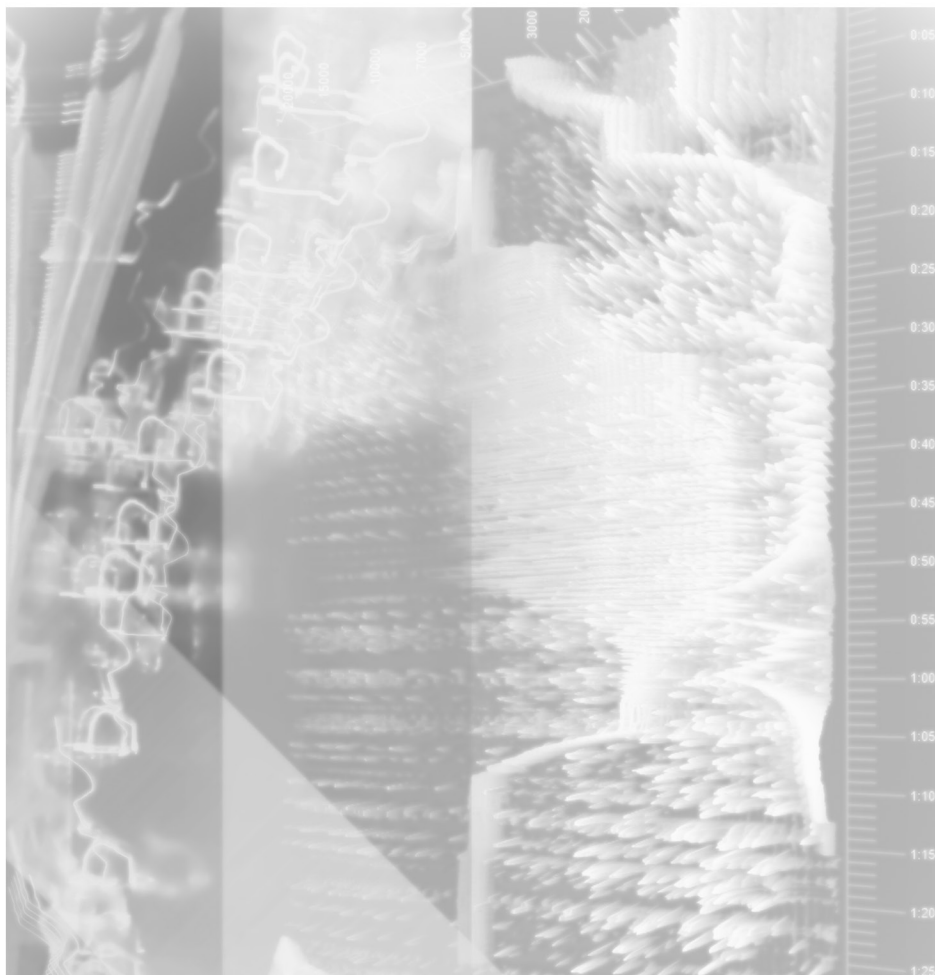


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**Swiss Radiophonic Art and Commissioned Compositions by the Swiss
Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR) at the *Prix Italia***

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SWISS RADIOPHONIC ART AND COMMISSIONED COMPOSITIONS BY THE SWISS BROADCASTING CORPORATION (SRG SSR) AT THE *PRIX ITALIA*

KEYWORDS

radiophonic art; musical work; electroacoustic music; auditory arts; Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR); promotion of music; Rai – Radiotelevisione italiana; *Prix Italia*; radio competition; radio archive.

ABSTRACT

Since its establishment as a public broadcaster in 1931, the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR) has been tasked with producing and disseminating information and entertainment programmes. Its cultural remit has also encompassed the promotion of culture, including music. One form of this promotion has been the distribution of composition commissions for different occasions. The inventory of these works, which is being compiled as part of the project “Music promotion over the airwaves. The SRG’s commissions of Classical Music and their Effects on Musical Life in Switzerland (1931–2021)” at Zurich University of the Arts, also includes a few pieces that SRG SSR submitted to the international competition *Prix Italia*. A systematic search in the *Prix Italia* archives brought up 221 works of Swiss radiophonic art that can be considered its representative selection. This contribution takes the opportunity to examine the collection of productions submitted to the competition by SRG SSR, offering a unique overview of Swiss radiophonic art and exploring its characteristics and development in the course of the entire competition. On the other hand, a look behind the scenes of the *Prix Italia* offers an impression of what has been understood as radiophonic art in the international European radio community and how it has transformed over the last 75 years of the radio history.

