

Musical treasures of Romandie 2: the SMEM

This summer, swissmusic.ch takes you to unusual musical places in French-speaking Switzerland. Second stop: the SMEM electronic instrument inventory.

Julie Henoch - 2018-07-31

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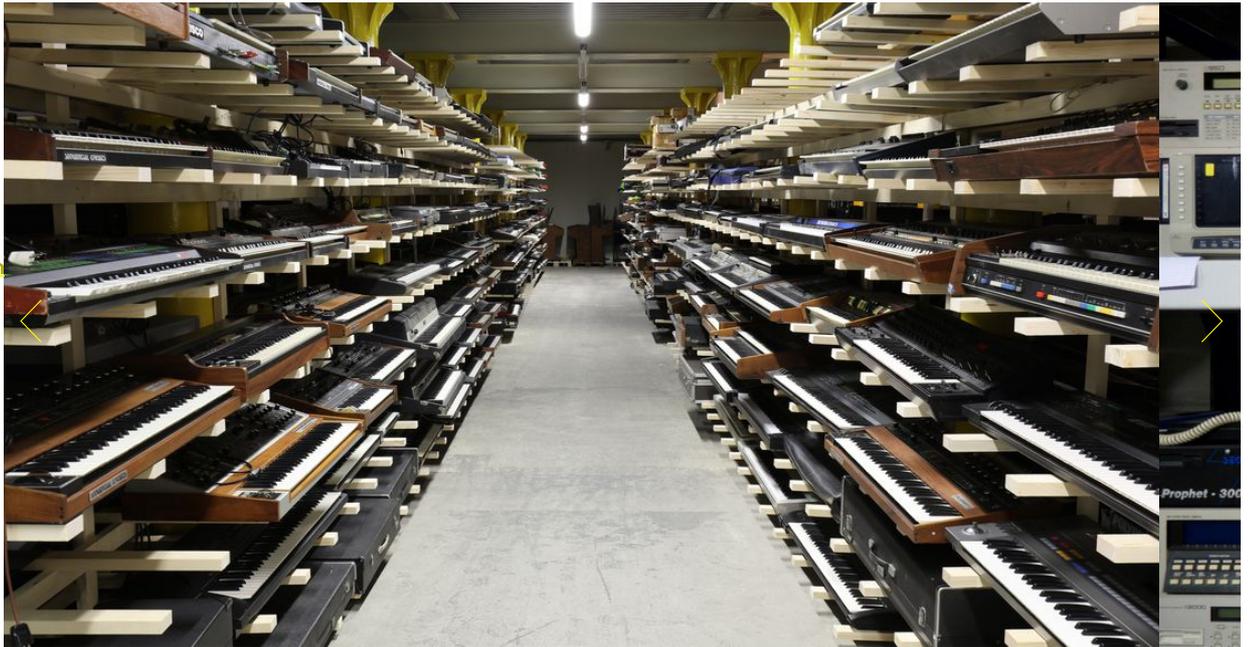
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Rather like walking into Ali Baba's cave, expectations are high when entering into the bowels of the former Cardinal factory in Fribourg, known today as the [Blue Factory](https://www.bluefactory.ch) (<https://www.bluefactory.ch>). The grinding of the freight elevator, the vague cellar smell, the small concrete maze and when the door opens, the perspective is very impressive: lined up on shelves of makeshift wood are countless synthesizers of all kinds on eight shelves and four columns.

On the left, jumbled up instruments all waiting to be catalogued for the inventory. On the right, organs and their stools, stacked up to the ceiling. It's a place of shadows where you wander around holding a flashlight as though in a treasure chamber. The equipment is being sifted through slowly thanks to a handful of volunteers led by the committee of a new public service association. At the back, a long gallery is lined with smaller instruments and studio equipment: pedals, compressors, processors, mixing desks, microphones, computer software, virtual synths, headphones, cassette recorders, tapes and tons of documentation.

