

Música em Contexto

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Yodeling “Heidi”: Swiss traditional music in transnational radio production

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Jäggi, Patricia. 2019. “Yodeling ‘Heidi’: Swiss traditional music in transnational radio production”. *Música em Contexto* 13, no. 1: 150-157. Disponível em <http://periodicos.unb.br/index.php/Musica/article/view/26626>.

ISSN: 1980-5802

DOI:

Recebido: 17 de maio, 2019.

Aceite: 15 de junho, 2019.

Publicado: 05 de julho, 2019.



Yodeling “Heidi”: Swiss traditional music in transnational radio production

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Abstract: This article deals with the Swiss International Radio and its transcultural mediation of Swiss culture during the Cold War. It will focus on the political and aesthetic strategy of the Swiss International Radio and the way in which Switzerland was represented abroad, using the example of the Arabic Service of the Swiss Radio International and its adaption of the famous novel “Heidi” by Swiss author Johanna Spyri.

Keyword: Switzerland. Music. Radio broadcasting. Heidi. Media anthropology. Cold war history. Yodeling.

Yodeling “Heidi”: Música tradicional da Suíça na produção radiofônica internacional

Resumo: Este artigo trata da Rádio Internacional da Suíça e a mediação transcultural da cultura da Suíça durante a Guerra Fria. Ele se concentrará na estratégia política e estética da Rádio Internacional da Suíça e na maneira como a Suíça foi representada no exterior, usando o exemplo do Serviço Árabe da Rádio Suíça Internacional e sua adaptação do famoso romance “Heidi” pela autora suíça Johanna Spyri.

Palavras-chave: Suíça. Música. Transmissão de rádio. Heidi. Antropologia da mídia. História da guerra fria. Yodeling.

Yodeling “Heidi”: Música tradicional de el Suiza en producción de radio internacional

Resumen: Este artículo trata sobre la radio internacional suiza y la mediación intercultural de la cultura suiza durante la Guerra Fría. Se centrará en la estrategia estética y política de Swiss International Radio y en cómo Suiza estaba representada en el extranjero, utilizando el ejemplo del Swiss Arab Radio Arab Service y su adaptación de la famosa novela "Heidi" de la autora suiza Johanna Spyri.

Palabras-clave: Suiza. Musica. Radiodifusión. Heidi. Antropología mediática. Historia de la guerra fria. Yodeling.

International Radio Broadcasting: Political and Historical Background

International radio was the first "limitless" and thus global medium before the World Wide Web (Browne 1982). It has been nearly forgotten in the (Western) countries today, but during its heyday in the decades after the Second World War, *shortwave transmission technology* was used to cross the oceans and reach the other ends of the world, and international broadcasters acted as transcultural mediators. Many countries had built up overseas language services during World War II. Following the war, these international broadcasters not only continued to inform their fellow countrywomen and countrymen abroad, but also became increasingly interested in foreign listeners as a growing target group. After World War II, wealthy countries invested large amounts of money in international cultural representation, also called cultural diplomacy. The main aim of such intercultural politics was to build up relationships between one's own country and a foreign public overseas. Alongside orchestras, books, and dance companies, radio was part of this international circulation of national cultural performances (Gienow-Hecht 2009), and was an equally important vehicle for international relationships and national promotion during the Cold War (Badenoch, Ficker, Heinrich-Franke 2013). The competition that accompanied this intercultural exchange is also a reason why international broadcasters were repeatedly criticized as propagandistic (Somerville 2012). International radio broadcasting was entangled in the East-West conflict—the Cold War having been called a "war of words" (Devlin 2010)—and its ability

to broadcast beyond the Iron Curtain, was, according to historian and journalist Michael Nelson, part of what brought down the governments in the East (Nelson 1997).



Fig. 1 – Shortwave radio antenna Schwarzenburg.

Source: https://www.sarganserland-walensee.ch/radio_tv_historisch/AM_Sender/kurzwellensender-schwarzenburg.html