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Introduction

The scope and character of radiophonic art have been discussed repeatedly in disciplines at the intersection of the auditory arts and technology, such as musicology, sound, media or radio studies. However, there is neither consensus on the use of the terms 'radiophonic art', 'radio art', 'experimental radio' or 'avant-garde radio', nor on what specific art form exactly they refer to. The search for the roots of radiophonic art usually leads to the first theoretical and practical approaches to merging auditory arts and technology. This indicates a very broad theoretical and methodological approach and includes necessarily developments in the field of music (cf. Knilli 1961, 9ff.; Cory and Hagg 1981; Kahn and Whitehead 1992; Dack 1994; Hagelüken 2008). However, there seems to be a certain consensus in the research that the definition of radiophonic art has been changing throughout the historical phases of media developments (Hall 2015). Consequently, there is no single definitive answer to the question of what radiophonic art is. Rather, a situational approach using case studies can be applied, examining what has been considered radiophonic art and in which contexts. In the following, I will approach this question on the example of Swiss radio and its contributions to the international competition *Prix Italia*. I will examine what was considered radiophonic art within the specific framework of this radio competition and I will trace its transformations due to technological, social and political developments.

The Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR)¹ has commissioned compositions from composers since its establishment in 1931. The production and promotion of contemporary music, alongside its dissemination, has been part of SRG SSR's cultural remit as a public broadcaster. Swiss broadcasting is divided into four language regions, which operate with a high degree of autonomy. As a result, historical developments in the four language regions have been very different.² While in the German-speaking part there have been hardly any commissions since the late 1980s, commissioning continued in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland until the 2020s. Within the corpus of the confirmed commissions of the SRG SSR,³ which currently comprises around 565 pieces, nearly one-third are works of radiophonic art. The most represented genres are music for radio plays, radio operas, radio operettas, radio pageants and jingles. Among these are 16 works of radiophonic art that were written explicitly for the international competition *Prix Italia*.

1 The name of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation in the four official languages in Switzerland is: German: *Schweizerische Radio- und Fernsehgesellschaft* (SRG); French: *Société suisse de radiodiffusion et télévision* (SSR); Italian: *Società svizzera di radiotelevisione* (SSR); Romansh: *Societad svizra da radio e televisiun* (SSR). In the following, the official abbreviation "SRG SSR" is used.

2 The regional radio and television stations operate as corporate units of SRG SSR: *Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen* (SRF), *Radio Télévision Suisse* (RTS), *Radiotelevisione Svizzera* (RSI) and *Radiotelevision Svizra Rumantscha* (RTR). Until the end of 2011, the German- and Romansh-speaking radio formed a single entity *Radio der deutschen und rätoromanischen Schweiz* (DRS).

3 This collection of works from recent history of Swiss new music is the subject of the research project at Zurich University of the Arts entitled "Music promotion over the airwaves. The SRG's commissions of Classical Music and their Effects on Musical Life in Switzerland (1931–2021)", <https://www.zhdk.ch/en/researchproject/musikfoerderung-ueber-den-aether-592181> [29.09.2025].

