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“Värslischmied” at the National Museum

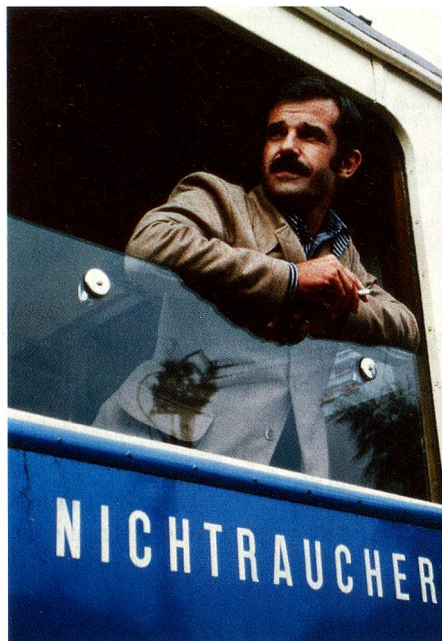
Mani Matter, the Bernese singer-songwriter, remains extremely popular 40 years after his death. The National Museum in Zurich is now dedicating an exhibition to him where parts of his estate will go on public display for the first time. The exhibition will run until 18 September. By Miriam Hutter

He was a philosopher, a lawyer, an intellectual, a literary talent and an extremely political figure. Mani Matter combined all of these facets in his songs, or “Liedli” as he called them. He has been revered in German-speaking Switzerland for generations. His songs are part of Swiss cultural heritage and unite people from wide-ranging backgrounds. Anyone born after 1970 will be familiar with Mani Matter’s songs from their childhood and will have loved them long before being able to really understand them. Schoolchildren still sing about the Eskimo whose love of music proved to be his downfall and the “Zündhölzli” (matchstick), which almost started a world war. New interpretations of Mani Matter’s songs have been performed by leading artists such as Polo Hofer, Dodo Hug and Züri West.

Mani who?

Mani Matter is virtually unknown in Ticino and French-speaking Switzerland despite the fact that it was his love of the French chanson of the 1950s that inspired him to sing and compose music. The legendary French chansonnier, Georges Brassens, for example, was an important source of inspiration for Mani Matter. He actually used the melody of Brassens’ “Ballade des dames du temps jadis” for his first song “Dr Rägewurm”. “Hemmige” – a homage to human inhibitions that would one day perhaps even save the world – was the only one of Mani Matter’s songs to become widely known in the French-speaking world, thanks to Stephan Eicher’s cover version in 1992.

Mani Matter was born into a liberal bourgeois Bernese family in 1936 as Hans Peter Matter. He wrote his first chansons at grammar school and initially wanted to study literature. He eventually opted for law as a school of thought. Matter only began performing his songs from 1965 onwards, after he had completed his studies, initially with the “Bernese Troubadours” and from 1971



Mani Matter on the little train to Worb, Berne 1972

mainly as a solo artist. Between 1969 and 1972, he filled concert halls in German-speaking Switzerland, performing between 90 and 100 times a year. At the end of 1972, he had a fatal car accident on the way to one of his concerts at just 36 years of age.

Songwriter, philosopher and poet

How can music be exhibited? Pascale Meyer, the exhibition curator, explored this issue extensively. She has long been fascinated by Matter’s songs, his surprising philosophical ideas and sharp observations which initially sound so harmless and cheerful. According to Meyer, Mani Matter, the “Värslischmied” (master of rhyme), had a unique understanding of how to deliver a message to an audience in a humorous way using brilliantly astonishing rhymes and to make people receptive to often severe criticism of affluent society and politics.

The exhibition does not just aim to present the Matter who performed songs in his Bernese dialect. The organisers have also attempted to show as many facets of his fasci-

nating personality as possible. The tour begins with a stage presenting Mani Matter the performer, before going on to an office where visitors find out more about his work as a lawyer. The various scenes that visitors pass through are all taken from the content of famous Matter songs. A different aspect is highlighted in each staged setting. The train compartment (from “Ir Ysebahn”) focuses on Mani Matter as a writer and poet, the barber’s chair (from “Bim Coiffeur”) reflects his philosophical side, and the parking meter (“Ds Parkingmeter”) explores his political motivations.

“Mani Matter felt responsible for society as a whole during his lifetime”, writes Wilfried Meichtry in the special publication that accompanies the exhibition. Matter debated philosophical, ethical, political and social issues while still a student. Even after taking up the newly created position of Legal Counsel to the City of Berne, he did not refrain from criticising Switzerland’s paralysis. But instead of becoming a full-time politician or publishing intellectual works for like-minded people, Mani Matter sought to reach those who might not have approved of him immediately through his chansons.

Multimedia-based exhibition

The exhibition at the National Museum in Zurich takes up little space at just under 400 square metres. However, it is worth taking time to appreciate it, as the subtle nuances and little gems here and there can only be discovered by listening carefully. In addition to previously unseen exhibits from his estate, all his published songs and a lot of film footage are also on display. This has been made possible thanks to the iPads that the National Museum uses instead of traditional audio guides. All the information is available not only in German, but also in French, Italian and English.

SPECIAL EXHIBITION PUBLICATION

MANI MATTER (1936 – 1972),
Wilfried Meichtry / Pascale Meyer (ed.),
Zytglogge Verlag, Oberhofen, 2011. 112 pgs,
containing various photos and a CD, CHF 36
www.landesmuseum.ch
www.manimatter.ch