The Swiss international radio (at the time Swiss Shortwave Service and Swiss Radio International) makes a good example of a small broadcaster that, also due to its proclaimed seeming political neutrality, operated from the margins. It started its official broadcasting in 1938. Besides the national languages German, French, Italian, and Rhaeto-Romance, its broadcasts were in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and occasionally in Esperanto. Not only but mainly due to political and economic internationalization after the war, the Arabic Language Service started broadcasting in 1964. Arabic, thus, was the first and only Non-European language the Swiss Shortwave Service spoke to the world on a daily basis. In comparison to the Swiss, the British BBC Empire Service started with its Arabic broadcasts as early as 1938 and addressed its listeners in nearly 70 languages. The BBC Empire Service was part of and co-funded by

the British foreign policy department. With the exception of a special grant issued by the Swiss Federal Council for the first years of its program extension for Northern Africa and the Arabian hemisphere, the Swiss Shortwave Service was only funded by the listeners' fees and, thus, had quite a limited budget (Padel 1985). Nevertheless, its broadcasts could be received worldwide. With good broadcasting weather, the Swiss could be heard in Africa and South America as well as in New Zealand. But as the archives show, the Swiss seem to have been a popular player. In the archived ratings of the London Listener Clubs, the Swiss regularly ranked in the first three along with Canada, Netherlands, the BBC, the Voice of America, or Leopoldville, a Belgian broadcaster from the Kongo (Das englische Programm, 1956).

The "Heidi" radio series

The "Heidi" radio series was broadcast each Monday from May to November 1968. As part of the changing foreign cultural politics of Switzerland it is an example of the attempt to present Swiss culture to an audience which at the time was mostly unfamiliar with the country and its particularities. Before 1964, only French and English programs were transmitted to Arabic countries. In the eyes of Western countries, Arabic regions were seen not only as needing economic and political development but also as interesting growing markets. Moving from the geopolitical and institutional context to the example of a broadcast such as «Heidi», I was interested in how the employees of the Arabic Service adapted the book for the listeners.

Originally, Heidi is a Christian education novel. Johanna Spyri saw herself in the

tradition of theological and popular education (Rutschmann 2001). Heidi is an orphan girl who, until the age of 5, lived with her aunt Dete. The story starts with Dete bringing Heidi to her paternal grandfather who lives on an alp above the village of Maienfeld, isolated from the other village people. There, Heidi not only gets to know her grandfather, but also meets Peter, a young goatherd. She spends time with Peter and the animals in nature. After three years, Dete decides to send Heidi to Frankfurt as a companion to a wealthy but invalid girl named Clara. In Frankfurt Heidi becomes more and more homesick. Through Clara's grandmother and in her great despair she starts to pray to God and becomes devoutly religious. Finally, her suffering becomes obvious to Clara's family and the family physician. She is allowed to return to her grandfather in Switzerland.

In the second book Clara is allowed to visit Heidi on the alp and is wondrously cured by the fresh mountain air and the loving companionship of Heidi. She is able to walk again and so the story ends happily with Clara's healing and the promises of Clara's family to take care of Heidi whenever she might be in need. As a second spiritual recovery besides Heidi, the grandfather, who had renounced God and hated the people in the village, returns to God and mankind.

In the well-known *Japanese TV version of Heidi* from Takahata (1974), all religious content was strictly left out (Figure 2). The same was decided for an *Arabic Heidi children's picture book* (Figure 3) from 2009 (Stamm 2009). I was curious how the Arabic service dealt with these conversion stories for their broadcast series, which addressed mostly Muslim listeners.

With the help of an Arabic-speaking student, we translated 6 of the 26 episodes, and were left with the impression that the Arabic Service followed the content of the original Heidi book very closely. Later, I made contact with Zeinab Huber. She is from Egypt and worked for the Arabic service as radio presenter. She was also the voice of Heidi. I asked her how they dealt with the religious content of the story, and she explained that the producer, Abderrahim Rifai, and all involved persons agreed to stay as close as possible to the original. In all their programs, she emphasized in an interview, the Arabic Service's aim was to represent Switzerland in

all its cultural aspects, including its religious tradition (Huber 2014).

Against this background it is thus interesting to see that one characteristic attribute was added to Heidi that is not mentioned in the original story at all: Heidi likes to sing, and is able to yodel and play the typically Swiss accordion. This is introduced in Episode 3 – the first episode in which Heidi herself appears. In a *sequence analysis* (Figure 4) one can recognize the proportion of the typical radio elements such as radio station branding (in the picture: Verpackung), spoken words (in the picture: Moderation, Dialog), and music (Föllmer 2013).

