

Mountain Groovery

One of the most astounding live experiences on the European circuit in the past year was the Tien-Shan-Suisse Express - the revenge of the mountain people. Stefan Franzen goes absailing in pursuit...

When the United Nations nominated 2002 the "Year Of The Mountains", nobody could have known what impact that decision would have on the new cultural expressions of Alpine artists. Especially Switzerland, which distinguished itself with a multitude of musical references to its topography - ranging from performances of Richard Strauss' Alpensinfonie to experimental happenings that included playing on instruments made of Swiss rock. Surely the most sustainable project, however, was the union of 21 musicians from different Swiss regions, the Tyrol and artists from Central Asia, which was enthusiastically celebrated at most of the region's summer festivals and during the WOMEX fair in Essen as well. Now they are about to go global: in July and August they will hit the stage in different European countries and Asia.

"I accepted right away. when the SDC (the Swiss Agency For Development And Cooperation) asked me if I would like to take care of a group made up of Swiss and Asian artists, as the musical director," remembers Heiri Känzig, jazz bassist and teacher at the Lucerne conservatory. At this moment the SDC is supporting many projects in Central Asia and investing a lot of money in terms of building up the economical structure and the-health systems. That's why they chose some of these countries to become involved in a cultural meeting with us: "SDC responsables pointed out that, by presenting the cultural variety of mountainous regions, they wanted to set an example of music's capacity to link peoples.

Combining sounds from Mongolian neo-classical music with traditions from Khakassia and Kyrgyzstan and Alpine music, within a single week of rehearsal, naturally required a unifying figure. Känzig seemed to be predestined for such a multicultural enterprise, which eventually was named Tien-Shan-Suisse Express, as an homage to the mountain chain between Kyrgyzstan and the westernmost part of China. Being one of the few Swiss musicians who can be heard on renowned international jazz labels like Blue Note or Verve, he is well known as a bassist for the Vienne Art Orchestra and has collaborated with a wide range of colleagues from jazz to pop, like Charlie Mariano, Lauren Newton and New Age harpist Andreas Vollenweider, to name but a few. Besides all that he is highly esteemed for his teaching abilities.

To represent the Swiss part of the project, Känzig put together a nine-piece band that he called Nationales Bergorchester (National Mountain Orchestra). "Most of the orchestra's musicians I've known for years, but here they are playing together for the first time. There are some who have a traditional background, but we also have jazz people who've always taken a close look at their roots. From my perspective there is no precise border between the styles anyway," says Känzig. One border-crossing musician is the experimental trumpet and alphorn player Hans Kennel, who works with

traditional patterns as a base for his improvisation. The brass section is clearly fundamental for the Bergorchester, composed of trumpet, trombone and different horns like the büchel, a short wooden horn resembling a big trumpet. Added to these are two kinds of accordeon, one of them being the national instrument schwyzerörgeli, and the dulcimer - both deeply rooted in the traditional folk music of the inner Swiss cantons, Glarus and Graubünden.

"We had no clue what would happen within this clash of different mentalities, but it all worked very well. We had interpreters in the rehearsal room who explained the essential structure of the pieces. but in the end we talked to each other through our music." Känzig is beaming all over his face at the memory: "I was very lucky that I didn't have to deal with any traditionalists, arranging their material, they were all very open."

They were the Mongolian sextet Egschiglen, who came together as a group of classically trained musicians from Ulaan Baatar in 1991. Since then they have been breaking free from the folklore clichés of their country, creating long, orchestral pieces that also include experiments such as a kind of Central Asian rap. Their new album, Zazal (Heaven & Earth), demonstrates that there is more to the music of Mongolia than overtones and horse fiddles. They were easy to contact for the project because they have been living near Nuremberg now for a couple of years.

For the Sabjilar trio, however, it was a rather long journey to meet the others. Originally, the musicians from Khakassia, a Siberian republic bordering Tuva, came together to revive their heroic epics dating back as far as the sixth century. Within TSS Express they display their nomadic tradition with a zither instrument called chathkan and the virtuoso komuz (two-stringed lute) playing of Serguei Charkov, who already could be heard accompanying the Tuvan star Sainkha Namchylak. Sabjilar also make use of a special form of overtone technique (kay).

Finally, the three Kyrgyz musicians (Kenje, Nurlanbek and Rathabek) also show their mastery of the long neck lute, and contribute flute interplays and a guttural vocal style which is considerably different from throat singing, at times appearing to be related to yodelling. "It was very exciting to compare those intricate harmonies of the Kyrgyz singer with our yodelling technique," enthuses Känzig. "In one case we combined an Alpine shepherd's call with one of their songs dedicated to the Yak cow, but unconsciously, only later did we know what was behind it. But in the beginning, what enabled the first fundamental communication between us, was the fact that Alphorn playing and throat singing are both based on the natural overtone scale."

One of the reasons why TSS Express is so celebrated on stage, is because of their multicoloured appearance. During the festival season Känzig noticed that this was the reason why they even attracted an

audience normally heading for a pop concert. In the first section of their performance, called Morgenrot (Red Sky In The Morning), the Central Asian artists introduce their traditions. Colourful robes and eccentric hats with feather boas provide a visual background to the expressive morin khuur (horse fiddle) and komuz playing, topped by the singing of the female Kyrgyz artist Kinjegul Kuvatovo. In the second part called Alpenglühn (Glowing Of The Alps In The Setting Sun), the National Mountain Orchestra demonstrates its new approach to Swiss music, with jumping accordeon solos, funky bass, and roguish büchel and alphorn, swinging beyond any cliché. But without a doubt, the climax of this exciting performance comes when all the musicians unite for the Gipfeltreffen (Summit).

