

Camp or cultural? The

Düsseldorf braces itself later this month to host the final of the Eurovision Song Contest. With 25 acts, almost as many languages and more than a pinch of kitsch, it's the continent's most loved – and most loathed – musical event.

By Catherine Richards Golini | This year the 56th final of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) takes place on May 14 in Düsseldorf, Germany. The competition – celebrated and scorned in equal measure – will attract its share of controversy, political point scoring, cringe-worthy costumes and Euro-trash tunes.

Switzerland has a long, though not always successful, history with the ESC. As it happens, the very first contest was held in Lugano in 1956. Coincidentally, it was won by Swiss singer Lys Assia. Only seven countries took part – Austria, Denmark and the UK were a bit slow off the mark and were disqualified for missing the entry deadline. Obliging the contestants to sing not one, but two songs probably seemed like a great idea at the time; however, it was the first and only time this happened. Since 1957, one tune per country has been the rule.

Controversy is never far from the ESC and the inaugural show was no exception. Luxembourg failed to send a jury, asking the Swiss to judge on their behalf. To this day, there are those who believe that the double-voting power tipped the scales in favour of the Swiss – in those days, judges were permitted to vote for their own nations. No marks were ever made public and no video footage of the entire show exists.

Assia won with a French-language song, *Refrain*, one of 14 French-language winners in the contest's history. Her second song was sung in German – and though no record exists of its place, the generally held suspicion is that it bombed. Since the musical jamboree began, only two winning songs have been sung in German, while English has been the language of 25 champion ditties.

Eurovision top tip 1: to maximise your chances of winning, sing in French or English

Assia still holds the contest close to her heart and, at the age of 86, has not ruled out representing her country again. In a 2010 interview she said, "I'm convinced that I would be the perfect person for the contest. I combine charm, elegance and ability. That's how I will bewitch all of Europe."

After its initial victory, Switzerland won the competition



Presenters Judith Rakers, Stefan Raab and Anke Engelke, will host the 56th Eurovision Song Contest in Düsseldorf

once again 32-years later and has come second on three occasions (1958, 1963 and 1986). Aside from Assia, Canadian Celine Dion (singing in French, *naturellement*) won in 1988. Dion's win ended the run of Francophone victors and it also ended the run of respectable placings for Switzerland, notwithstanding fellow Canadian Annie Cotton's third place position in 1993.

Eurovision top tip 2: to maximise votes, sing in French as a Canadian representing Switzerland

Their poor showing in previous contests also explained the Confederation's non-participation in 1995, 1999, 2001 and 2003; though finding the courage to carry on hasn't made a huge amount of difference: for the last four consecutive years (2007-2010), Switzerland has failed to make the finals having been booted out at the semi-final stage.

Paolo Meneguzzi, Lovebugs, DJ Bobo and Michael von der Heide were the unlucky performers, with von der Heide being infamous for finishing last in the entire contest in 2010.

Eurovision top tip 3: being attractive helps ... considerably

Fans posting in the ESC Today Forum were split between those who felt von der Heide's song deserved to be in the top 10

EUROVISION

SONG CONTEST DÜSSELDORF 2011

Eurovision Song Contest



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National pride and an appreciation of kitsch brings fans out in droves



© Indrek Galetin (EBU)

Winning the ESC doesn't necessarily guarantee future success

("I still have it on my iPod!" wrote one fan a year later) and those who believed his poor performance on the night and his resemblance to Scooby Doo let him down.

"I'm fine. Happy is another word. But I'm okay," was von der Heide's response.

Unlike von der Heide – who had been a fan of Eurovision since childhood (not that it did him much good) – this year's Swiss entrant, Anna Rossinelli, is new to the competition. "I haven't followed the event so far," the young Baslerin admitted, while acknowledging the popularity of the show and its potential. "It's clear that the ESC is a huge platform and it's probably of interest to any musician – to be able to perform [in front of] such a large audience," she added. Err ... yes, probably.

Figures vary wildly (exaggeration being a feature of the ESC), but global viewers of the show are estimated to number anywhere between 160 million and a whopping 600 million.

A large audience indeed, though few winners have gone on to enjoy commercial success outside of their own, or neighbouring countries. Celine Dion is an obvious exception, as is ABBA, the Swedish super-group who won in 1975 with *Waterloo*.

The success of the original show, and the world's mania for the pint-sized, even spawned Junior ESC in 2003. To avoid the

dreaded *nil* point scenario, and to spare the feelings of the tender teens, every contestant automatically receives *douze* (12) points at the outset.

Eurovision top tip 4: silly song titles are not a hindrance

The ESC has seen many tweaks and adjustments in its 50-plus years, though the penchant for silly song titles has remained a constant. As far back as 1969, British singer Lulu sang *Boom Bang-a-Bang*, while the Spanish had won the previous year with the imaginatively titled *La, la, la*.

Since then, winners have trilled *Ding-a-Dong*, *A-Ba-Ni-Bi and Diggi-Loo Diggi-Ley*, while this year's entries include *Boom Boom* (Armenia), *Da Da Dam* (Finland) and *Haba Haba* (Norway), which will be sung in English and Swahili.

Anna Rossinelli's song title *In Love For a While* is positively pedestrian in comparison. "Actually, it was the idea of songwriter David Klein that we participate in the qualifying round," said Rossinelli when I asked how the Eurovision idea came about.

"For me, it was both interesting to work with him and to have the opportunity to practice before a big audience on television."

Eurovision top tip 5: if at first you don't succeed ...

It's hard to avoid the impression that some Eurovision participants haven't had anywhere near enough practice, though the week of rehearsals that precedes the televised show attempts to minimise on-the-night disasters.

Eurovision disasters are not to be taken lightly. They can – and do – spark nationwide debate and breast-beating, though after four crushing defeats in a row, the Swiss seem unshaken.

In fact, the decision to send an entry in 2011 was made, apparently, because the costs were negligible. That's the spirit!

Switzerland's selection process has changed too, in response to an increase in viewing figures for the contest. What was formerly jury-only, shifted to an audience and jury vote for the 2011 selection.

"There is a clear upward trend in viewing numbers. On average, just under half a million people in Switzerland watch the contest; corresponding to an audience share of around 30 per cent," explained a *Schweizer Fernsehen* spokesman. "With this in mind, *Schweizer Fernsehen* has revamped the process for selecting Switzerland's entry."

The last time the audience had anything to do with selecting the entry is, ironically enough, somewhat infamous. Piero and the Music Stars, the nation's choice, crawled into last place in 2004.

None of this is getting to Rossinelli, whose self-assurance remains high. "Of course, we are confident, but I think it is difficult to say exactly how good our chances are," she said.

If Rossinelli *had* been following the Eurovision Song Contest over the last few years, she'd know that optimism and a pretty ditty are no substitutes for a dodgy frock and half-a-dozen scantily clad back-up dancers. Nonetheless, *Swiss News* wishes her the very best of luck. Let's bring the trophy, and next year's competition, back to Switzerland!



Lys Assia winner of the first ESC in 1956



Will Switzerland's 2011 contestants, Anna Rossinelli & Band, bring the title home?



A permed Celine Dion circa her 1980s ESC victory