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At Violinos

Richard and I recently unexpectedly met Swiss born Ruth Hall who is farming 6 kilometres from Ashburton; we happened to notice a large Swiss Flag flying in the rural landscape of Winchmore in the South Island and the sign "At Violinos". Curiosity got the better of us and we rang her and subsequently spent 3 hours in her company at At Violinos, the musical farm.

It was fascinating to hear her story unfold. Ruth an accomplished violinist and music teacher was inspired by a trip to ski area Obertoggenburg, in Switzerland where she discovered the Klangweg, a walkway where various sounds can be created by the summer visitors. You could stop at 25 stations and blow into something or pull

a handle to produce a haunting sound. Ruth as a very passionate and talented musician, who loves all things musical, found the idea fascinating and decided to use the idea on her farm on the outskirts of Ashburton.

At Violinos started out as a romantic farm stay in a music themed cottage. A farmstay included a music tour where a windmill made from a defunct hand drill, sheet metal pieces and fishing sinkers plays Pokarekare Ana. Nearby a door labelled "Master C. Rapper" conceals a toilet with the seat painted as a guitar. When seated, ones feet activate popular big-band tunes.

A playground in the shape of a guitar offers board games like chess and Nine

Men's Morris (Mühle). A see-saw has a xylophone-like instrument mounted in the middle, down which a golf ball rolls playing a tune as the children, and I suspect adults, see-saw to their hearts content. A sit-on ocean drum contains 4236 lead balls - it tilts as it rotates imparting sounds of the sea. Frisbees can be thrown at outdoor gongs.

The farm shed and container exteriors are embellished with painted musical symbols but the contents remain a secret until they are opened: one reveals a Boom Whammer made from PVC drain pipes to look like a concert organ with the idea being that the visitor takes a shoe or jandal (provided) and whacks out a tune by hitting the end of the pipes. Most musical creations that you find here have musical notes provided and categorised: novice, intermediate, expert. In no time one can knock out a recognisable melody.

Another holds Tibetan singing bowls, another Indonesian rain sticks while the next one we enter contains Swiss Hang drums (an article appeared on page 17 of June-July Helvetia re this instrument). The Swiss ambience is enhanced by cowbells. When Ruth was in Switzerland she visited a Swiss factory that had specialised in cow bells since 1367. She met people who had them in their attics and offered them to her. She ended up transporting 80 kilograms of cowbells back to New Zealand.

Ruth is always intrigued by visitors' responses, as I am sure she was by our responses as we walked into the house via a nondescript main door to find our feet stepping onto a mat of piano keys while our eyes drank in the large Chapel like room to the right. Around the walls stand various instruments such as a 1910 gramophone as well as a bookcase and secretaire dating back to the 1770s which houses 20 Crown Devon jugs and bowls, 3 cigar boxes all of which were fitted with Swiss music boxes.

Musical note fabric adorns the soft cushioning on six 5m kauri pews which welcome one to sit and contemplate what an enormous journey Ruth had undertaken while creating this music hall e.g. an organ combined from two 1908 organs which now takes centre front stage in a specially constructed 2 metre alcove which is lit by a round stained glass window designed as a treble clef, and dedicated to Ruth's mother who, along with her father, had

New music farm room



By John Keast

There is the squeezebox and its reedy notes.

There is the trumpet with a light.

And violins and a gifted pianola and more.

This is Ruth Hall's collector's room, a new addition to her At Violinos music farm on the Ashburton-Methven highway.

It is the only farm of its type in New Zealand.

Mrs Hall, a gifted musician, has been adding to the farm for years, and the collector's room brings together items she

has collected, and items donated.

There are small accordions - one note on extension, a higher note when closed - a Swiss music box, and a Swiss band playing traditional instruments and carved by an elderly man.

An item which has pride of place is a donated Hohner harmonica which, unlike traditional harmonicas, is essentially six harmonicas in one.

Mrs Hall, a gifted violinist, like most of her instruments, can play it.

There is also fine furni-

ture, inlaying a trumpet-shaped sewing table with intricate inlay, and Edison phonographs.

When visitors have whetted their musical appetites on the collection, Mrs Hall, performs a musical feat with a bowl and coin.

She rolls the franc coin - she has already worn one out - around the inside of the bowl, and the noise created resembles the call of a herdsman to his cows.

Photo: Ruth Hall with the rare harmonica in her collector's room at At Violinos.



been instrumental in fostering her passion for music.

Above the organ in a specially built turret hang 3 Swiss cow bells that had Richard, who was once a bell ringer at his local church, intrigued.... so of-course bell ringing took place!!!

Here it needs to be noted that every step

of the journey whether it be combining two organs into one or creating the musical playground has been catalogued meticulously with photos and explanations of the process. They make for an interesting read. (See enclosed newspaper article on page 8).

The music hall, which can seat up to 100 guests, has hosted the Hammers and Horsehair concert featuring Robert Ibell from the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra on cello and Douglas Mews, a New Zealand classical organist and harpsichordist, on fortepiano. This duo performed a range of musical and romantic pieces on period instruments while guests enjoyed a candle-lit evening listening to these two accomplished musicians. The romance of the evening was captured with mood lighting and battery operated wax candles that had been dressed up in musical paper. Ruth always makes sure the "musical" theme appears wherever possible even her laundry room doors in the private part of her house have piano keys painted on them!!!

Too soon it was time for us to leave saying how glad we were that we had rung Ruth after seeing the Swiss flag flying proudly in the countryside!!!



The restored organ is made out of two 1908 organs from England's Positive Organ Company. One had damaged pipes, the other a damaged body. Both were held by the South Island Organ Company in Timaru. The organ came about when John Hargreaves, from South Island Organ, visited the farm and noted the lack of an organ.

That led to a major 9 month project involving retired engineer, Lester Hobbs who had already been involved in helping prepare other musical apparatus at At Violinos as well as Irishman Stephen Kyle whose expertise is in wood and Christopher Templeton to tune the organ when it was finally completed.

The organ has 60 wooden pipes and 100 metal pipes - the biggest is around 2.4m long. Some wood from old bedheads has been used for the organ face, and as well as traditional pedals, users will be able to use a switch to start a motor to push air into the instrument.

What they did not have they made. At one point, special glue made from horses hooves had to be heated in a small pot to an exact temperature so Lester made a faceplate and a potholder for the face of the iron, inverted the iron and fitted the plate, and simply dialled the temperature required!!! This invention is also on exhibit for the keen visitor to view. It is this

kind of innovation and thinking that has allowed this project to have an amazing organ as a centrepiece.

I was absolutely fascinated in the catalogues and their pictures and the explanations that were within for they helped to build a picture of the enormity of the undertaking: special leather, special glue etc and demonstrated the tenacity of the craftsmen involved in joining the two organs into one!!!

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