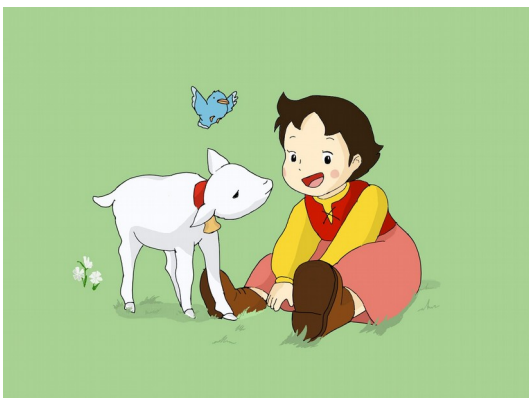


Figure 2: Japanese TV version of Heidi (Takahata 1974)

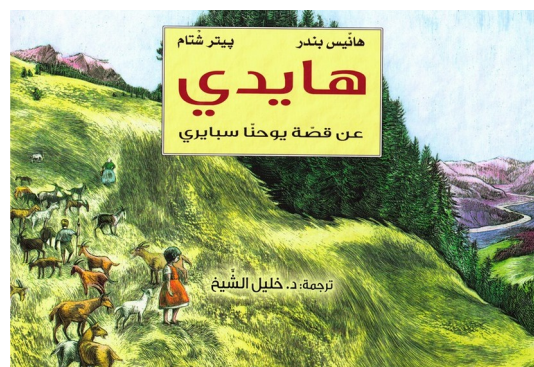


Figure 3: Arabic Heidi children's picture book (Stamm 2007)

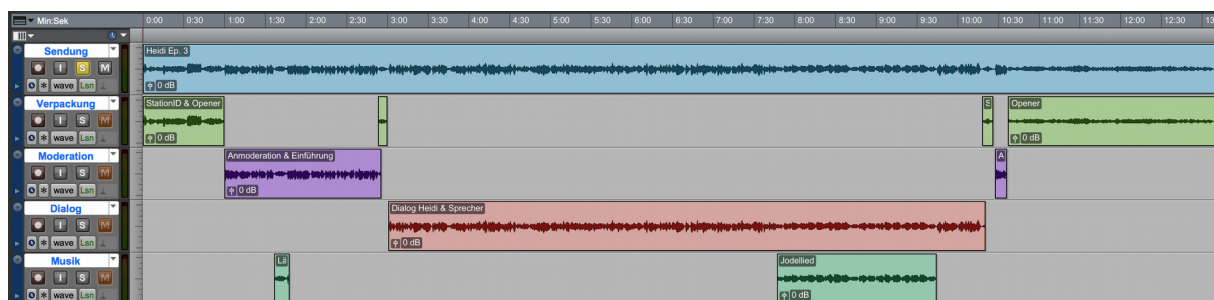


Figure 4

After a station identifier, an opener, and an introduction to the program, Heidi appears for the first time. In Episodes 3 to 26 an audio signal serves to indicate that Heidi has left the book and is physically present. Each time, the same radio presenter talks to Heidi about the story in the book as if it has just recently happened. In this way, Heidi is presented in the form of a radio portrait and thus appears as a somehow ‘real’ person. As a child, and with the help of the presenter, she talks about and reflects on the events in the books in the manner of a biographical interview. The highlight of this episode is not only that Heidi is alive and that we hear her talking. Her voice is also a musical voice. She knows to sing a yodel song. As one can see in the last line of the sequence analysis, 2 minutes of the overall 15 minutes was given to this piece. In comparison to the musical snippet that was used in the introduction, this is quite long and stresses the importance of music as a sonic attribute of the child. The example below is an abbreviated translation of episode 3.

Here is Switzerland (Station ID)

Title melody (Opener)

The Arabic Department of Switzerland's Radio presents episodes of the Heidi book by the writer Johanna Spyri.

Title melody (Opener)

Ladies and Gentlemen, last week we presented to you a glance of the life story of Johanna Spyri. And now we are going to tell you the story of Heidi. And we are also going to gain an insight into the place where Heidi lived—just as the writer intended. We already know that Maienfeld is the place where Heidi was born, and that this village is

at the bottom of the Rhine valley in the east of Switzerland. Let's go there to get to know the hero (or main character) of our story.

Musical Snippet

Heidi the child is eight years old. Her hair is black, her skin has a tan (like whole wheat). She is always very happy and healthy like all the children in the Swiss mountains.

She likes colorful clothes and she loves to walk barefoot a lot. And even if she looks stubborn sometimes, her big heart is full of empathy and sympathy towards people.

And now open your ears well and listen:

Sound signal (appearance Heidi)

Heidi: Good evening!

Announcer: Good evening dear child. Who are you?

Heidi: I'm Heidi.

A: Say what? Are you Heidi? Where have you come from?

H: I have come from the book of the Heidi story and I just heard you talking about it.

A: Can you introduce yourself to the audience?

A: Now we have talked enough about [Heidi's friends]. Let's start narrating your story now. But before we begin, tell me, can you sing my little child, Heidi?

H: Yes for sure I can. My grandfather taught me a lot of songs while we were taking care of the goats on the Alp with Peter. And Peter also knows a lot of songs. What would you like to hear? A yodel song?