The competition was founded in 1948 and is hosted by the Italian broadcaster *Rai – Radiotelevisione italiana*. The submitted works were divided into the categories *Music* and *Drama* which were defined as “musical works with text” and “literary or dramatic works with or without music”. Therefore, both categories were relevant for radiophonic works containing music. The works for the *Prix Italia* competition therefore oscillate between the two areas of music and radiophonic art. Both forms appear on the radio in the electroacoustic milieu and both are produced by electroacoustic means. Instrumental and vocal music, recorded or synthetic sounds as well as speech, noises or silence are equally considered as creative elements for composition.⁴

The assignment of composition commissions at the Swiss Radio was anything but systematic. No clear internal strategy for commissions is discernible. Whether a composer got a commission or not seems to have depended rather on the individual responsible persons, the heads of the music departments, and their interests and personal networks. Documentation of this commissioning activity also varies greatly from studio to studio. Thus, only a small part of the Swiss works submitted to the *Prix Italia* could be identified as commissions so far. Systematic research in the *Prix Italia Archive* of *Rai – Radiotelevisione italiana* (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 2025) has resulted in the compilation of 221 radiophonic works (including the 16 already known), partly to be incorporated into the existing inventory of SRG SSR music commissions (Sandmeier 2022). In order to determine their competition entries, the SRG organised its own competition, the *Prix Suisse*. The winning works received a prize and were entered in the *Prix Italia* on behalf of SRG SSR. Therefore, these works represent a special type of composition commissions by the SRG SSR. For many years the awarding of prizes for radio works has been part of the SRG's efforts to promote radiophonic art and music.

The productions by the Swiss Radio that took part in the *Prix Italia* can be regarded as the most representative works of Swiss radiophonic art. Based on these productions, I will shed light on what was, within the framework of the *Prix Italia*, considered radiophonic art in different time periods and where the intersections with music were drawn. Over the decades, radiophonic art has changed significantly, influenced by technological, social, political and aesthetic transformations. These changes can be observed not only among the submitted works by the Swiss radio, but also in the way the competition itself has been modified.

As this study focuses on a classification and an overview of the newly researched archive material, it methodologically primarily follows a historical-archival approach. This methodology limits the contextualisation and an in-depth discussion in a broader theoretical framework of musicology, sound and media studies or radio research to some extent. However, this study provides a sound basis for such further examinations.

4 The close connection of both forms has become particularly evident in the 1950s in the electronic studios at public broadcasting corporations (especially in Paris, Cologne, Milan and London). There, experiments with electroacoustic radio technologies were conducted and new theoretical and aesthetic concepts as well as compositional methods and forms of auditory arts were developed (Eichenberger 2021a).

Before turning to the corpus of the SRG SSR competition entries, I will outline some key milestones and significant transformations in the history of the *Prix Italia* in the first chapter. The second chapter traces the modifications to the definition of radiophonic art within the regulations of the competition, and examines whether and how historical developments have been reflected. In order to understand what was considered radiophonic art at the outset of the competition, the following chapter focuses then on the jury's discussions in assessing the works in the early 1950s regarding their classification. Finally, the last chapter traces the development of Swiss radiophonic art in the competition in the course of its 75 years.

***Prix Italia* – Establishment and development of a radio competition**

The international competition *Prix Italia* was founded in September 1948 by fourteen radio corporations during a conference on the Italian island of Capri. It was intended to establish a platform that would stimulate the creation of works of words and sound specifically written for radio and to promote their dissemination. The conference outlined the starting point of this initiative, discussing the potential but also the limitations of radio in relation to artistic production: The still relatively new medium radio had not only the advantage of bringing existing art forms to a broad audience, but also provided a unique platform and means for creating entirely new art forms. However, radio was unattractive as a source of income for writers or composers: revenue-generating repetitions as in concerts or theatre were not deemed feasible or acceptable for radio programmes (*Radiocorriere* 1948a, 3f.).

The competition's generous award fund with at least 20,000 Swiss francs⁵ for the first prize was intended to counteract these disadvantages: On the one hand, authors were to be adequately remunerated for their creative work; on the other hand, the propagation of these high-quality works within an international network was to be guaranteed. In order to establish such a network and bundle the resources of broadcasters in the so-called European zone (Europe, North Africa and the Middle East), the conference in Capri was convened and the competition was subsequently launched (cf. *Radiocorriere* 1948a; *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 1948). In the introduction to the 1950 annual report, Sir Ian Jacob, then President of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), reported on the first successes: "It has already made known internationally a number of radio works that would otherwise have remained confined to their national transmitter systems" (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1950b, 8). At the 1952 general meeting, a statistical report was presented listing the number of broadcasts of the award-winning works and those mentioned by the jury during the first three years of the competition. Some works reached up to 11 broadcasts (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1952b, Appendix No. 4).

