

Yodelling

Autor: Carien Wijnen

1. What is yodelling? An introduction.

Yodelling is not an exclusively Swiss speciality. Yodelling is a part of different cultures throughout the world. Yodelling is fun and puts you in a good mood. The definition of yodeling is the singing of tone syllables with no meaning. It was a means of communication between foresters and herders in prehistoric times. The so-called alpine call or "Juchzer" was sent from alp to alp between the alpine dairies. With this vocal technique it was possible to communicate over long distances.

The yodel effect is achieved by the conscious accentuation of the crossover point between the vocal registers (chest and head registers) while singing certain vowels. This "click" or "break" is to be found in many other types of singing, e.g. Balkan singing, country singing, some pop singing etc. This crossover point is consciously avoided in classical singing, but it is a part of the most natural forms of singing.

At the moment there is a renaissance of yodelling in the German-speaking Alpine areas. The film "Heimatklänge" (Switzerland 2007) opened up new horizons towards the understanding of this archaic vocal and musical technique. Artists like Hubert von Goisern (Austria), Christian Zehnder, Nadja Räss and Noldi Alber (Switzerland) are the pioneers of a new avant-garde yodelling generation, who are open to influences from other cultures. There is now an annual Yodel symposium in Klangtal Toggenburg (East Switzerland), which started in 2011.

Glossary of German terms

Juchzer: Joyful call which starts in falsetto and then falls

Jodeln (Yodelling): is often identified as whooping and shouting for joy

Johlen is an older term for yodelling and often means rejoicing or loud joyful singing (later it came to mean singing off key and making a noise (!)). The original meaning of Johlen was connected with the magical concept of repelling demons. Other words for yodelling are Jaulen (yowling) or Jo-en (the singing of the word "Yo").

2. Technique

Yodelling is singing tone syllables without meaning. Common sequences of syllables are e.g. "Hodaro", "Iohodraeho", "Holadaittiyo" and many others. Characteristic features of yodelling are frequent rapid switching between chest and falsetto register (register-switch) with leaps of great intervals. The "break" when yodelling is the fast sudden switch between chest and head voice.

When a note is sung "normally" with a gentle use of the air stream, the vocal chords move towards each other and nearly touch, the glottis (the gap between them) disappears, the breath vibrates the vocal chords, a tone becomes audible.

When yodelling the breath is blown strongly and hard through the vocal chords so that they open before they can react with resonance. They separate for a moment, which produces the entry sound or "break".

When boys' voices are breaking, this break also occurs (the vocal chords grow faster than the strength of the muscles which control them), the voice "tips".

When yodels are part of musical pieces, the voice break does not occur, e.g. in "Andachtsjodler" (prayer service yodels) which have been sung in churches since 1830, mostly at Christmastime

Chest voice: vowels which are well-suited to the chest voice are “ah”, “o” (single vowel Italian “o”, **not** the English double vowel as in “go”), “aw” (as in “awe” or “saw”). It is important to sing with a strong, deep, earthy chest voice.

Head voice: vowels which are well-suited to the head voice are “ooo” (single vowel), “eee”, “ü” (“ooo” and “eee” at the same time, as in German über).

The suitability of the vowel sounds is connected with their different overtone formants. The intervals which are used are the third, fourth, fifth, sixth and octave. The consonants “d”, “t”, “y” and “r” are typical.

As a yodel beginner you need to have the courage to sound “ugly”, i.e. when you are first practising, the second tone may sound like croaking, howling or wailing.

3. Cultures

Yodelling was originally a means of communication

In probably all mountainous and inaccessible regions of the world there are varying techniques for bridging long distances acoustically shouting or calling. The origins of yodelling go back to prehistoric times: herders, gatherers, foresters and charcoal burners communicated with each other by yodelling. It was not only in the Alps (Switzerland, Southern Germany, Austria, Northern Italy) that people sent messages from mountain pasture to pasture via the alpine call (in German “Almschrei” or in dialect “Almschroa”) or “Juchzer”(in dialect “Juchetzer, Jugitzer, Juschroa”). They also gathered their herds together by yodelling (or herd-calling).

In the Harz Mountains and in the Erzgebirge (Erz Mountains) there are virtuoso yodelling competitions keeping this music folklore alive.

In Alpine folksongs the yodel was musically developed into the yodel-song. Original yodels were often featured as solos. Most yodel-songs are in several voices and yodels are frequently to be found in folk songs as repeating and final refrains. Particularly in Switzerland in the 19th century yodelling was further developed by choirs. Yodels with solo or several voices are also a part of the sacred church music tradition, for example in South Tyrol. There are even instrumental yodels that are played in small groups.

Conflicts with the church

The “Martyr Files” from the year 397 record the case of three Christian missionaries who were murdered by Alpine herdsmen in Nonsberg near Trentino; the report speaks of how “inter stripentes et horridos iubilos pastorales” – with horribly noisy herdsmen’s yodels - the missionaries were slaughtered, or so to speak “yodelled to death”.

In the 8th century in the Saint Gall Monastery yodelling was forbidden because “voices which imitate obscene joke tellers, yodellers, Alpine inhabitants, women’s singing or even animal noises were considered unworthy of praising God”.

The Church suppressed many ancient forms of religious rituals. (Thus professional wailing women mourners were prohibited from practising their art. In Southern Italy for example, all that was allowed was the singing Maria’s Lament during the Easter procession).

