

**“EXCUSE ME, I’D LIKE ANOTHER VELTLINER, PLEASE!”<sup>1</sup>  
- PERFORMED IDENTITIES WITH ALPINE ZITHER MUSIC**

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**Abstract**

The Alpine zither has a special status and significance among the music instruments as very ‘German’ or ‘Alpine’. This young stringed musical instrument, which has emerged in its present form and style of playing in the last two centuries, is still today mainly present in the amateur music and zither club scene. The plucked zither was originally used in Alpine folk music. With common symbols individuals share common identity, musicians are identified by the instrument and the music they play. What is stereotypical about the image of the Alpine zither and do zither players see their instrument symbolic in the same way? How does zither music differ inside the common group? In my paper I would like to use this instrument as a focus for understanding the processes of social change, the dealing with inclusion and exclusion and the shifting in concepts of identity among the Alpine zither players. Little about the zither has been published. Most books have been written by amateur researchers. In addition, the Zither music has hardly been the focus of researchers. Because relevant research findings are so scarce, emphasis rests on those ethnomusicological methods involving audio-visual recorded field research.

The Alpine zither is often simply referred to as the typical musical instrument of cultural importance within the German speaking Alpine area. What is stereotypical about this image? Do zither players see their instrument symbolic in the same way?

Quite naturally and not thinking much about it I recently packed the zither in the instrument case and slipped into my Alpine *Dirndl* costume, when I left for a *Musikantenstammtisch*<sup>2</sup> in a Viennese *Heuriger*<sup>3</sup> wine tavern in *Hernals*. Once there, I took note of the surprise that I was dressed in native costume as only one among all the musicians - a dress code that I transferred from similar official and informal events with traditional music performing in the Bavarian Alps with not a thought to its symbolic image. I quickly realized that this dress habit was not common in the Austrian capital Vienna even among enthusiasts of traditional music. Suitable for that other guests in the tavern asked me several times: „Excuse me, I’d like another Veltliner, please!“ The Alpine *Dirndl* dress with blouse and apron identified myself as a waitress in the urban winery and not, as usual in my Bavarian home country, as a

1- Ordering some more Austrian wine in a Viennese wine tavern „Entschuldigung, Frau Kellnerin, ich hätte gerne noch einen Veltliner ...“.

2- A *Musikantenstammtisch* - similar to a jam session in jazz music - is an informal group meeting of Alpine folk musicians held on a regular basis in a restaurant. It’s not a structured meeting, but rather a friendly get-together to play music without rehearsals, contracts or income, no pressure to perform and for an official audience. Guests are always welcome (see Mayrlechner 2011:24).

3- A typical wine bar in Vienna/Austria, usually selling the year’s new wine.

musician playing traditional Alpine music. There was a clear discrepancy between the internal and the external perspective.

The Alpine zither has a special status and significance among the music instruments as a very 'German' or 'Alpine' instrument. Distinguished by a short history and still today mainly present in the amateur music and zither club scene, the zither was originally used in Alpine folk music. Gerlinde Haid speaks about its subsequent history which has seen an extension in the identity of the characteristic folk music instrument. Today the context and style of zither performance includes the performance of plucked string orchestras, chamber music, Early Western classical music as well as contemporary and experimental music as a form of art music.

In this paper, I would like to present a brief overview of the history of the Alpine zither, using this instrument as a focus for understanding the processes of social change and shifts in concepts of identity among the Alpine zither players.

Musicians are identified by the instrument and the music they play. From an inside view musicians do the same process to position themselves in the group. The parameter music has a great effect in the attempt to relate to a group - in both directions: Inclusion and exclusion! Irmgard Merkt sees the potential to support identification processes by music consequently on a small scale: „Die Identifikation mit Musik ist sehr hoch - wenn sie die eigene ist.“<sup>4</sup> (Merkt 2000).

The parameter music is more than the instrument and played music. The context of the performance is also very important. This subject has been discussed in musicology several times, but there is a desideratum in Alpine folk music research and in particular to zither music. Silvan Wagner criticizes the missing interest of musicologists in themes belonging to plucked string instruments in general because these instruments like the Alpine zither are mainly played by amateur musicians (see Wagner 2010:1). This fact makes plucked instruments unattractive for musicologists who are still primarily interested in professional Western classical music. This situation, in turn, is aggravated by the historical view marked down by Michael Praetorius in his instrument description *Syntagma musicum* published in 1619. He defined the early zither instrument *Scheitholt* as „billich unter die Lumpen Instrumenta referiret ...“ - that says the zither is the instrument of tramps or beggars.

