

When the cittern rings in the Thuringian Forest

Symposium/ At Suhl a nearly forgotten, though popular instrument is in the middle of the focus

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Martina Rosenberger could speak in modern slang, that she plays the "German Bouzouki". Probably this would cause her listeners to nod approvingly. But if she talks straight about her instrument with the old-fashioned name "Waldzither" she earns awkward smiles. Unduly.

Suhl

"I've been thinking to be the last and only one, who's heart beats for the Waldzither in Germany" Rosenberger tells. But meanwhile she attracted a couple of luthiers, musicians and enthusiasts, who meet this weekend for the second time since 2003 for a conference. A Waldzitherconference. To make music, try out and share knowledge. Until the location of the meeting, the Hotel Thuringia will "tremble" (The German word "zithern", which means "play the cittern" is substituted here by "zittern", the word for "trembling" to create a joke. / translator's comment)

During the last days the 75 year old Hilmar Günther from Dietzenhausen has held lectures to teach luthiers what they need to know to build a Waldzither. And Joachim Rosenbrueck from Ilmenau is writing sheet music for the instrument, because there is almost nothing available any more and a new tutor is needed to teach how to play the Waldzither. All this is necessary "to prevent the instrument from being totally forgotten", Rosenberger comments.

At the edge of dying out

It had nearly happened in her own family, too. For years the Waldzither had served as wall decoration. "Until the baptizing of my son in 2000 - to have some music in the church". This rekindled her interest in the Waldzither. Her father, who had rather learnt to play the piano, was very fond of making music. "In former years making music was much more important to people than nowadays" Rosenberger tells, who plays drums and the baroque recorder, too. Her father had had no choice. A piano was out of reach in terms of money. So he saved every coin to buy a Waldzither from salesmen, who had been very active in the 1920ies and 1930ies.

He was fond of plucking his instrument, not only on Christmas eve. And he taught his daughter basics of playing. But it took her years to revive the instrument – given the occasion of the baptizing celebration. She dug out her inherited books and hand-written sheet-music and started again, self-educated. So the revived sound of her Waldzither five years ago worked as a initial spark.

Via Internet she had found sources for new strings. But it was impossible to find a teacher. So she started to ask more and more people until she ended up doing research, contacting experts and scanning old chronics and books for forgotten details. As a result she edited two documentations and created the conference and a website to give information. Like the history of the name, which was created about 1900 as a short form of "Thüringer Wald"-Zither. In this region very specific Waldzithern are built until now, with a special manner to fix the

tuning mechanism. Another interesting information given by the website is the effect of the Parted Germany after WW2. In the western part of Germany the instrument nearly died out for lack of spare parts. Its production was centered in Saxony - in the Eastern Part. Rosenberger: "All spare parts were behind the iron curtain. And after the 1930ies no publisher was interested in sheet music for Waldzither as selling numbers went down."

Irish Folk and Song-Accompainment

It's a pity, because there has been a tradition in Germany for this kind of cittern since 300 to 400 years ago. It had a major role in the court music of "August der Starke" of Saxony. As the age of electrical instruments and keyboards began, the Waldzither lost even more status. Today, when cheap Didgeridoos are a selling standard, the Waldzither is almost unknown. "Exotic instruments are always a catcher of interest. But no one expects them to exist in our own country. Nearly no one knows about the European ancestors of the Waldzither and "family members" like the Portuguese Guitar - famous with its Fado music."

Even if the Waldzither is made fun of - there is quite a lot of styles that go with it. It's used for Irish Folk, baroque tunes, middle-aged drone music and modern song-writing. "Most of the faszination is created by the sound itself. A rich, warm sound, not as sharp as expected with steel strings", Rosenberger explains. Although she's a self-employed master goldsmith, she's now connected with the Waldzither as well to the point of songwriting. Thoroughness, lots of ideas and talent of organization go along with her profession and are the tools for her Waldzither-topic, too. And when she starts to sing, together with her ten-year-old daughter, the critics go silent.

Today there is a concert at 8 p. m. at the Hotel Thüringen, Suhl for all interested listeners.

(Translated by Martina Rosenberger)