4. Natural yodelling

The basis of the melody of the natural yodel, especially in its original, archaic form is the so-called harmonic series (the harmonic series also occurs in overtone singing).

The yodellers’ club from Muotathal has kept up this ancient form of yodelling. This kind of yodelling based on the natural tone Fa (alpenhorn Fa) is one of the most original and spontaneous melodies in all of the yodelling repertoire. It is especially fascinating to the listener. This natural yodelling was passed on in remote, inaccessible valleys in for example Switzerland from village to village and from family to family. In this way this form of yodelling kept its originality.

5. Joiking

Norway/ Finnland (the word “joiking” is related to yodelling)

The joik (in Northern Sami “juoigan”), which is related to the yodel, is the monotone-guttural singing of the Sami, the indigenous people of Lapland. The joik is sung at rituals in holy places, and is dedicated to people, animals and natural phenomena.

The joik is still an integral part of the Sami culture today. The joik is cultivated by men and women and consists of both sung texts and meaningless syllables. In the past it was the only traditional musical form of the Sami and it consisted of solo singing without instrumental accompaniment. The main Sami melody instrument was a reed instrument called the fadno. The shamans used the shaman’s drum for their sessions. Both of these were occasionally used as accompaniment to the joik.

The Sami joik is only partly structured and about half of it is improvised. Basically, a joik is created by a person’s experience of living in nature. It is a reflection of the atmosphere and the landscape.

It is a sung poem or ballad, mostly with lyrics about life in the bleak landscape of the Polar region. Some joiks speak of people, feelings and hopes; most however are about animals, which are especially important to the Sami e.g. reindeer and several other wild animals, and about special holy places in nature.

Every year at Easter in Kautokeino (in the Province of Finnmark / Northern Norway) a “Sami Grand Prix” takes place, a musical competition in which the locals sing their own compositions.

The best-known joik singer is Mari Boine Persen.

6. Shamanism

One of the aims of yodelling is to influence the natural spirits and to pacify them. Like overtone singing (Tuva / Mongolia) its roots go back to shamanism and natural religions.

Examples

1. CD: “ Sangoma” Miriam Makeba: her shaman aunts “Sangomen” in South Africa yodel as part of their healing rituals for ill people
2. In Switzerland there are two original forms of yodelling:
 - a) das Zäuerle
The Zäuerle is a heathen custom from Alemannic times. It was used to repel evil spirits and to attract the good spirits. It is an ancient form of yodelling that is only found in the canton of Appenzell today. It is only to be heard on the so-called old Silvester (13th January according to the Julian calendar). Demonic figures go in groups from house to house ringing bells very loudly.
 - b) Der Betruf
The Betruf (prayer call) is a magical chant asking for protection / blessing, which is sung at sunset on high alps (only in a few places these days); higher powers are called on to give protection and support.
(Lussi 2004)
3. Shamans tried to call for help from spirits who were mostly in animal form by imitating the corresponding animal voices.
(from “Joiken aus Norwegen” by Andreas Lüderwaldt.

7. Health

Yodelling is "food for the soul"

1. Joy

"Yodelling is unique in our folk music landscape. There is a great richness of form: Three part voices moving in parallel "with each other", moving in canon "after each other", the polyphonic knitting of voices "for each other" and all sorts of mixed forms. There is the strong, shouting leading voice but also gentle, joyful, thoughtful tones. The spiritual singing from the Alps / the mountains moves us deep inside. Yodelling is a splendid bathing in pure sound, being immersed in the power and magic of pure vocals. Strongly penetrating in the chest voice, the finely vibrating in the head voice..."

(Rough translation of a quotation from: Steierische Volksliedwerk)

2. The thyroid gland Yodelling makes you happy, alive and awake.

In the words Jodler (yodel) and Jodeln (yodelling) we find the word Jod (German for iodine). Throughout the world yodelling is a tradition in mountainous areas. Singing in general has a ten-fold positive effect on health (circulation, deepening of the breathing, harmonization, release of hormones like alpha immunoglobulins, endorphins, oxytocins etc., reduction of the stress hormone cortisone, antidepressant effect through release of serotonin etc.).

Yodelling also has the effect of strongly activating the blood supply to the larynx. The thyroid gland is on the thyroid cartilage, directly on the vocal apparatus.

In the mountains people often suffer from underactive thyroid due to iodine deficiency.

Through yodelling thyroid activity is stimulated and the body's metabolism is increased.

3. Sobbing, wailing

When sobbing, crying, moaning and howling the voice breaks quite unconsciously, which allows us to express our emotions. In so-called Schlager music and schmaltzy songs this effect is often used in order to give expression to sadness and other emotions.

4 The richness of overtone sound

This connects us with spiritual otherworlds

According to Tomatis (French ENT specialist) the brain recharges itself with energy through overtone-rich sound.

Based on the following sources:

Lussi, Kurt (2004). Lärmen und Butzen. rex Verlag / Brunner.

Steierische Volksliedwerk (2011). 123 Jodler und Juchzer. Graz.

Thoma, G. & Merkle, L. (1977). Die Kunst des Jodelns. Alpenländische Jodelschule. Heimeran.

Online Verfügbar:

<http://www.alpenschamanismus.de/Alpenkraft/Alperer/alperer.html> [31.01.2014]

<http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jodeln> [31.01.2014]

<http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joik> [31.01.2014]

<http://www.jodlerklub-muotathal.ch/> [31.01.2014]

Referat R. Fürbass