There is also a dilemma for the Alpine zither in a further direction: Discussions are avoided due to the instrument bearing the impression of being very 'German' or 'Alpine' like (see Huber 2014:150-155). The recall of German national socialist history is not very attractive for the instrument.

The need to belong to and identify with a group is big. The view from outside a music group identifies the instrument as a symbol which connects all zither players in a similar way. Aleida Assmann sees common symbols as very important for shared common identity: „Über die gemeinsamen Symbole hat der einzelne teil an einem gemeinsamen Gedächtnis und einer gemeinsamen Identität.“<sup>5</sup> (Assmann 2009:132) - meaning that music played with the Alpine zither can be such an audible and visual symbol to support identification.

When zither players are confronted with the public view as explained before, the musicians often react with different attempts to identify themselves. On the one hand zither players keep an

4- Identification with music is very high - if it is one's own.

5- Common symbols allow individuals to participate in collective remembrance and shared common identity.

inward differentiation because they are not a homogeneous group. On the other hand they cohere to isolate themselves from other instrument groups. It's about 'one's own and not one's own' or in the words of Ursula Hemetek: "Identität [...] Immer hat sie mit Ein- und Ausgrenzung zu tun"<sup>6</sup> (Hemetek 2001:139)".

The attempts to identify differ considerably inside the zither music scene and in the perception from outside the group. The self-attribution shows a diversity of facets. The construction of the instruments they play is similar, but that is all they have in common. The identification inside the group of zither players can happen gradually or very consciously by the definition of single parameters. Identification is not a one-time or rigid process. Zither players constantly move back and forth, meander between the groups and include and exclude people and cultural trends.

### The Alpine Zither

Zither instruments are common in the whole world. They all consist of more or fewer strings stretched across a sound box. The Alpine zither or modern mountain zither (a term used in Hornbostel and Sachs' system of musical instrument classification) is a product of only the last two centuries. Social, ethnographic and historical aspects of musical life in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century formed an environment in which the development of the zither from the *Scheitholt* to the *Kratzzither* and finally to the *Schlagzither* was possible. As a result, the zither became a musical counterpart to the popular middle-class piano. This Alpine zither is now fully chromatic with two playing fields which are played simultaneously: Five melody strings across a fretboard, tuned like a viola with a double 'a' and varying numbers of unfretted, open 'accompaniment', 'bass and 'contra-bass strings played in the manner of a harp.

Distinctive historical aspects and events contributed a special sense of identity in Bavarian and Alpine zither playing today. Sound research poses questions to what the typical sound of the Alpine zither is. What are the tonal qualities and sound characteristics which delights people, which creates that passion, which wins enthusiastic acclaim from all who hear it and which seemingly incorporates Bavarian *Gemuetlichkeit*?

In a poem from 1862, Franz Ritter von Kobell writes: "Die Zither is a 'Zauberinn, I' g'schpür's gar tief in' Herzn drinn, ..."<sup>8</sup> (Kobell 1862). All my informants spoke about the zither in a similar fashion, saying its sound simply enchanted. The Alpine zither tone is diffuse and quiet, best coming into its own in small rooms. The playing style (arpeggios and broken chords) is reminiscent of the harp, but differs by using chromatic scales, also incorporating staccato tones, vibrato and special sound effects. The zither - with melody and accompaniment available simultaneously - works perfectly as a solo-instrument but also in an ensemble and for accompanying singers. The nearness of zither sound to the human voice evokes a sympathetic response and gives a feeling of down-home. The zither is often a small instrument - easy to carry. As it lies on the table when played and playing requires rather small movements, the zither may seem a little harmless at first. This instrument is not suitable for loud affairs, marching or monumental ceremonies as with most string instruments.

6- Identity [...] it always deals with inclusion and exclusion.

7- Atmosphere of comfort, peace and acceptance.

8- The zither plays a siren's role. She holds me captive, heart and soul.

## Historical Roots and Socio-Cultural Environment

### Duke Maximilian in Bavaria

To look back to Europe at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the French Revolution has changed political and social life, the Congress of Vienna has reorganized political Europe.

What was once:

- Aristocratic chamber music has become public bourgeois concerts and house music in middle class homes.
- Folk music from Bohemia, Hungary and Italy has become famous.
- The middle class have started playing musical instruments on an amateur basis.
- A great demand has arisen for printed sheet music and musical instruments.
- A fascination has developed for the Alps.
- Researchers, scientist, painters and poets have discovered the hitherto ignored Alps, becoming interested in native costumes, music, the countryside and country-folk in general.
- The zither has come into social fashion, in part caused by the playing of Bavarian's Duke Maximilian Joseph in Bayern, the father of the Austrian Empress Sisi (Elisabeth).

