published by the Swiss Publishing Company of New York. In these song books you would find the lyrics and notes for pieces such as “Alpandacht” (“Alpine prayer”) or “Alp-Fahrt” (“Alpine journey”), which glorified the world of the mountains. This was in sharp contrast to the fact that Zimmermann was based at 239 West Seventy-Sixth Street in New York City.

Zimmermann took advantage of this boost in popularity and became quite prominent on the Swiss-American concert circuit in the early 1920s. The “Famous Swiss Folk Singer and Yodler,” to quote an announcement, usually divided his concert program into two sections. In the first half he sang “Classical Numbers and American Songs” while in the second part—now wearing a more or less traditional Swiss costume to boost his Swiss credibility—he performed “Swiss Folk-Songs and Yodels.” The costume was described as a picturesque rarity from Berner Oberland of the eighteenth century. “*Es ist sein Bestreben, nicht nur durch Ton, sondern auch im Bilde uns in die heimatlichen Berge zurückzubringen,*” stated the article. (“It is his intention to take us back to the mountains of home not just with sound but also with pictures.”)

Usually Zimmermann appeared with a soprano singer, though sometimes he added an

extra baritone to his act, and was accompanied by a piano player. He would also “furnish a novelty by singing along with his own records, made by the Columbia Gramophone Company” to promote his records. Of course, the phonograph industry profited from Zimmermann’s popularity, too. One advertisement from the summer of 1919 offered to give each purchaser of a “Cirola talking machine” five free “Zimmermann yodeling records.”

2. Jost & Wunderle, *s’ Berner Oberland*
Columbia E 4770, December 1919

The fame of Fritz Zimmermann was nearly matched by Jost & Wunderle, the partnership of singer and guitarist Jakob Jost and zither virtuoso Constantin Wunderle. They received publicity from record shop owners E. De Witt of New York City and T. J. Porske of Brooklyn who placed advertisements in the *Amerikanische Schweizer Zeitung* offering several new recordings of the singing duo who were shown in a photograph wearing Alpine costumes. One of the advertisements declared: “*Jost & Wunderle-Platten sollten in keinem Schweizerheim fehlen.*” (“No Swiss home should be without the records of Jost & Wunderle.”)

Capitalizing on their growing fame, the two American-based *Alpensänger* (Alpine singers) went on tour in 1920 playing the Swiss-community circuit from Indianapolis to Canton, Ohio. They not only played at picnics and masked balls but also appeared in proper concerts often supported by local choirs, instrumental talents, and even gymnastic groups. The critics were full of praise. Five years later their concerts were still attracting audiences of between 400 and 1,600 people and were covered by the immigrant press. Songs in English now became a part of their program and were added to their Alpine repertoire: “Roll On, Silvery Moon” was followed by “My Sweetheart,” a song written by Jack Jost, as the singer now called himself. The critics were again enthusiastic, emphasizing the naturalness and masterly skills of their performance.

3. Hanns in der Gand, *Heimwehlied der Schweiz-Amerikaner*
VDX 3645, November 1927

In 1922, Hanns in der Gand became the first artist from Switzerland to cross the Atlantic and tour the United States. As he was a well-known and highly respected singer from Kanton Uri, the Swiss immigrant press in America was able to quote for the first time

concert reviews from Swiss newspapers.

The concerts of in der Gand in America, organized by his manager Eduard Salchi, received enthusiastic reviews. They praised the singer's ability to transport the listeners back to their old homeland and comfort their homesickness: "*So fühlte man sich weit weg von New York,*" wrote one critic, "*vergass dasselbe ganz und schwelgte in alten Erinnerungen, sah das Dörfchen, war Soldat, verliebt—man war wieder daheim und glücklich.*" ("You felt far away from New York, you forgot all about it and lost yourself in memories. You saw your village, you were a soldier again or in love—you were back home again and happy.")

Hanns in der Gand paved the way for other Alpine musical performers who undertook the two-week long journey by ship to America. In the second half of the 1920s two ensembles came over for very long and highly successful tours: the Moser Brothers and the Scheidegger Seven.

4. Scheidegger Sieben, *Üse Älli*

Victor V-6006, June 1928

After Swiss performers arrived in the United States, advertisements were usually placed in the Swiss-American papers announcing their availability and publishing a contact address. When the Scheidegger Seven arrived in America in October 1927, one could read in the October 20 issue of the *Schweizer Journal* under the headline "The Scheidegger Seven— Original Swiss Yodlers": "*Die Scheidegger Familie, bestehend aus Vater, Sohn und 5 Töchtern aus dem Emmental, ist kürzlich nach Amerika gekommen, um in Schweizerkreisen die beliebten Jodel- und Handharmonikakonzerte zu geben. . . . In ein oder zwei Wochen wird die Scheidegger-Familie Kalifornien bereisen und ist bereit, überall wo genügend Schweizer wohnen, Jodelkonzerte zu veranstalten. Vereine oder Private, die Interesse haben, die Jodlerfamilie in ihrer Ortschaft zu hören, können für solche Konzerte Arrangements machen, indem sie in brieflichen Verkehr mit der Scheidegger-Familie treten. Die temporäre Adresse ist: Familie Fritz Scheidegger, c/o Fred Boesel, Box 8, Warren, Ore.*" ("The Scheidegger family, consisting of father, son, and five daughters from the Emmental, has recently come to America to give popular yodel and accordion concerts in Swiss circles. . . . In one or two weeks they will travel to California and would like to perform wherever there are enough Swiss people. Clubs or private persons who are interested to hear the family in their town

can arrange a concert by writing to the Scheidegger family: Family Fritz Scheidegger, c/o Fred Boesel, Box 8, Warren, Ore.”)

