Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1959)

Heft: 1351

Artikel: 84th fête suisse and Scottish - Swiss Festival

Autor: [s.n.]

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-692756

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84th FÊTE SUISSE AND SCOTTISH - SWISS FESTIVAL

on WEDNESDAY, 21st OCTOBER 1959

at the ROYAL ALBERT HALL

It is a far cry from Caxton Hall to the Royal Albert Hall; who would ever have dreamed that one day the "Fête Suisse" would be held in this famous place?

This annual festival — so popular in the Colony — had changed many years ago from Caxton Hall to the Central Hall, Westminster, as greater seating accommodation was needed. This Hall could seat about 2,500 persons, and as far as I can remember I only twice saw the " sold out " notice pinned to the entrance door — 2,000 being the usual attendance.

Why, then, one may ask, choose a hall capable of accommodating no less than 8,000 people? Here is the explanation. When the final date for the "Swiss Fortnight" was fixed last year, the "Fête Suisse" committee decided — rightly — to postpone the festival, which usually takes place in May or June, to a date which would coincide with the "Fortnight", and that it should be amalgamated with a festival which was planned to take place in October of this year in aid of the Funds of the British Pestalozzi Children's Village Trust.

Without much ado, Mr. A. Renou, the dynamic President of the "Fête Suisse" committee, got in touch with the organisers concerned, and knowing that he would then have at his disposal various Swiss groups who would be performing during the "Swiss Fortnight" in various places in London and the provinces and therefore would be available to take part in the programme, it was decided that this year's festival should be held at the Royal Albert Hall in collaboration with our Scottish friends, as a programme supported solely by local Swiss talent was out of the question and would not have filled this large hall.

It was, of course, realised that by acquiring a hall of such dimensions the organisers would be faced with a stiff task, but I am glad to say that the Royal Albert Hall, on Wednesday, 21st October, was completely "sold out", and some latecomers, I was told, even had to be turned away. Amongst the varied audience there was a large contingent of Swiss numbering well over two thousand. In one of the boxes were the Swiss Ambassador and Madame Daeniker, in company with Sir John Wolfenden, C.B.E., President of the British Pestalozzi Children's Village Trust, Dr. H. J. Alexander, Chairman, Mrs. Mary Buchanan, Hon. Secretary, and the Earl of Verulam, M.A., J.P., Hon. Treasurer.

This combined festival served two purposes; firstly it conveyed to the audience something of the national character and similarities of both nations, and secondly it helped a very deserving cause.

The programme, to which I shall shortly refer, included performances from each of the four Swiss language zones. The "Ladina Kapelle" came from the Romansch-speaking part of the canton of Grisons. There were our old friends from the "Corale" of the Unione Ticinese, representing the South, and singers and players from the French language areas of Lausanne and Geneva, and from the hills of Eastern Switzerland came yodellers, flag throwers and dancers.

The Scottish part of the programme illustrated well the basic similarities of Scots and Swiss traditions. From the Highlands and the Isles came foursomes and strathspeys, and solo dances from the North like Sword and Fling, and Seann Triubhas. Some of the dancers, like many Scots, were fluent in Gaelic, the original language of Scotland. From the Lowlands (and from the Highlands, too) came the country dances, with their gaily repetitive tunes. The Scots are always associated with the bagpipes, and the festival included the Pipe Band of the Royal Caledonian Schools' Old Boys.

Soon after 7 p.m. the programme started with marching and countermarching by the Old Caledonians Pipe Band (wearing the Hunting Stewart Tartans), who received an enthusiastic reception. They were followed by the "Genève Chante", who were appearing for the first time in this country. They were fully equal to the reputation with which they came to us, after their many successes at home and abroad. The ladies especially impressed by their attractive costumes and their captivating smiles. It is difficult to pick out any item of their performance for special praise, all were sung with remarkable precision and perfect harmony. I for one enjoyed immensely the fine rendering with tenor solo of "La Jardinière du Roy" by Haug. Not only can this choir sing well, but some of their members are accomplished dancers. Their performance was much applauded.