5 The award was indeed stated in Swiss francs and not in Italian lire.

The regulations adopted in 1948 allowed submissions of musical or musical-literary works that were explicitly “created for the microphone” and took into account the “requirements and special possibilities of the radio”. These were to be sent in as recordings of the original version together with the score and translations of the text into French and English⁶ as well as explanatory notes. The jury evaluated the works not only on the basis of a simple reading of the scripts or scores, but primarily on the basis of the listening experience (cf. Radiocorriere 1948b, 8).

Over time, the competition developed into a platform for the newest international radio and, soon afterwards, television productions, keeping pace with the changing times by reflecting current political, economic and cultural events as well as technological progress: Thus, in 1957, the *Prix Italia* established a television competition and created a new radio category for stereophonic works in 1962. The latter was abolished in 1971 as stereophony had become a broadcasting standard. In 1982, satellite television became a topic at the first edition of the annual conference, whereas in 1998, the discussions had moved on to “[t]he creative power of broadcasters in the new digital environment”. Subsequently, the web competition was introduced in 2000 (a special prize for web products has been awarded since 1998.) Already in 2002, the topic of intermediality, particularly “cross-media”, was brought up, followed by “trans-media” in 2014 and “cross-platform” in 2018. The *Prix Italia* has reflected ongoing global events by the situation-based awarding of special prizes for current topics. In 1991, for example, the theme of the annual conference was “East/West: the new frontier of television” reflecting the fall of the Berlin Wall and the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union. Also in 1991, a special prize for coverage of the Gulf War was awarded to CNN and BBC World. From 2001 to 2008 a special prize “Communication for Life” was awarded for television programmes dealing with the economic, social and cultural effects of war, emergencies, intolerance and repression (cf. Polognieri 2025, 313–20). These awards indicate a heightened awareness of high-quality journalism as well as of current world events within *Prix Italia*.

What did these transformations mean for radiophonic art? How did it position itself in the context of these developments of the competition? The following section traces the changes in the definition for the works submitted to the competition in the radio category over the course of its 75-year history and highlights the most important milestones.

Modifications to the definition of admissible works for *Prix Italia*

From a structural point of view, not many changes can be observed in the radio section of the competition. In 1953, the three categories *Music*, *Drama* and *Documen-*

⁶ The official language of the competition was French. Since 1949, the annual reports have been published in French, while the minutes of the jury meetings and the general assembly meetings have been published alternately in Italian and French. Only from 1954 onwards a bilingual publication of the minutes – in French and English – has been established.

tary were established and have remained in use until today. However, over time, the definitions of admissible works have undergone some modifications. In the first few years, the wording was discussed and refined several times. These discussions provide insights into the contemporary understanding of radiophonic art and its relationship to music. The initial conference in Capri in 1948 established a very simple and open definition of the works eligible for competition: "un ouvrage musical ou musico-littéraire". Interestingly, purely literary works were not considered for the competition at the first stage. The correspondent for the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* mentioned that these might be included at a later stage (cf. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 1948). Already a year later, a more specific definition was provided, allowing literary works with or without music to be submitted. Under article 3 of the regulations, radio works were divided into the following two categories: "1°) une œuvre essentiellement musicale avec ou sans texte; 2°) une œuvre essentiellement littéraire ou dramatique avec ou sans musique"⁷ (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1949, cf. minutes of the general assembly on 29 September 1949, 4). It was also decided that the prize would be awarded to musical works in even years and to literary or dramatic works in odd years. This practice continued only until 1953. Afterwards, both prizes were awarded annually. At the general meetings in 1951 and 1952, article 3 was discussed extensively. The debates centred on the definition of musical works and whether they should be admitted either with or without text, or only with text. Discussions also focused on the adjective "essentiellement". According to René Dovaz, director of *Radio Genève* and delegate of SRG SSR at the jury meetings, both the wording "essentially musical work" and, a year later, the new wording "musical work with text" led to some challenges for the jury. In the second case, works were allegedly sent in although it was obvious that the text elements had been artificially inserted into an otherwise purely musical score (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1952b, cf. minutes of the general assembly on 6 October 1952, 11). Despite these experiences, the wording "un'opera musicale con testo" and "un'opera letteraria o drammatica con o senza musica"⁸ was adopted in 1952. Radiophonic works belonging to these two categories had to meet certain requirements, which were specified in the second part of the definition:

