

Tones of the Times: Reflections on the 2021 *Alpentöne Festival* with Barbara Betschart, Roland Dahinden, Pius Knüsel, and Roland Schiltknecht. Altdorf, August 2021

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Sharonne Specker (SS) with Barbara Betschart (BB), Roland Dahinden (RD), Pius Knüsel (PK), and Roland Schiltknecht (RS)

The town of Altdorf in Uri, Switzerland is home to the biennial *Alpentöne Festival*. Translating as “alpine sounds” and attracting a loyal public of locals and visitors, it takes inspiration from its alpine surroundings to create an inimitable festival experience, defying musical genres and spanning the traditional to the experimental. The most recent iteration took place, live and on-site, in August 2021. I sat down for a virtual chat with four people involved in its realization: Barbara Betschart, one of the artistic directors; Pius Knüsel, the executive director, Roland Dahinden, trombonist and composer; and Roland Schiltknecht, hammered dulcimer player. Our conversations revealed a sense of collective relief as well as critical reflection on what could have been different. This year’s festival was shaped by practical pandemic adjustments – attendees required a certificate verifying their COVID-19 vaccination, recovery, or test result (the latter available on site); venues were changed or relocated; and the festival pass was replaced by individual tickets, to track capacity numbers. The pandemic coloured every aspect of the organizational process, from contingency plans to financial management. However, the experience of running a festival during a pandemic was contingent on its possibilities and existence *outside* of crisis conditions. My interlocutors reaffirmed the inherent mutuality of live music-making and its emotional, corporeal, and sonic resonance in a shared space. They also highlighted the importance of continuity, as the ability to build on pre-existing relationships, ensembles, and connections was especially critical to facilitating this year’s festival.

The following interview excerpts have been translated from Swiss German and have been condensed and revised in partnership with my collaborators.

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Fig. 1 Festival Alpentöne 2021, Atdorf, canton of Uri, Switzerland.

SS: How are you feeling after the festival?

BB: Above all, we're happy that everything went well. We're also grateful that the high quality was there, and nothing was cancelled. *Alpentöne* has always been a festival where you could discover new things, and in that regard, we had a lot of possibilities this year.

PK: After the festival, one always feels relieved that it's over. Particularly, doubly relieved that nothing bad happened as a result of corona[virus]. Of course, I'm also glad that there were such great concerts. With the entire balance of the festival, however, I'm semi-happy – a little glum because the end result was only half as attended as I would have liked.

RD: [In our performance] we tried to let the multilayered potential of that cultural space bloom, sonically. We knew that it would be good on a professional level. Yet the way that it blossomed so beautifully [with the audience] – you can't simply count on that, you can only hope for it! That beautiful flourishing, that is a gift. It also gives a sense of gratitude, and a lovely resonance, a lovely recall; an echo which is wonderful.

SS: How did you decide to go ahead with the event?

PK: We wanted to officially decide at the end of November, but of course it was corona [dependent], because at the end of November there was already a lockdown announcement. So, we postponed the decision. It was only on March 8th of this year that the [funding] municipal council definitively chose to take the risk. We had the programme together already, broadly speaking, and the financing had also progressed much further. Then we could estimate. We considered a scenario: what would it cost in the event of a total cancellation? That would have been more expensive, while every version of going ahead with it would have resulted in less deficit.

BB: There needed to be a statement for culture [at this time]! So much *didn't* happen, and we felt we had to organize the *Alpentöne Festival* – also because you can't postpone [commissioned compositions] for years! So, we needed and wanted to organize it, and the municipal council actually jumped on that and [eventually] figured, "OK, go!" And then we went! But with [performers from abroad], up until 2 days prior, we didn't know if they'd be able to come or not.

SS: What was it like to make music and continue projects during the pandemic?