From this time on the Alpine instrument zither was fashionable in Austrian and Bavarian noble and upper class circles - enhancing the impression of being 'from the country', with the rural people imitating the zither playing of the middle class and in the process re-discovering their own instrument.

### Tyrolese Minstrels

At the same time poor Tyrolean farmers travelled around the country during the winter and tried to sell their handcrafted art. Their essentially private singing and yodeling entertained people. This singing then became the main purpose of their national and international travels. They even introduced new music to the public including the song Silent Night, Holy Night, now widely known all over in the world.

Eventually, instrumental music became more important in their performances. They preferred the zither because it was inexpensive and it enhanced the impression of being 'from the country'. The zither became a symbol for rustic Alpine living. It was also a symbol for freedom, as seen in some songs of rebellion.

### Printed music and Cabinet Cards

Decades before, the molly coddled daughters of well-to-do families had to learn the harp. Now they have to learn the zither. Not only prominent figures of politics and wealth, but also the working class discovered the zither as its instrument. We see this on their cabinet cards and carte de visite. Often the zither was only a popular decoration for the cabinet cards - as with the harp years before - meanwhile wallpaper background on the pictures show Austrian-Bavarian mountains. Pictures on the cover pages of the sheet music often reflect Alpine enthusiasm, but also Alpine

myths: The beauty of the Alpine mountain world and a happy rural life full of joyful dancing and singing were especially idealized.

Against the background of what we know to be zither music, our theme can be outlined as follows:

- Identification of individuals as performers in the cultural heritage and amateur music area.
- Identification of individuals as performers in the Western classical musical life of the professional scene.
- Identification of individuals as performers in mainstream and popular music business and products.

### Cultural Heritage

Alpine traditional music, dancing, singing and yodeling demonstrates the unity of individuals which in a political sense belong to different states (Germany, Austria, South Tyrol/Northern Italy, Switzerland, parts of Czech Republic, Slovenia and Hungary). One symbol to demonstrate a kind of cultural unity is the Alpine zither and zither music in which individual, cultural and collective memory is preserved. The German scholar of cultural studies, Aleida Assmann, wrote in her book 'Erinnerungsräume' (spaces of remembrance): „Wir definieren uns durch das, was wir gemeinsam erinnern und vergessen. Umbau von Identität bedeutet immer auch Umbildung des Gedächtnisses ...“<sup>9</sup> (Assmann 1999:62f., 232). Zither players use the amount of symbolic power of the zither in subjective memory. Walter Deutsch's remarks on multipart singing in Austrian folk music also fit well to the traditional practice of Alpine zither musicians (see Deutsch 2013:3): They play zither music for their own enjoyment - uninfluenced, spontaneous and not tied to any aesthetic principle. Music learned and rehearsed without the use of notes is typical for traditions in local music performance. The practice of playing new variations in every repetition makes recording difficult.

The zither in traditional performance has always been subject to continuous change. Especially after WWII, the zither threatened to disappear more and more because of the anti-German mood in the music of the country.

Government-funded cultivation of traditional songs and music (*Volksmusikpflege*), Folk Music Competitions, Folk Music Schools and printed music helped to weather the years with lack of interest. As a result, a new sound of an urban-orientated folk music culture was created and is now presented with eagerness and conviction using special selection criteria and visibility becomes an important issue, too (see Deutsch 2013: 2).

Now in recent times we can see a designed connection to the cultural heritage. Gerlinde Haid quotes Walter Wiora's definition 'Zweites Dasein' in the meaning of second existence (Haid 1988: 60). In the 1950's Wiora already spoke about the present-day use of traditional music in Austria and Bavaria in which the zither music is no longer connected to the musicality and tradition of the former local regions. Today the music is presented on concert stages and in Christian churches, with virtuosity and in an individualized use. The former purpose for dancing and socializing became very seldom by the growing absence of 'born-in-the-tradition' musicians (see Solís 2004:12).

9- "We define ourselves by what we remember and forget together. Reconstruction of identity always implies alteration of memory ..."