Tali opere devono essere create appositamente per la radiodiffusione ed avere un carattere tale per cui questo mezzo di espressione convenga loro meglio di ogni altro. Esse devono presentare delle qualità estetiche notevoli e contenere degli elementi che perfezionino e arricchiscano l'esperienza radiofonica (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1952b, cf. Appendix 6, 1).⁹

⁷ Translation: 1) a work that is essentially musical, with or without text; 2) a work that is essentially literary or dramatic, with or without music.

⁸ Translation: a musical work with text; a literary or dramatic work with or without music.

⁹ Translation: Such works must be created specifically for radio broadcasting and be of such a nature that this medium is more suitable than any other. They must be of high aesthetic quality and contain elements that enhance and enrich the radio experience.

Further changes only occurred after 1970. Due to recent technical and aesthetic developments, an addition was made in 1971. The wording was changed to “a musical composition with words or new sound elements,” adapting it better to electroacoustic means and practices. In 1973, the prize structure was adjusted, so that both the radio and television sections could award three prizes each. The new definition was formulated without any further discussion as follows: for the music category, any “programme in which music plays the dominant part” and, analogously for the drama category, any “programme in which the text plays the dominant part” were eligible (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1973, 162). In effect, this meant a return to the original open definition from 1949: A work or programme “in which music plays the dominant role” is basically an “essentially musical work.” This definition was not revised until 2016.

In 1970, an interesting debate concerning the television section emerged: In response to the development of new TV programmes with a popular character and the potential to attract broad audiences, the *Prix Italia* considered dividing the music category into the subcategories “original productions” and “more popular entries.” Due to rather negative feedback and concerns expressed by member broadcasters that the award might lose prestige if multiple prizes were awarded or a rather artificial distinction would be drawn between original works and those produced to attract popularity, this change was not implemented (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1970, cf. Appendix 4). Remarkably, a similar discussion arose in the radio section during the 2000s. At the extraordinary general assembly on 31 January 2000 in Naples, it was reported that “documentaries on music and artistic performance of music found themselves competing against each other, to the embarrassment of the jury which was forced to select one prize for two such different genres” (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 2000, cf. Minutes of the extraordinary general assembly of the *Prix Italia* (Naples 31. January 2000), 2). In 2002, the music category in the radio section was indeed divided into the subcategories “composed work” and “work on music” – the latter referring to productions for a broader audience, as the wording of this category from 2015 confirms: “programmes about any kind of music attracting a broader audience” (cf. for example Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 2015, 40). These sub-categories were discontinued in 2016 and since then, there has been again only one single music category, the definition of which explicitly includes both directions:

Music-composed works (programmes specifically composed and recorded for radio, which stand out for their creativity and sound exploration) and/or programmes (or part of a programme) about any kind of music attracting a broader audience. The prize is awarded to the best programme which intentionally and creatively promotes the spreading of musical culture, regardless of genre (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 2016, 4).

As will be discussed later, it is very possible that this division has had a significant influence on the type of productions that have been submitted to the music category

by the SRG SSR from that point onwards. The second part of the definition, outlining the criteria, has also undergone significant changes compared to the version that had been in force since 1952. The focus was no longer on works created specifically for radio that should enhance and enrich the radio experience and demonstrate high aesthetic quality. The new definition focussed mainly on programmes contributing to the dissemination of music culture in general. This definition has remained in force to this day. The last modification in the Radio section was made in 2023, when it was renamed into *Radio & Podcast*.