In many pieces, the vocal qualities of Tien-Shan-Suisse Express are shaped by two women singers who are making their mark on contemporary Alpine music. Sabine Kapfinger a.k.a. Zabine is the only Austrian musician among the Swiss in the Bergorchester. "From the very beginning it was really amazing and charming to work with my neighbours. And as for the Asian musicians, it was particularly wonderful for me to collaborate, because I always had this affinity towards throat singing. In 1997 I toured the US with Huun-Huur-Tu from Tuva to pick up something of their vocal practice."

Kapfinger was well-known as a backing singer for Alpine rocker Hubert von Goisern, whose band she joined at the age of 18 under the name of Alpine Sabine, often stealing the show. In the meantime she got rid of the image of the yodelling stage doll and released her solo album Transalpin, characterised by cool clubby sounds and Austrian rap. Then she got a call from Känzig. "I said to Heiri that actually I didn't want to go back to yodelling once again. But the concept and the mixture of cultures tempted me so much that I surrendered very soon. I realised that this project was no step backwards in my career, because on stage it is such a sharp contrast to what I was doing with Hubert." It seems that among the Express people Zabine found an outlet for enthusiasms that she had previously expressed in journeys to Africa and India. There is even a story that whilst yodelling in an ashram on New Year's day in 1995, she almost was declared goddess by the community!

She goes on to explain that for TSS Express she really had to train her voice hard in order to master the complicated yodelling of the Swiss classic songs *Du Liebe Bueb Vom Emmetal* (The Handsome Boy From Emmental) or *Min Vatter Isch En Appezöller* (My Father Comes From Appenzell). One of the highlights of every Express show is her duet with Kyrgyz sister Kenje Kubatova, a dialogue which is beautifully worked out in the transcontinental mountain music of Kuahsuocha Kydlyp Turam.

Zabine, now with her worldwide cultural experiences, no longer wants to differentiate between good and bad Alpine culture. "When I sang in Hubert's band, there was the usual distinction between the cool side of Volksmusik (that certainly was us) and the ugly face of commercial singalong shows," she remembers. "But from my point of view I can't despise the latter, because so many people get pleasure out of it." It's out of this tolerance that Zabine's self-confidence emerges, and will reach a new creative level with her next recording *Gschmeidig* (Smooth), where she sings softly in a reduced setting of piano, cajon and bass.

The second woman singer on board the Express is Laurence Revey from the French-speaking part of the

Wallis canton. On stage, sporting a pink top with the Swiss cross on it, she represents a unique facet of Swiss pop music by revolutionising mountain music from the inside. For many of her cappella songs she uses an almost defunct Franco-Provençal patois. Other pieces are embedded in an electronic setting by producer Hector Zazou, such as one of her adaptations of traditional French material, when folk singer Gabriel Yacoub joined her in the studio. "My approach was in no way of the ethnological kind, but I was fascinated by the sound of that ancient language, which was the idiom of my grandmothers, it's like a mystery of my childhood," she recalls. "This is a language that will have disappeared soon, because it contains many words for basic commodities from the beginning of the last century that now aren't used anymore in everyday life. I had to learn the correct phonetics with a songwriter, it has an incredible timbre that goes very well with my songs."

To record her last album, *Le Clot Di Tserafouin* (Narrow Pass Of The Fairies), Revey withdrew to a church in a valley near her home town, because she wanted to reflect on her past. "The atmosphere we caught on the CD is like a cradle, like a cocoon." Oddly enough, this music seems to have had enormous impact on dance floor acts, as the tracks have already been remixed by the likes of Transglobal Underground and released on a proper album. Revey can understand the fascination that urban people feel for the ancient, now that she is spending most of her time in Paris. For it was there that she regained contact with the myths and nature of her home region. "Living in a melting pot your sensitivity towards myths is growing, witnessing so many cultures in the same place. But also watching people who are obliged to live in the streets, you start to question yourself as to what is the source that connects us all." And she sums up: "I felt the need to break away to find freedom and paradoxically I found it by returning home." It seems she is a kindred spirit for Tyrolian stage companion, Zabine; their sisterhood is captured in the romantic ballad *Antan*.

This summer the Tien-Shan-Suisse Express will tour Europe for three weeks, and then present itself in front of an Asian audience, a venture long overdue, as Känzig affirms: "It's high time to buy the ticket for the opposite direction, it will be Switzerland-Tien-Shan then!"

Tien-Shan-Suisse Express Paleo Festival Nyon 2002 (Blanko/Virgin); **Zabine Transalpin** (2001 Blanko/Virgin), *Gschmeidig* (March 03, Blanko/Virgin); **Laurence Revey *Le Clot Di Tserafouin / Le Creux Des Fées*** (1999/2002, Muve), *Le Creux Des Fées - The Remixes* (2000, Muve). More info: www.revey.com; www.blankomusik.de; www.does-it-matter-horn.ch

