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A Harmonic Trail in the Alps

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- ¹ This paper describes the characteristics of a work located in the Alps, on the Rittner Horn (see fig. 1), at about 2000 m of altitude, a work that aims at suggesting a contemplative relation between body movement and the mountainous environment, based on a diversified rhythmicity. The term 'harmonic' does not refer to the conventional notion of musical harmony (no sounds are involved), but to the ancient discipline of harmonics, as we will see later. The area is above the timber line, the chosen path offers a wide and constant panorama, has a gentle slope, an appropriate length (860 m) and an attractive flora. Furthermore, it does not cross pasture ground.

Fig. 1. The Rittner Horn area. Sarntaler Alpen. Scale 1:25000.

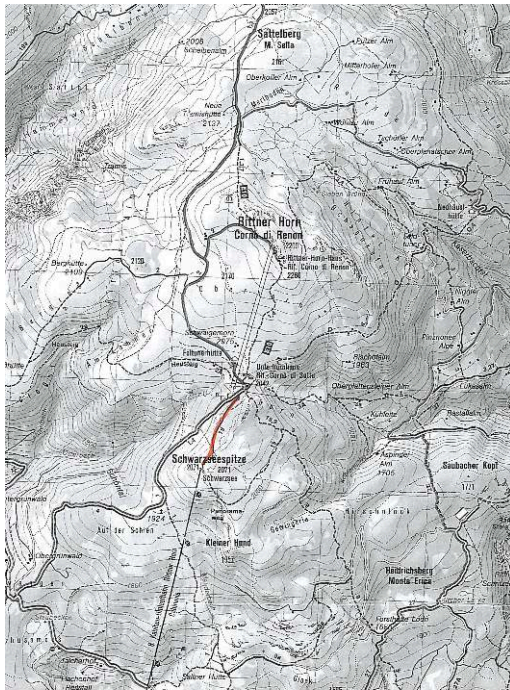
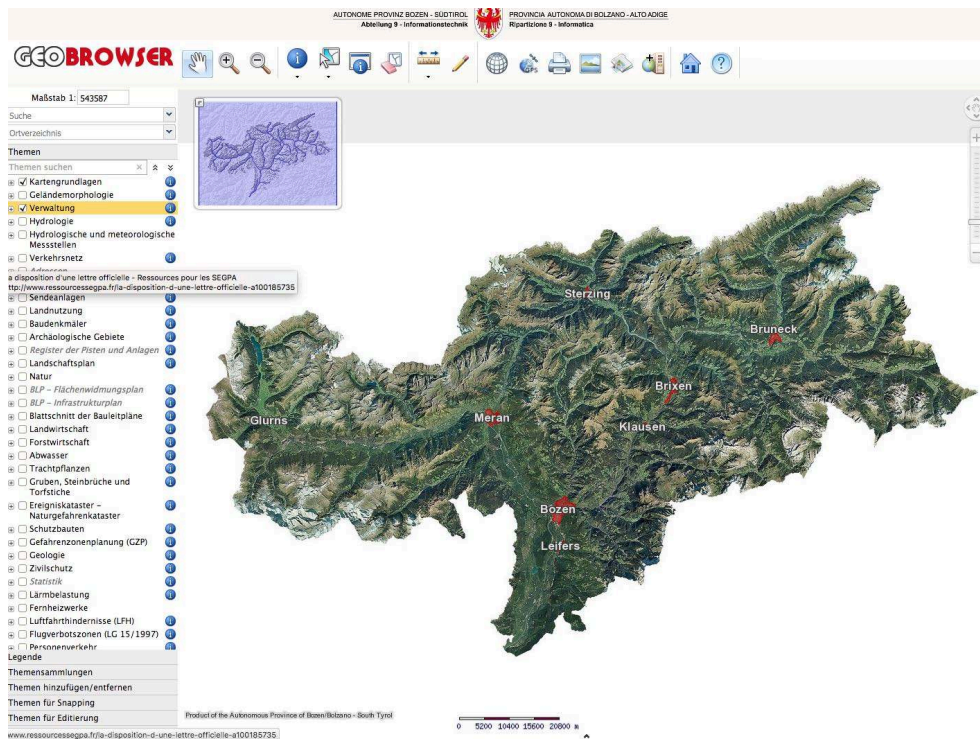


Fig.1 The Rittner Horn area. Sarntaler Alpen. KOMPASS 056. KOMPASS-Karten GmbH, Rum/Innsbruck. Scale 1:25000.

KOMPASS 056. KOMPASS-KARTEN GMBH, RUM/INSSBRUCK.

- 2 The Rittner Horn is more or less in the center of the Autonome Provinz Bozen-Südtirol, Italy's northernmost province (see fig. 2 http://gis2.provinz.bz.it/geobrowser/?project=geobrowser_pro&view=geobrowser_pro_atlas-b&locale=de)

Fig. 2. Autonome Provinz Bozen-Südtirol



Screenshot of Geobrowser page : http://gis2.provinz.bz.it/geobrowser/?project=geobrowser_pro&view=geobrowser_pro_atlas-b&locale=de