The modifications in the definition of the admissible radiophonic works in the early stages of the competition were mainly a result of challenges encountered by the jury in assessing the submitted works. In the following, I will take a closer look at the discussions of the jury in the early 1950s, which centred on the definitions in articles 2 and 3 of the regulations: On the one hand, this involved distinguishing which works were considered musical and which literary. On the other hand, it addressed the radio characteristics of the submitted works and evaluating their aesthetic qualities. The examination of these issues and questions emerging from the jury's discussions reveals not only the understanding of radiophonic art at the beginning of the competition by the leading figures in European broadcasting. It sheds light on the developments of this new art at a time when it began to be shaped by the availability of new technical means, in particular the magnetic tape recorder.

Classification of radiophonic art at *Prix Italia* in the 1950s

Extensive discussions arose within the jury regarding the distinction between the two categories *Music* and *Drama*. Within the "musical" editions of the competition held in 1950 and 1952, certain productions were excluded because the jury considered them to be literary rather than musical works. In 1952, Pedro do Prado, delegate of the Portuguese *Emissora Nacional de Radiodifusão*, argued for the exclusion of the Dutch production *The Town Musicians of Bremen* by Jurriaan Andriessen:

The entry submitted by the Netherlands is undoubtedly a literary work with music; I repeat, undoubtedly. Do you wish to convince yourselves? Make this experiment: listen to the literary part alone. It is a work which begins, continues and has a conclusion. Do the contrary: listen to the music alone. It has no sense. The pieces of music inserted into it are nothing but illustrations of the text. It is a book with illustrations and illustrations have no influence on the status of a literary work. The structure, the skeleton so to speak, is literary and not musical because the music in it is only complementary (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1952a, cf. minutes of the jury on 4 October 1952, 17).

It is questionable whether such straightforward arguments would actually be helpful in classifying works using speech, music, sounds, noise and silence as equally important compositional elements. It is likely that numerous literary or dramatic works

of an abstract nature would also fail Prado's "experiment". There were also less conservative voices in the jury when it came to assessing the literary or musical character of the works. Another example is the work *Le briquet* by the Finnish composer Nils-Eric Fougsted in 1950. It was also put on the list for elimination because of its allegedly literary character. Jouko Tolonen, musical director of the Finnish *Oy Yleisradio Ab*, argued for its retention in the "musical" competition:

L'œuvre «Le briquet» a été composée avec des textes parlés, très courts, séparés par des textes musicaux composés expressément pour la Radio. Je pense que l'esprit et la substance de l'œuvre sont parfaitement conformes à l'esprit du règlement. Je pense, donc, qu'elle doit être retenue (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1950a, cf. minutes of the 9th jury meeting on 16 September 1950, 14).¹⁰

Tolonen's argument, emphasising the concept of interplay between text and music and its radiophonic character, did not convince the majority of jury members. *Le briquet* was excluded with a vote of four against two with one abstention (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1950a, cf. minutes of the 8th jury meeting on 15 September 1950, 15).

This leads to a second point intensively discussed by the *Prix Italia* juries in the early 1950s: During both "musical" competitions in 1950 and 1952, the jury debated how exactly to interpret the wording in article 2, "œuvres créées spécialement pour la Radio" (works created especially for radio). In the jury's morning session on 16 September 1950,¹¹ Pedro do Prado stated that nine of 21 works should be excluded because, for various reasons, they were not "created specifically for radio": Among them were three symphonies which, according to Prado, could certainly be broadcast on the radio, but had not been written for the radio. Three other works did indeed contain text, but their music was unsuitable for radio broadcast. Two works had clearly been written for the theatre, and the music in one work appeared to be much more suited for cinema than for radio (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1950a, cf. minutes of the 9th jury meeting on 16 September 1950, 10). In the ensuing discussion, each of these works was briefly discussed to determine whether or not it should remain in the competition. However, no clear arguments were put forward as to what constituted a "specifically radiophonic work". The decisions were based mainly on subjective opinions. At the beginning of the afternoon session, jury vice-president René Dovaz emphasised the responsibility of the jury to adhere to the regulations and to award prizes to works that were better suited to the medium of radio than any other. It was the jury's task to identify the elements in these works that improved and enriched the broadcasting experience. Dovaz also expressed his own difficulties in deciding whether a work that could easily be performed in a concert or theatre could really be considered radio-specific. Unfortunately, his im-

¹⁰ Translation: The work *Le briquet* was composed with very short spoken texts separated by musical passages composed specifically for radio. I believe that the spirit and substance of the work are perfectly in line with the spirit of the rules. I therefore believe that it should be accepted.