RD: Well, for example, I received various requests to play at online festivals, where you play at home and it gets broadcast, and I declined all of them. I always said: "Hey guys, let's stay quiet, and go walking in the woods or go jogging instead." As a composer, I was affected by it much less, because as a composer you need stillness, in a way. Because if too much is going on, then you can't compose. That means that, for example, this commission – and I had two other composition contracts at the same time – they came about in this time when less was happening on stage.

SS: What about online music-making?

RS: No, I had almost nothing to do with that. That didn't interest me at all. I also didn't listen to online concerts. We're currently in an incredible flood of concerts and online services, where we can access any kind of music at any time. That's also inflationary. That's why live playing has gained a different status: the bigger the flood of possible music that you can listen to, the more important the person who stands there [on that stage]. Even if they make really simple music, if it is authentic and from the heart, it can be more touching than any virtual or recorded concert. It still works that way for me, that something

mysterious emanates from those vibrations. And I believe they are different vibrations when they come straight from the instrument than when they are recorded.

SS: How was practicing music for the festival?

BB: It was problematic! With the choir concert, for example, we were really worried that they wouldn't be able to practice. Then, at some point, came the moment when groups of under 20 could sing together, outside – but the choir was more than 20 people! Singing together was only possible in the last couple of weeks. Otherwise, some groups practiced together online, other groups practiced with distance. There was intense pressure before the festival, because they knew that they all wanted to fulfil their contracts. But it was still more difficult than in a normal year.

SS: What was the significance of having an in-person festival?

BB: Online, as a musician, nothing comes back to you in terms of emotion. There is no real resonance. You simply play, and maybe with your colleagues you have a nice time playing – but musicians are attuned to resonance. It's so lovely, when one can play live, before an audience. Our public was so delighted to feel that again, and to sense how much joy the musicians had. One group said at the beginning, after the first [frenetic] applause: "Wow, what a feeling to play again for the first time in 18 months." You simply feel that. That, with all the energy, and joy of living, joy of playing, and also the audience's joy, all of it vibrating together: just amazing!

RD: To be able to play in public again, and to feel the concentrated energy from the public – you surf on that, it's very tangible. I'd say, for the same concert without public, the chance would have been very high that it would have been a very good concert, but it wouldn't have blossomed so wonderfully. I mean, now when we're talking over Zoom – naturally if we were present with one another, there would be other vibes than over the screen. When you're making music on the stage, you're much more sensitive to that.

RS: Originally, folk music was deeply embedded in society, as part of daily activities, festivities, and culture. It was integrated into our lives, not limited to concerts. I take the perspective that when people either listen or dance [to live music], then something new comes into being. You could say that's actually the case with any relationship. When a relationship is intensive, any kind of interpersonal relationship, then something new emerges which is greater than each individual. I think that when a musician gains wings, he does so thanks to his audience. He could [make music] alone, but it's still a special moment when people also enjoy it. One feels that; it comes across. I think people who make music have a deep need to engage in some form of communication. When that's missing, over a long period of time, then – one can always make music for oneself, but it's never the same, because it is solitary. And we are social creatures.

PK: We've always found that *Alpentöne* is a live experience; something completely different [than a recording]. We always had the feeling that you must experience these things physically, and you must experience them communally. Therefore, we never seriously considered streaming. I think that was also good, because people are so tired of streaming!

SS: What is the future looking like?

PK: It's really up to the people involved. When there is so much voluntary effort and so much heart in there, we have to optimize this energy with the overall balance. It's not just about what was on stage, and how did the audience like it, and the media – but how did [all of us] experience it, what did it bring

and cost us personally? Also, what does it mean for Altdorf, how is it developing, and where could it go now? These are still important questions.

RD: I suspect the pandemic will keep us busy for a while longer. I don't think that we're simply through it. Today you live with a question mark. That means that all commitments you make, and that includes concerts with contracts, where the flights are booked – there is nonetheless that question mark. You simply don't know. At any time, they could be cancelled. And I think we must simply live with that uncertainty for a while.

Alpentöne: <https://www.alpentoene.ch>