A: Yes, I and the audience would very much welcome this song. What do you think? Are you ready to sing?

H: Okay, hand the accordion over to me, please.

Heidi sings (Jakob Ummel: *Ho sä sä, chumm*; Performers: unknown)

A: Wonderful! That was gorgeous and beautiful. Thank you Heidi.

Why did the producers introduce Heidi as a musically capable girl? And why did they choose Jakob Ummel's “*Ho sä sä, chumm*”, a solo yodel song that is not that well-known and not that often sung in Switzerland?

Zeinab Huber explained to me that the most important selection criteria was the similarity of the singer's voice to Heidi's voice. They aimed to create the illusion that it was the 'real' Heidi that is singing. Other criteria such as the popularity of the song in Switzerland or the performer's musical quality were secondary. Thus, the criteria for selecting music for the Heidi series were different from those in music programming in radio, where other qualitative criteria were and are still crucial.

In "Heidi", Swiss traditional music fulfilled not only a musical purpose but also extramusical purposes: in the program, yodeling is repeatedly semiotically interwoven with the character of Heidi. Through her knowing and being able to sing and play Swiss yodel songs, she becomes even more Swiss than she is in Johanna Spyri's original text. In its embodiment in Heidi, yodel music becomes personalized and emotionally charged. Heidi, who is presented in the book as a child of nature that the bourgeoisie in Frankfurt are (unsuccessfully) trying to tame, is furthermore a naturally gifted singer. Yodel music becomes an authentic sonic property of Heidi and, reading between the lines of the program, of 'the' Swiss people and their Alpine culture. In the program, yodel music and the character of Heidi are intelligently interwoven. This linkage of Heidi and yodeling is reproduced in each episode through the opening tune, with its Heidi-like voice and yodeling syllables. In the words of Roland Barthes, Heidi's singing voice produces an intersubjective space (Barthes 1990), an emotional contact zone. Radio maker Lance Sieveking describes this as a sudden mental contact between creator, in this case more of its creation "Heidi", and the listener (Hendy 2013).

Conclusion

Returning to the wider historical context of international broadcasting, the adaptation of the Heidi's character is the product of a political and somehow pedagogical agenda of the Arabic service. There was a broadcasting strategy to be followed for each language service of the Swiss International Radio. In a paper from November 1964, the program director of the Arabic service, Fouad Chambour, pinpoints a variety of intentions of his service, referring to the three-month pilot run between August and October 1964¹:

Swiss traditional music is very particular and not easily accessible for the Arabic ear. Against all expectations, we managed [in the three-month pilot phase] to make it enjoyable, thanks to an effective presentation. [...] We will for sure insist on the cultural and moral values of Switzerland. [...] Provided that Switzerland follows a mission of peace in the world, we think that the hundred millions of inhabitants in the Arabic countries deserve its attention and influence as peacemaker. (Chambour 1964)

These examples depict a general ambiguity in international radio broadcasting. On the one hand, broadcasters claimed to work for an understanding among nations and for peace (Schürmann 1985). But on the other hand, the quotes also reveal the political and

1 Original in French: [...] la musique folklorique Suisse [...] est, pour l'oreille arabe, très particulière et difficilement accessible. Contre toute attente, nous avons réussi à la faire apprécier, grâce à une présentation adéquate. [...] Nous [allons] surtout insist[er] sur les valeurs morales et culturelles de la Suisse. [...] Dans la mesure où la Suisse poursuit une mission de paix dans le monde, nous pensons que les cents millions d'habitants des pays arabes méritent son attention et son influence pacificatrice. (Chambour 1964)

pedagogical intentions behind international radio broadcasting, in this specific case, of the Arabic radio service. The political need to bring peace to the Arabic world and the intention to teach an Arabic public to listen to Swiss music stand side by side. The two minutes of yodeling, thus, are not simply part of the charm of a musically gifted child, but are part of a national cultural political agenda. The Arabic Service of the Swiss Radio International tuned Heidi's character for the time. She stays a Christian convert but, due to the political agenda and due to radio as an acoustic medium, they changed her role in 1968 into a naturally authentic cultural and musical ambassador for Switzerland. Similar to the above-mentioned Japanese version and to a current Arabic version of Heidi, her naturalness becomes the leading trait. Swiss author Peter Stamm, who was in charge of the more recent Arabic adaptation of the story issued in 2007, said he aimed to highlight the universality of the character by excluding all religious content (Seaman 2010). Transnational mediation, even in the case of an Arabic radio series emphasizing Swissness, still needs to refer to universally applicable and understandable concepts.

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