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Switzerland – a nation of culture

MANY FOREIGNERS STILL ONLY ASSOCIATE Switzerland with magnificent mountains and delicious chocolate, as a study commissioned by Presence Switzerland has once again shown. People do not really seem to be aware of just how much culture there is to be found in Switzerland that they can enjoy along with the mountains and chocolate. Few other countries have as much to offer culturally as Switzerland in all areas of the arts.

Is the Culture and Convention Centre Lucerne the most modern and magnificent concert hall in the world, or, at the very least, does it possess the best acoustics? The "Salle blanche", designed by the brilliant French architect, Jean Nouvel, is most definitely an architectural gem with outstanding sound. And the Lucerne Festival is perhaps the world's most prestigious musical event – and not just since Claudio Abbado began bringing the finest orchestral musicians together each year in his Lucerne Festival Orchestra to mesmerise the international music world with this extraordinary ensemble. The musical elite take the stage for five weeks in Lucerne – a showcase event for all the great orchestras, conductors and soloists. When the "Salle modulable" is completed in a few years' time, even opera will be performed in the summer in Lucerne. And all this will be achieved with hardly any government funding.

While the Verbier Festival primarily aims to promote young artists, Gstaad's Menuhin Festival has developed, over its 53-year history, from its origins in the church of Saanen into a major event featuring more than 40 performances and attracting 20,000 visitors. Since the year 2000, the large symphony concerts have been held in a 1800-seat

marquee. 70% of visitors to the Gstaad festival attend regularly, and 76% come from Switzerland.

Prince, in addition to many other artists, flew in especially from the USA for two exclusive performances at the Montreux Jazz Festival this year for a fee of CHF 1.5 million. The open-air events, from Berne's Gurten Festival to Sittertobel in St. Gallen, from Interlaken to Frauenfeld, and from Gampel to Zofingen, always boast first-rate line-ups.

Basel, the city of art, attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors wishing to see world-class art. Van Gogh's landscapes could be marvelled at in the Kunstmuseum, while Giacometti's magnificent work attracted visitors from all over the world to the Beyeler Foundation in Riehen. The "From Cézanne to Rothko" exhibition was held in Lausanne, while "From Courbet to Picasso" was on display at the Giannada Foundation in Martigny.

Zurich offers musical festival weeks and traditional theatrical performances. And Locarno has the film festival.

There is art and culture aplenty.

The splendid calendar of events, which Switzerland offers twelve months a year, is possible thanks to the country's general prosperity. Only a wealthy nation has sponsors able to spend large amounts of money on culture, even in times of economic crisis. World-class culture does not come cheap. Ultimately there also has to be a demand for events, which can sometimes be expensive, and an audience who can afford them.

We should not take the large spending on cultural events all over Switzerland for granted. It allows Switzerland to stand out, making us a cultural superpower.

HEINZ ECKERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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■ **EDITORS:** Heinz Eckert (EC), Editor-in-Chief; Rolf Ribi (RR); René Lenzin (RL); Alain Wey (AW); Viviane Aerni (VA); Jean-François Lichtenstern (JFL), responsible for "Notes from Parliament", Service for the Swiss Abroad, DFA, CH-3003 Berne Translation: CLS Communication AG ■ **POSTAL ADDRESS:** Publisher, editorial office, advertising: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, Alpenstrasse 26, CH-3006 Berne, Tel.: +41 31 356 61 10, Fax: +41 31 356 61 01, Postal account (Swiss National Giro): 30-6768-9. Internet: www.revue.ch ■ **E-MAIL:** revue@aso.ch ■ **PRINT:** Zollikofen AG, CH-9001 St. Gallen. ■ **CHANGE OF ADDRESS:** Please advise your local embassy or consulate. Do not write to Berne. ■ All Swiss abroad who are registered with a Swiss representation receive the magazine free of charge. Anyone else can subscribe to the magazine for an annual fee (Switzerland: CHF 25 / abroad: CHF 40). Subscribers are sent the magazine direct from Berne.

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Cover picture: Didier Burkhalter (FDP) has been elected as Pascal Couchepin's successor in the Federal Council and takes over the Department of Home Affairs. Photo: Keystone