- 3 This province, with about half a million inhabitants, has a conflict-ridden history, three (official) linguistic groups, each with its particular relation to the mountains and their world, a relation which – as far as the German and Italian-speaking populations are concerned – is still not free from nationalistic undertones. The numerous tourists visiting South Tyrol all year round, obviously have their own, particular relation to the mountains. My choice was therefore to create an abstract and unspectacular work that would be impermeable to the different ideological interpretations and not functional to the tourism industry. The project was part of the initiatives in 2006 for the 60th anniversary of the Südtiroler Künstlerbund.
- 4 As a composer who has worked in electro-acoustic music I was always fascinated by the harmonic sequence 1, 1/2, 1/3, 1/4, 1/5, etc. which represents the frequency relations between the fundamental and its overtones in (most) instrumental/vocal sounds. Its role in (Western) tonal music is well known¹, but it played an even more important role as a universal key for the analysis of the world. This role goes back to the Pythagorean tradition that was alive up to Johannes Kepler (1571-1630). In fact, harmonic proportions may be found in inanimate and animate nature and human artifacts. After the Renaissance this tradition has been forgotten and only revived in the 19th century².
- 5 In my work I have employed this ordering in visual and audio pieces³. In *The Harmonic Trail* I decided to use it as the basis for an interactive spatio-temporal project, to my knowledge the first attempt of this kind. Another source of inspiration was Time Geography, developed by Torsten Hägerstrand and his collaborators at the university of Lund. Time Geography studies the spatio-temporal structure of the various paths and trajectories that persons undertake in their activities⁴.

- 6 *The Harmonic Trail* is an installation and at the same time, and mainly, a public score which visitors may perform in a variety of ways. Usually, environmental art works are objects that stay there to be admired, thus perpetuating the conventional art/spectator relationship. With *The Harmonic Trail* art only arises from the active interpretation/participation of the visitors. I consider this a more ecological approach to environmental art.
- 7 What does *The Harmonic Trail* look like? The total length of the trail has been subdivided in harmonic partials (indicated by colored signs placed next to the trail) up to the eighth “overtone” (see figs 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e)⁵.

Fig. 3a to 3e. *The Harmonic Trail* – details



PHOTO: A. MAYR, 2008-2009.

Fig. 3b



PHOTO: A. MAYR, 2008-2009.

Fig. 3c



PHOTO: A. MAYR, 2008-2009.

Fig. 3d



PHOTO: A. MAYR, 2008-2009.

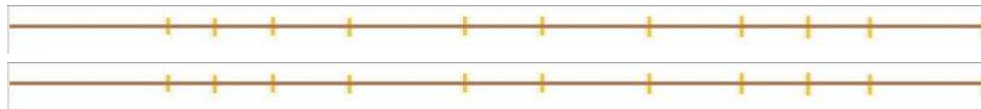
Fig. 3e



PHOTO: A. MAYR, 2008-2009.

- 8 The signs have been placed in the following order: the first sign at the beginning (which is also the end if you come from the opposite direction) is marked with 0/0 (not a mathematical expression, but one used in Harmonic Theory) on one side and 1/1 on the reverse side; the following signs are 1/8 and 7/8; 1/7 and 6/7; 1/6 and 5/6; 1/5 and 4/5; 1/4 (which corresponds to 2/8) and 3/4 (corresponding to 6/8); 2/7 and 5/7; 1/3 (corresponding to 2/6) and 2/3 (4/6); 3/8 and 5/8; 2/5 and 3/5; 3/7 and 4/7; 1/2 and 1/2. This in the first half of the trail, the second half is obviously specular to the first.
- 9 This resulted in the following partial distances: from the beginning to the first sign (1/8) the distance is 1/8 of the total, i.e. 107,50 m. The distance to the next sign (1/7) corresponds to $1/7 - 1/8$, i.e. 15,35 m. The distance to the following sign (1/6) is $1/6 - 1/7 = 20,50$ m. Then, following the same procedure, 28,65 m; 43 m; 30,72 m; 40,94 m; 35,84 m; 21,50 m; 24,60 m; 61,40 m in the first half; again, the second half is specular to the first. For a graph of the relative length of the resulting spatial sections, see fig. 4.

Fig. 4. Graph of the relative length of the resulting spatial sections



DESIGNED BY ALBERT MAYR.

- 10 At the beginning of the trail a board gives some information on the structure of *The Harmonic Trail* and offers a few suggestions on how the score of the trail may be 'performed' by the visitors. There are various possibilities: the simplest one only implies acknowledging the subdivisions (and perhaps relating them, silently, to one's walking speed and rhythm); or (the sporty version) you can use the markings as a guide for dividing the total length in stretches for running and for walking leisurely; in another version you can choose a certain periodicity, say the 5th "overtone", for alternating periods devoted to the apperception of the environment (its sights, sounds, smells) with periods in which you elaborate and share your sensations. If there is a group you may choose a periodicity for alternating periods of conversations with period of silence.
- 11 Visitors are also encouraged to invent their own versions of using the score.
- 12 Walking in the mountains is often said to be, among other things, a (potentially) spiritual experience. *The Harmonic Trail* intends to offer an additional dimension by putting sensitive visitors in contact with a line of thought that had an important role in the Western philosophical and artistic tradition.
- 13 Of course, many visitors simply ignore the markings, but children like to invent games around them, and adults who take the time to think about the score very often report a rewarding and gratifying experience derived from a performance of *The Harmonic Trail*.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmonic>
 2. The literature on Harmonic Theory is vast. See, for instance: Hans Kayser *Akróasis Die Lehre von der Harmonik der Welt*. Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 6. ed., 2007. www.hanskayser.com (in English).
 3. *Calendario Armonico* 1981; *Hora Harmonica* 1983; *Dies Harmonica* 1984.
 4. See, for instance: Torsten Hägerstrand, "Time Geography: Focus on the Corporeality of Man, Society, and Environment", in *The Science and Praxis of Complexity*. Tokyo: The United Nations University, 1985, pp. 193-216.
 5. The pictures are intentionally non-professional snapshots, in order not to distract the attention from the conceptual aspects of the work.
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