¹¹ On 16 September 1950, two jury meetings were held, the 9th meeting in the morning at 9:30 a.m. and the 10th meeting in the afternoon at 3:00 p.m.

portant remarks were not followed by any substantive discussion addressing these issues (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1950a, cf. minutes of the 10th jury meeting on 16 September 1950, 1).

Similar discussions, based on subjective opinions rather than substantial arguments, can be observed on the example of two Swiss contributions. Among the works mentioned by Prado that had text but, in his opinion, lacked radio-specific music, was Rolf Liebermann's *Streitlied zwischen Leben und Tod*: "Je dirai que ce n'est pas une musique expressement composée pour la Radio",¹² Prado stated (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1950a, c.f. minutes of the 9th jury meeting on 16 September 1950, p 10.). The jury president, René Tellier, musical director of French-speaking programmes at the Belgian *Institut national de radiodiffusion*, summarised his assessment of the piece as follows:

Pour moi, la musique est bonne, mais un peu lancinante, et trop pleine de philosophie. Je n'y ai trouvé aucune expression directe; elle est renfermée dans un cadre ou deux, ce qui m'a un peu choqué. C'est une grande fresque, du point de vue radiophonique, mais dans laquelle il n'y a pas besoin d'un texte pour expliquer les choses (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1950a, cf. minutes of the 10th jury meeting on 16 September 1950, 10).¹³

A contradictory opinion came from Dario De Rosa, delegate of *Ente Radio Trieste*:

Contrairement à notre Président, j'ai trouvé que dans la musique de Liebermann il n'y a pas trop de philosophie; au contraire le texte est beaucoup plus profond que la musique, et est facilement compréhensible. Du point de vue radiophonique, je trouve qu'il vient à se créer une efficacité extraordinaire dans l'alternative entre le chant de la vie et celui de la mort (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1950a, cf. minutes of the 10th jury meeting on 16 September 1950, 10).¹⁴

After these two contrasting statements, no discussion emerged among the jury members. These quotations illustrate the uncertainty prevailing among the jury members with regard to what was to be considered radiophonic, or which aspects were to be included under this heading at all: Tellier argued in favour of radiophonic expression, pointing to the expressiveness of music, which would work even without text; De Rosa, in turn, emphasised the contrasting nature of the chants of life and death as a radiophonic expression – both actually mentioned different musical aspects and qualities of the work.

¹² Translation: I would say that this is not a piece of music composed specifically for radio.

¹³ Translation: For me, the music is good, but a bit haunting and too philosophical. It is confined to one or two frames, which shocked me a little. It's a grand fresco, from a radio perspective, but one in which there is no need for a text to explain things.

¹⁴ Translation: Unlike our President, I found that there is not too much philosophy in Liebermann's music; on the contrary, the text is much deeper than the music and is easily understandable. From a radiophonic point of view, I find that an extraordinary effectiveness is created in the alternation between the song of life and the song of death.