Next came a group of girls, the White Heather Dancers, dancing Scottish country dances with the accompaniment of the London Gaelic Choir; they danced most delightfully. A Hebridean Weaving Lilt was followed by Bonnie Anne, with fiddle, piano, and accordion accompaniment, and several other folk dances, which were accompanied by the Blue Bonnets Scottish Country Dance Band. Warm applause greeted the performance.

It was appropriate that the canton of Appenzell a. Rh. should be represented in the programme, as the first Pestalozzi Children's Village was founded in Trogen. The Appenzeller Folklore Group sang, played and yodelled to their hearts' content; greatly admired were their costumes. The famous "Thaler Schwingen" was watched with keen interest. They left the arena amidst tumultuous applause.

Then the versatile White Heather Dancers made their appearance again, and were loudly cheered; most of their items were accompanied by bagpipes. It was a sheer delight to watch these graceful dancers in their attractive Scottish dresses. The almost riotous applause with which their performance was acknowledged was well deserved.

Whilst so far all Swiss items in the programme were executed by groups hailing from home, now the "Corale" of the Unione Ticinese made their bow, no doubt with their tongues in their cheeks, wondering what might be their reception after the flawlesness of the previous numbers. The audience soon showed

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that it appreciated their courage and underlined each song with hearty applause. The Ticinese brought the sun by their carefree and spontaneous singing. There were old and new songs, all well done, and when they retired with their signature tune "Ciau" they received an ovation. Well done, "Corale", you have not let us down! By the way, I noticed that the male members of the choir wore new costumes, and looked well in them, and were a good match to the ladies' costumes.

Item No. 7 was billed on the programme as "Welcome" from and to the Swiss Colony in London at the end of the "Swiss Fortnight", and in the beam of a spotlight there appeared Mr. A. Renou, President of the "Fête Suisse" committee. He addressed first the Scottish audience (not forgetting the English), and afterwards spoke very wittily in French, Italian and "Schwyzerdütsch" to our compatriots, concluding by rendering thanks to all the artists taking part in the festival. I have heard this speaker on many occasions, and I must admit that I have seldom heard him speak better. He was vigorously applauded.

Mr. Renou then introduced "A Personality" (as the programme stated). This "Personality" was no other than Mr. Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, the well-known radio commentator, who made a sincere and moving Appeal for the support of the British Pestalozzi Children's Village Trust.

After a short interval the programme was resumed with the appearance of the Lake of Geneva Brass Band in their smart blue uniforms. This band is the official band of the Radio Suisse Romande, and enjoys no mean reputation at home. They played with much vigour a potpourri of popular Swiss tunes. Oh! how these melodies brought back to us Swiss living "loin du pays" treasured memories!

There was more fine dancing by the White Heather Dancers, and more singing by the "Genève Chant". New in the second part of the programme was the "Ländler Kapelle Ladina", who played "Ländlers" and Waltzes, and sang with much feeling, both in Romansch and "Schwyzerdütsch". Their performance was intercepted with blood curdling "Yuchzers", causing much amusement. New also was an Appenzeller flag thrower, who very cleverly threw his flag almost, but not quite, to the top of the Hall; during his performance he was accompanied by the "Alphornbläser".

This attractive programme came to a close shortly before eleven o'clock with a Grande Finale, all the artists who had taken part assembling in the arena: the various costumes, Swiss and Scottish, presented a grand sight. The Swiss, Scottish and English flags were then hoisted and the two National Anthems were played and sung by the entire audience, followed by Auld Lang Syne, and the Retreat, "Scotland, the Brave", played by bagpipes.

The general verdict was that the 84th "Fête Suisse" and the Scottish-Swiss Festival was a festival of sheer delight, which I am sure will be remembered for a very long time. Credit for the exceedingly well organised performance should be given to the Hon. Producer, Marie Le Fort, Assistant Hon. Producer (Swiss), Alfred Renou, and Hon. Assistant Producer (Scottish), Alan Geddes.

Now we are looking forward to the next "Fête Suisse"; when and where will it be held, I wonder.

ST.