Today we have enthusiastic young musicians performing Alpine zither - the most do not have a rural traditional background. They are mainly urban-oriented. In a way designing the past, they try to imitate the sound of popular folk music from the early 20th century and they play old zither instruments. They play traditional melodies from those days and their new compositions work with similar stylistics. They even keep the dress code from those old days with native costumes. Prior they want to keep alive the cliché of the zither as an Alpine instrument being from the country. A new heritage is now created with old innovation in generally recognized musical rules and performance on stage.

### **Intellectual Property, New Access And Innovative Ways**

Zither music is generally not considered as a factor in European classical music culture, having been developed mainly among lower class people and thus remaining nearly independent of influences from the newer mainstream musical fashions in Europe.

However, today the group of zither players who are strongly interested in European classical music culture is increasing. In contrast to the in 'Alpine tradition playing' group they want to avoid any association of the zither to be very German or Alpine like. Not in the kind of performance (they do not perform in restaurants and beer halls - their podium is the concert hall with appropriate dress code), not in the played repertoire and even not in the sound of the instrument.

Their goal is defined with a high artistic standard, a rigorous perfection in rhythm and technique, virtuosity - they aim at a high interpretational level based on criteria of Western classical music. Zither music is critically judged by a rating scale which is chipping away the cultural and historical associations and meanings about the zither which developed in the mid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Special selection criteria in German national competitions like *Jugend musiziert* and academic training ensures the adoption of a European classical standard and the trend toward contemporary and experimental music.

In the last years this group of zither players developed together with luthiers and zither makers a modified zither instrument, called *Zither in Psalterform*, which is technically played in the same manner but differs a lot in the sound characteristic and optic. Juliane Gross, a Munich publisher of contemporary music, commented on this development in an interview at Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation some years ago. She explained how happy she is to see and hear this renewed zither instrument. The new sound is far away from the well-known Alpine zither sound and not connected to its traditional history.

The new type of zither is centered on performances of Renaissance, Baroque and contemporary music toward experimentation and modernization. The new aesthetics of zither playing is reflected in sound, literature, gesture and environment. The 'outside-of-tradition' zither music with its musical expression is compared to a cultural environment which emanates from a completely different self-image. Interested musicians and innovative audiences welcome the change of the zither value and its redefinition of identity.

### **Timely Mainstream And Commercially Products**

The zither always had ebbs and flows in its popularity. The movie 'The Third Man' from 1949 had an amazingly revitalizing effect on the instrument's popularity and broad resurgence of interest in

zither music ensued. The Viennese zither player and composer Anton Karas wrote and performed the musical score to the 'The Third Man', which used only the Alpine zither. The movie theme topped the international music charts in 1950.

Anton Karas always only wanted to perform Viennese Heurigen music. It is curious that both zither playing groups, the performer in the cultural heritage and the performer in the intellectual property, do not want to be identified with the sound of Karas' zither music. That is although or maybe just because his music is connected to the Alpine zither by people from all over the world. On the one hand this dislike could be due to the extremely simple zither melodies Karas' played. On the other hand a fact of the disapprobation has to be discussed with the very special German questionability of merchandising traditional music in mass media like radio and TV and for making money. This very German consensus which consists in the moral and ideological point of non-merchandising traditional music was often in conflict with musicians who earned income with zither music caught between self-promotion, using images and automatism of marketing strategies.

In my analysis I did not see a similar negative attitude when zither players started to include a set of new ideas with music pluralism which did not belong to this instrument group before, e.g. jazz, pop, rock and diverse religious sounds. Viewed with music-historical background a question needs to be asked: Why did the first steps start so late to open the zither for and adapting other music genres - only the last 20 to 30 years? Could that fact lead back to the stereotypical image and inviolability of the zither as very 'Alpine' or 'German' instrument?

Today we can see different approaches in the impact of modernization the zither in new stylistic, technical, historic and sound elements, repertoire, development of the instrument in the directions of electric instrument with solid body, performance in casual clothing, specific hairstyle and gestures and new concert venue. The audience's expectations and desires, attraction and reflection are growing, but still too less to characterize a new musical identity in zither playing on national and international level.

## Conclusion

Although zither players are using the same symbol, present-day practice with zither music performance is very diverse. The view from outside and inside differs a lot, the acting from one group setting to the next inside the society of zither players is often different. It ranges from the traditional folk music genre to adoptions of European classical music and modernization toward broader cultural trends in experimental and mainstream music. All zither players are using the amount of symbolic power of the zither either in subjective memory, in a ,designed' connection to the past or to open innovative ways and new access to the instrument. It is different in every case and communicates with diverse present-day audiences meanwhile the purposeful construction of identities takes place. As long as the zither is part of collective memory, it continues to benefit the community in different identification processes.

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