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Eicher, Hunger, Happy & Co.

New trends are emerging in Swiss folk music. Stephan Eicher has always been the most revered Swiss performer in Europe, but now Zurich's Sophie Hunger and other Swiss songwriters are also making their mark. We take the plunge into a world of sound.

By Alain Wey

Is Swiss folk music in good shape? With leading performers like Stephan Eicher, Sophie Hunger and Heidi Happy, it most certainly is. Nonetheless, it is difficult to label these performers as folk artists as their music embraces other styles ranging from jazz to rock. To understand the new trend in Swiss folk, which is also eminently exportable, you have to take a look at the Swiss music scene. The only database of Swiss artists (www.mp3.ch) contains no fewer than 12,000 groups and performers. But few of those categorised as songwriters have managed to achieve success abroad as easily as Sophie Hunger. You would have to go back to Stephan Eicher to find an artist who has been as well received in neighbouring France. There have been rave reviews in England and Germany as well as in France. And this is just the start of her career.

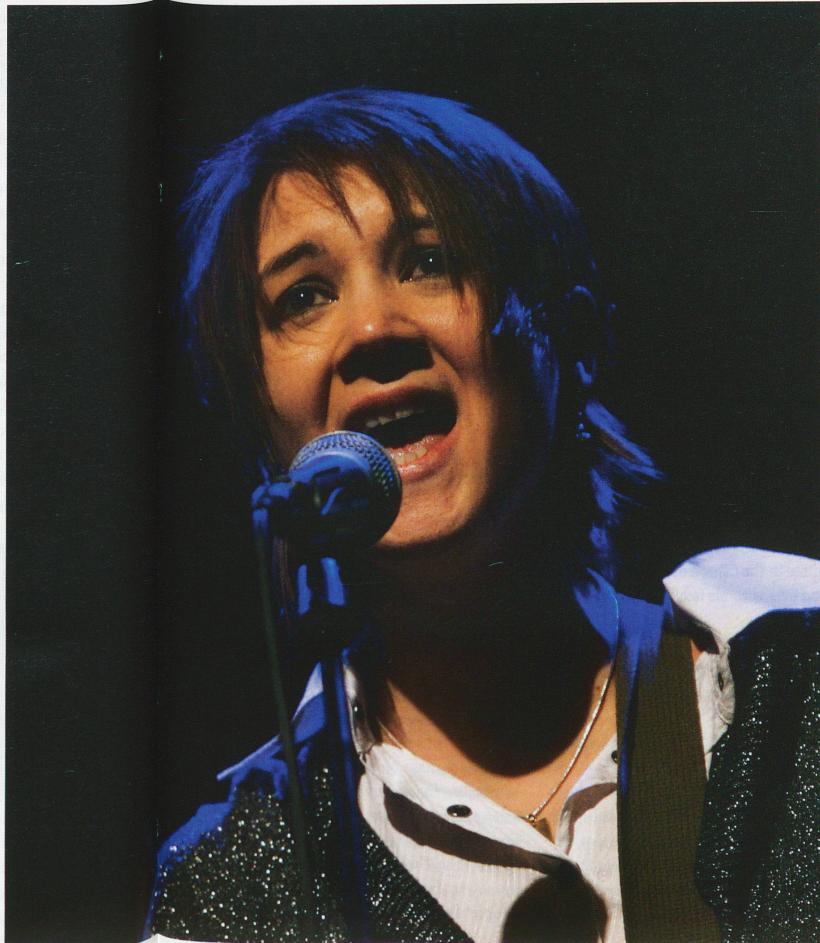
A trend has emerged in Switzerland in recent years with young female performers growing in stature and assimilating influences from American, English and Scandinavian folk music. The most popular ambassadors of Swiss folk are Sophie Hunger,

Heidi Happy and, more recently, Evelinn Trouble. This is a fine example of a local and global Switzerland showing openness to the various musical influences around, taking its cue from Stephan Eicher who always favoured this kind of eclectic approach. The Bernese artist also knows the importance of relationships and contacts when it comes to exporting music. After all, it was Eicher who introduced Sophie Hunger to France when she performed in the first part of his concerts in Paris in May 2007.

To understand the huge impact Sophie Hunger has made on audiences, you only need to take a look at her "myspace" page, which has almost a million visitors. This 26-year-old is on her way to conquering Europe. "Sketches on Sea", her debut album recorded at home in Zurich in 2006, first won over the critics and then her musical peers. It was the vocalist of "Young Gods" who passed the album on to Stephan Eicher. Her reputation is growing, and it is not by chance that her album "Monday's Ghost", which came out in October 2008, stood at the top of the Swiss charts from the first

week of its release. Praised to the heavens in Germany and in France, she has been compared to British artist P. J. Harvey and Iceland's Björk in the UK. Her captivating, velvety voice and untainted songwriting have obviously hit the spot. Hunger's influences include both Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash, whose styles she blends on her defiant, frenetic album "Sophie Hunger Blues". Since her talent has blossomed and after meeting inspirational figures like Eicher (they sing "Spiegelbild" as a duet), the "Young Gods" and trumpet player Erik Truffaz, nothing seems to be able to stop her. The press in French-speaking Switzerland is heralding "Sophie Hunger's great destiny", while the French magazine "Les Inrockuptibles" proclaims her a "songwriter of immense personality with a scintillating album". Her tracks fluctuate between folk, jazz, pop and rock, all revealing a fierce independence in terms of writing and expression. She says: "My inspiration comes from my passion for playing, in the primary sense of the word. I don't know how I would describe my music, but all I can say is that I play and invent things like a child."* The daughter of a diplomat, she was born in Berne and grew up in the UK, Germany and Switzerland. It may well have been the time spent drifting

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Photos: Keystone



Rising star of the Swiss folk scene: Sophie Hunger

at university which finally led her towards music in 2003. She resumed the piano and learned to play the guitar. She said: "I have always loved music, but I stopped myself from pursuing it. I kept my distance. I had so many things in my head, I analysed everything. I had to still my consciousness, and forget my own identity. It was when I managed to achieve a state of nothingness that I was finally able to open myself up to music."

Performing around twelve concerts a month in 2009, the artist from Zurich is gearing up to conquer the UK next year. Sophie Hunger seems to look to the future with a sense of irony and light-heartedness.



Evelinn Trouble: A promise?

extraordinary timbre modulation, and has chosen a snappy stage name for herself, Evelinn Trouble. She played around with the words to come up with "in trouble", which sounds like the title of a hit movie.

Label: Irascible www.myspace.com/evelinntrouble

Heidi Happy

As her mother is a classical soprano, it comes as no surprise that Heidi Happy should captivate audiences to such an extent with her suave, jazzy voice. In 2007, the 29-year-old from Lucerne released her debut album, "Back Together", and performed more than sixty concerts in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Belgium and Holland. Her brand of folk, jazz and pop reveals even greater depth on her second album "Flowers, Birds and Home", which came out at the end of 2008. Accompanied by seven musicians on stage, including a trombonist, Priska Zemp - alias Heidi Happy - plays the guitar and the glockenspiel and loves the loop station (device enabling artists to produce sound loops with the voice or an instrument). Clear melodies, moving tales of unhappy love affairs, complicit irony and bold arrangements make Heidi Happy a leading light in Swiss pop. She is also set to accompany the Swiss Jazz Orchestra on its autumn tour.

Label: Irascible www.myspace.com/heidihappy



Going right to the top: Heidi Happy from Lucerne



Leading the way: Stephan Eicher and Sophie Hunger