

Switzerland and its anthem(s)

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Switzerland and its anthem(s)

National anthems as we know them today are a relatively recent phenomenon. They date back to the emergence of the modern nation state in Europe at the end of the 18th century, which brought with it the need for state symbols. The individual states adopted flags and coats-of-arms as a visual expression of their identity, and national anthems as their audible counterpart. Only a few countries already possessed such a thing; the rest had to find them in more or less of a hurry. Many states simply took old folk songs and gave them new words, while others wrote new ones from scratch. Time was often of the essence. The composer of the Costa Rican anthem, for example, was given just three days to come up with a suitable work, urgently needed for an important diplomatic occasion. His effort is in use even today.

The Swiss, however, believe in taking things at a more leisurely pace. The current anthem was composed in 1841, but it took another 140 years for it to be officially adopted.

"Radiant in the morning sky..."

As this long hesitation implies, Switzerland has always felt a little bit uncomfortable about its anthem - and still does. A poll carried out among German and French speaking Swiss by the Coop magazine in 2000 showed that practically no-one knew the full text off by heart. This was particularly true of young people: only one per cent of those between the ages of 15 and 29 claimed to know all the verses.

The current anthem, the so-called Swiss Psalm, was first performed in 1841 and was soon played at various patriotic events. Several times between 1894 and 1953 the Federal Council - the Swiss government - was asked to declare the Psalm the official national anthem. However, the Council did not believe it had won full acceptance among the population as a whole, and responded by saying that it was for the people to show they had chosen an anthem by singing it regularly.

It was only in 1981 that it gained the official status of national anthem.

"When you call us, Fatherland"

Another strong candidate for the

national anthem was the popular and somewhat belligerent song, "Rufst Du mein Vaterland" - "When you call us, Fatherland" - which was often performed at political and military ceremonies. The words were composed by Johann Wyss, better known as one of the joint authors of the classic children's story, The Swiss Family Robinson. It was sung to the same tune as the British "God Save the Queen" (incidentally, a tune also used by a number of other European royal houses at the time). However, as contacts between countries increased in the 20th century, awkward situations sometimes arose when both the Swiss and British national anthems were played.

That was why in 1961 the Federal Council decided that a new national anthem should be provisionally introduced. A competition to find a suitable one was held in 1979, but although many entries were received, none provided a convincing alternative to the Swiss Psalm. The Federal Council thus felt obliged to declare the Psalm the official anthem on April 1st 1981.

The search for a new anthem

Even today the Psalm has few passionate supporters. People find the words pompous and exaggerated, and while there are fewer objections to the tune, many people find it lacks oomph. As a result, several attempts have been made to find a replacement.

"With all my might will I serve this land..."

Self-taught musician Christian D. Jakob was one of those inspired by the 1979 competition to try his hand, although he did not present his composition to the public until many years later. He combined his musical and poetic talent with his knowledge of Swiss history to compose both the tune and the words. He based the text on the 1291 federal charter - regarded as Switzerland's founding document.

According to Jakob, activists among Switzerland's Rumantsch speakers seized on the new composition as a chance to promote Rumantsch Grischun, the artificial compromise between the various idioms which had been recently adopted as an official language, and accordingly the first translation of Jakob's words

was into Switzerland's smallest language. An Italian version quickly followed, and finally, a French one.

This attempt at an anthem was presented to the public for the first time in October 1998. The public liked the simple tune, in 4/4 time, rising in a gradual crescendo to the end. However opinion was more divided over the one-verse text. The opening words "With all my might will I serve this land, never bowed to foreign laws" provoked fierce debate. The main sticking point was the expression "foreign laws" which raised the question of whether it was compatible with possible future membership of the UN or the European Union.

"My Switzerland, my fatherland"

At the beginning of 2006 an Action Committee for the Swiss National Anthem was founded, with the aim of finding more suitable and memorable words, while keeping the same tune.

A German and an Italian version were proposed. The German version stressed the Swiss love of freedom, while the Italian version praised Switzerland's generosity.

However, it soon became clear that the motion would not receive sufficient support in parliament, and the committee's secretariat abandoned its efforts in May 2006.

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