This method certainly worked. By the beginning of December the Scheideggers had given more than forty concerts. Published concert reviews kept interest levels high. They continued their tour until March, sometimes even using radio for promotion, as in early January 1928, when they could be heard on a radio station in El Centro announcing their up-coming concerts in the area.

Sometimes, however, things went wrong. In the February 2, 1928 issue of the *Schweizer Journal*, a farewell-concert of the Scheideggers in Los Angeles on February 11 was announced. The following week’s issue, though, read: “Wegen Missverständnis wird das Konzert bis auf weiteres verschoben.” (“The concert has been postponed because of a misunderstanding.”)

5. Moserbuebe, *Mys Heimatdoerfli*
HMV 30-12775, end of the 1920s

The other Swiss group touring the United States was the Moser Brothers, who traveled by car. First they bought a large secondhand Buick in New York to accommodate three musicians, their luggage, and the instruments, which included two accordions and an upright bass. They were so successful that on their next American visit they could already afford a brand new Nash, “the biggest one they made.” Money was good. “When I got the job, I couldn’t believe it. I earned four times as much as my dad who was on the railroad for twenty years,” Rudy Burkhalter, a member of the Moser Brothers, said.



The appearance of these original performers from Switzerland coincided with the decline of the career of the first generation of Swiss-American artists such as Fritz Zimmermann, possibly indicating a shift in taste. Was it possible that the audience no longer appreciated Americanized Swiss music anymore and was demanding the real thing instead?

Some years earlier, in a concert review from 1920, it was already possible to read between the lines the unease the critic felt with Zimmermann's own self-composed songs. He wrote: "*Wir selbst erlauben uns kein fachmännisches Urteil über diese Kompositionen und bemerken daher bloss, daß diese im Volksgesangstil gehaltenen Lieder sehr warm applaudiert worden sind.*" ("We don't feel capable of making a qualified judgment of these compositions and therefore only say that these songs in the folk-singing style were warmly applauded.") Was this an early indication that not everybody accepted these newly composed folk songs?

A few years later Rudi Burkhalter reported an incident that pointed in the same direction: "We got a few up-to-date yodels which were beginning to get popular in Switzerland. I'll never forget, when we came to America, the Swiss people told us 'This is junk. Forget about that kind of music. We want the old ones which we knew when we left.'"

The concert reviews also reflected this shift in taste. They idealized the native Swiss performer as the true carrier of tradition, the embodiment of the deep Swiss soul. The November 17, 1927, issue of the *Schweizer Journal* reported the following about a concert given by The Scheidegger Seven: "*Jeder Platz in der grossen Halle war besetzt und ein dankbares Publikum lauschte den Lieder- und Handorgelvorträgen, das dann auch mit Beifallsbezeugungen nicht geizte. 'The Scheidegger Seven' ist nicht eine aus Künstlern zusammengesetzte Truppe, sondern es ist eine solide Schweizerfamilie, die ein gut Teil Heimatluft mit sich bringt. So sind auch ihre Lieder keine Kunstgesänge, sondern es sind Heimatlieder, Volkslieder, Herzensergüsse der Aelpler und Küher. Der fröhliche Chorgesang mit den Jodelklängen und dem Herdengeläute versetzte das andächtig lauschende Publikum wie mit einem Zauberschlag in die alte Heimat zurück, und Heimatliebe und Schweizersinn wurden von neuem angefacht.*" ("Every seat in the big hall was occupied, and the grateful audience responded enthusiastically to the songs and accordion tunes. The Scheidegger Seven are not a band made up of artists, but a proper Swiss family who brings with them quite a bit of air from the homeland. Their songs are not art music but sounds of the homeland, folk songs, outpourings of the heart of shepherds and cow hands. The audience was taken back to their homeland as by a

stroke of a magic wand, and the love of their homeland and the Swiss spirit was recharged.”)

The reviewer’s distinction between artificial folk music and authentic Swiss song was taken further and turned into a polarized pattern: on one side was the modern urban “Babylon” of America (so called by the Moser Brothers), on the other the good old rural homeland of Switzerland. The artists were seen as the embodiment of this divide. One reviewer from the January 19, 1928, issue of the *Schweizer Journal* commented about the young women in the Scheidegger ensemble: “*Ich habe tüchtig gestaunt, wieder einmal Frauen zu sehen, die kein Rouge und keine Schminke anwenden.*” (“I was rather surprised to see women who don’t use rouge and make-up.”) Another critic commented on the females, too: “*Und das sie nicht bei Cakes und Candies aufgezogen wurden, das verraten ihre roten Bägglein.*” (“That they were not brought up on cakes and candies was shown by their red cheeks.”)

The emotional impact of the concerts was increased even more by adding visuals to the performances. While the Moser Brothers performed in front of a stage painting of an Alpine scene, the manager of Hans in der Gand used the latest technology of slide projection to present pictures of Swiss mountains “in their natural colors,” to the delight of the audience.

Apart from the fact that to an immigrant the old homeland always seems greener, the audience obviously tried to come to terms with the rapid changes within American society, which at that time was probably the most advanced on the globe. In contrast to the experience of change in this—for the immigrants—new environment, the old home which one had left a long time ago becomes a static place where nothing ever changed, a fantasy world, evolved and maintained by the strong need for something to hold on to.