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The first-ever yodelling graduate

Dayana Pfammatter Gurten from Valais is the first person in Switzerland to have earned a master's degree in yodelling. Does a university course risk turning this quintessentially Swiss singing technique into something a little too polished? Not at all, says Pfammatter, who wants to pass on her knowledge to young people.

SUSANNE WENGER

Dayana Pfammatter Gurten, 31, comes from Mund, a village perched on the mountain overlooking Brig. She embodies a new chapter in Swiss folk music, having recently completed a Master of Arts in music with a major in yodelling. Pfammatter is the first person to have graduated from a new degree pathway that was launched at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts in 2018. "Many people think I yodelled all day long," she says. But it was a very broad-based degree. In addition to vocal training and body work, she spent five-and-a-

half years studying subjects like music theory, rhythm, and music history.

Pfammatter played in a folk music ensemble with other music students and learned how to compose and arrange. "I was able to develop a strong musical acumen." She already had yodelling experience, because yodelling has been part of her life since childhood. Her family yodelled. She also learned to play the "Schwyzerörgeli", the accordion typically used in Swiss folk music, at a young age. Pfammatter did an apprenticeship as a pharmacy assistant after leaving school, but yodelling remained a passion.

Yodelling is her day job, but Dayana Pfammatter also likes to spend time looking after her Valais Blacknose sheep.
Photo: Alain Amherd

Making a living from yodelling

She attended courses given by the Swiss Yodelling Association and, at the tender age of 23, became head of Safran yodelling club in Mund. While receiving further tuition, she found out about the new music degree at Lucerne offering yodelling as the main subject. No other Swiss university had ever unveiled such a degree. Pfammatter applied and was accepted. "It was a chance for me to be academically trained as a music tutor."

Pfammatter has been making a living from yodelling since completing





her master's degree at the beginning of this year. She works as a vocal coach at a music school and teaches yodelling on a freelance basis. People also book her as a singer. She has deferred her back-up plan to help out at the pharmacy, because requests for her tuition services are coming in thick and fast. "It is great to be doing this on a full-time basis," she says.

Pfammatter teaches yodelling – requests for her services are coming in thick and fast.

Photo: Alain Amherd

From grassroots to academic

Yodelling – once used by herdsmen to communicate in the mountains – was not invented in Switzerland. Yet this haunting form of ululation that rapidly and repeatedly changes in pitch from the vocal chest register (or "chest voice") to the head register (or "head voice") has been practised here with gusto since the 19th century. There is a lively grassroots yodelling community of local choirs and clubs. Qualified choirs compete at the Federal Yodelling Festival every three years – the most recent event attracted around 10,000 singers and over 200,000 visitors.

Yodelling is a part of Swiss culture and identity, which is why people keep close track of it amid the push and pull of tradition, innovation, and popular culture. When yodelling be-

came an academic subject six years ago, there were fears that the degree course could set up an aesthetic that was too polished, blurring the regional differences in singing that have been passed down through the generations.

Preserving old arrangements

If there are still any such misgivings, Pfammatter no longer hears of them. In fact, she has done a lot to dispel the doubts. Pfammatter is deeply immersed in the Swiss yodelling scene. She says she used to perform with her sister "at the yodelling strongholds". The Swiss Yodelling Association regularly hires her as a course leader and as a judge at yodelling festivals. In autumn, she will become the main person responsible for training future choir leaders in two regions of Switzerland.



Dayana Pfammatter: "It is great to be doing this on a full-time basis."

Photo: Alain Amherd

"People know me," she says. "They know how steadfast I am." During her studies, Pfammatter focused on experimental contemporary folk music and traditional yodelling melodies. "We listened to old, crackling recordings and transcribed the songs to preserve them for posterity." Safeguarding and passing on the tradition to others is important to her, particularly with

the next generation of yodellers in mind. Pfammatter also teaches yodelling to school children, putting into practice the musical early education skills that she acquired in Lucerne.

Yodelling courses in demand

Above all, Pfammatter is a fan of natural yodelling without words – the purest, most primal form of yodelling. "Natural yodelling is dear to my heart." It moves her deeply, she says, and gives her goosebumps. Others feel the same way. After the Second World War, yodelling was long dismissed by the progressive urban set as quaint and parochial. But it has become hugely popular in recent years. Yodelling courses are booming in both rural and urban Switzerland – no surprise to Pfammatter. "Many people want to return to their roots and rediscover themselves in these stressful, fast-moving times."

Some people meditate or do yoga. Others yodel. "Yodelling is very natural and primeval. It helps people to touch base," she says. Besides teaching and practising every day, Pfammatter still runs her village yodelling club, Safran, which has the honour of hosting next year's cantonal yodelling convention. There is a lot of preparation and planning to do. She also continues to perform in small ensembles. Her master recital in Bettmeralp at the beginning of the year – featuring two female musicians from eastern Switzerland – went so well that another performance by the trio is in the offing. Pfammatter also has a passion for Valais Blacknose sheep. "They keep me close to nature and my roots," she says.

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