When coordinator, Vincent Borcard, is asked how many pieces are this collection, he answers rather awkwardly: "Hard to say, if you include even the small pieces, at least three thousand items I guess". At first sight, it looks like more, but nobody can tell yet. The [SMEM association](https://smemmusic.ch/about/) (<https://smemmusic.ch/about/>) is in full inventory-mode at the moment, a huge, meticulous and demanding job which will take several years and requires specific know-how.

A compulsion of modern times

This foundations of this vast project lie in the fantastic collection bequeathed by the Swiss-German collector, [Klemens Niklaus Trenkle](https://www.klemensniklaustrenkle.com) (<https://www.klemensniklaustrenkle.com>), who for over 35 years has been gathering synthesizers, keyboards, organs and studio effects with a fervour that is both compulsive and alarming. "For all these years, he's bought and stored this equipment, believing it to be an important legacy of items too often thrown away by people. In reality, this kind of material has rarely been collected. He really cares about passing all this onto future generations. His dream is that these instruments should be appreciated and played, (but not necessarily by him)."

Professional actor, passionate music lover and « a musician of sorts », we are dealing here with a special breed of collector. His collection owes its patchwork quality to the fact that everything seems to have the same value in his eyes: from the small, trival objects to the rare and now overpriced pieces. His collection of electronic instruments (as opposed to the guitars and horns that Trenkle also frenetically collects) was gradually moved to Fribourg in 2017. However, it's not uncommon for him to still show up with new items, "sometimes even funny stuff" Vincent Borcard adds affectionately, since word-of-mouth continues to circulate

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- + among music-lovers seeking a resting place for their favorite instruments. The goal of the SMEM today is to organise itself, making both visible and audible the richness of this heritage in order to establish itself as the world's leading center of electronic musical instruments.

A living museum

It's an enormous task because these instruments can degrade quickly without maintenance. Plastic gets damaged, batteries leak, some items need a lot of attention and repair. Furthermore, certain things remain a mystery because the information regarding their use is missing. « For many instruments, you can't just do an internet search » explains Vincent Borcard, adding this anecdote: « for example, we were looking to repair a famous synthesizer, the Oberheim Matrix 12, which had broken down. As we were stuck, we emailed the designer, Tom Oberheim, who is very old nowadays. He was sorry as well as annoyed to admit that he had nothing left, neither information nor the circuit plans ». If entrance into a heritage museum often symbolises the beginning of its disappearance, the SMEM prefers to define itself as a "living museum" or "cultural centre", with the desire to host concerts, conferences and meetings.

International and digital ambitions

The association intends to gradually deploy different activities centered around the collection on an international scale. The stock is now accessible to visitors by appointment. Some musicians like [Sophie Hunger](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophie_Hunger) (https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophie_Hunger) have already borrowed some instruments. Soon, it will be [Christian Pahud's turn](https://swissmusic.ch/en/read/bombers-synth-drumn-pop/) ([Larytta, Bombers](https://swissmusic.ch/en/read/bombers-synth-drumn-pop/) (<https://swissmusic.ch/en/read/bombers-synth-drumn-pop/>)) (<https://swissmusic.ch/en/read/bombers-synth-drumn-pop/>) to get his hands on some treasures for recording purposes. Each request is negotiated on a case by case basis. In early November 2018, the association will launch its "Playroom", a space where thirty or so functional instruments, organized in rotation, will be available to be played at fixed times and with an annual subscription fee (CHF 130.- for students), which will give access to free sessions and other preferential deals. For CHF 25.- per year, anyone can become a member of the friends of the SMEM association and thus participate in the realization of this major project.

Eventually, SMEM would like to list and spread all information via its website. An exciting and ambitious project that greatly depends on the know-how of electronic enthusiasts already gravitating around the collection, as well as future ones who might be thinking of getting involved.

In September, a collaborative fundraising project will start on Kickstarter to co-finance the different SMEM projects and help with its professionalisation.

SMEM, passage du Cardinal, CP 72 1701 Fribourg Switzerland (<https://smemmusic.ch>) contact@smemmusic.ch

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2018-07-19

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