After discussing Liebermann's piece, the jury moved on to the next Swiss work, *Concerto*, an *évocation musicale radiophonique* by Pierre Wissmer. It was unanimously agreed that the musical quality of Wissmer's *Concerto* would not match that of Liebermann's. With the exception of Tellier's brief remark that, although the work was of no particular artistic value, it would certainly attract the attention of listeners, the assessment focused exclusively on musical aspects without taking into account its radiophonic qualities: De Rosa noted that the music was more suited to a film commentary than to a work of purely musical aesthetic value. Per Lindfors, deputy head of the music department at Swedish *Radiotjänst*, even considered it frivolous to consider music such as Wissmer's alongside Liebermann's for a *Prix Italia* award. Interestingly, the explanatory texts that had to be sent in with the works were not discussed by the jury at all. The explanatory text by Wissmer as well as by the script author Pierre Girard clearly showed the thoughts behind the creation of this work for radio. Wissmer and Girard adhered closely to the specified requirements, producing a piece exclusively for radio and essentially musical in nature. It is evident that from the very beginning, starting with the development of the idea, there was close collaboration between the author and the composer: The music carries the narrative along – without it, the story would be incomprehensible. The concept also took into account the listener and their listening situation: Since radio addressed rather small groups or individuals, a more intimate and confidential sound was chosen – in clear contrast to Liebermann's work for large orchestra and choir. Although orchestra and choir are also used in *Concerto*, they are processed using radio techniques (variable microphone positions, the use of echo chambers and filters) to achieve the intended intimate atmosphere (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1950b, 75–78). Liebermann's explanatory text, conversely, is a very ordinary description of the work in which radiophonic aspects are not mentioned at all (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1950b, 71). The work titles ultimately speak for themselves: whether Liebermann's "dramatic cantata" for soprano, alto, tenor and bass, narrator, mixed choir and orchestra or Wissmer's "évocation musicale radiophonique" were conceived specifically for radio does not require further comment.

The aesthetic qualities of the music and the reputation of the composers apparently played a greater role than the radio qualities in the early years of the *Prix Italia*. The 1950 award-winning work *Ifigenia*, a one-act opera by Italian composer Ildebrando Pizetti, shall serve as an example of these trends. During the jury's long discussion about this work on 16 September 1950, two points of view became apparent: One clearly advocated aesthetic qualities and considered them more important than radiophonic ones. Prado emphasised that a production had to be first and foremost a work of art in order to qualify as a radiophonic work at all:

[...] j'aimerais préciser que nous sommes là pour attribuer un prix à une œuvre d'art radiophonique. N'oublions pas, toutefois, qu'avant tout il faut que ce soit une œuvre d'art. C'est là la première des conditions. Nous ne réussirons jamais à arriver à une œuvre d'art radiophonique si ce n'est pas une œuvre d'art. [...] Nous ne sommes pas là

pour décerner un prix à une œuvre dont la qualité n'est pas très élevée uniquement parce que nous savons qu'elle est très radiophonique (Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana 1950a, cf. minutes of the 10th jury meeting on 16 September 1950, 9).¹⁵

Especially the last point in Prado's statement seems questionable: conversely, this would have meant that any high quality piece of classical music barely meeting the conditions formulated in article 2 could participate in the *Prix Italia* and be given preference over other radiophonic works. Other jury members praised Pizzetti's work in terms of musical quality, but noted that the work did not in any way improve or enrich the radio experience, as required by the regulations. It was not created in such a way that it was better suited for radio than any other medium, and there would be no difference between playing it on the radio or in a concert hall. In the voting for the *Prix Italia* award, the aesthetic argument in favour of a high-quality musical work of art seems to have convinced most of the jury members.¹⁶

The musical works with no discernible radiophonic concept that were submitted to the *Prix Italia* at the beginning of the 1950s refer to the tradition of "radiophonic music" developed in the early days of radio during the 1920s. It was music composed specifically for radio, often commissioned works, that took into account the particular sound conditions of radio technology at that time. This was usually achieved by using smaller, adapted instrumentation. However, with the expansion of broadcasting houses and the establishment of radio symphony orchestras, such adaptation was no longer necessary (cf. Kleinen, 19f.). As a result, this concept was outdated by the 1950s, and "radiophonic music" did not differ significantly from that composed for the concert hall.

After outlining the framework of the international radio competition and discussing the fundamental developments and issues at its outset, I will now focus on Swiss radiophonic art, addressing the question of how these developments were reflected in the works submitted by SRG SSR throughout the history of the competition. Since the entire development of the 75 years cannot be presented in detail, an evaluation of the available material will be provided, offering a general overview. After a brief overview of the body of works, I will discuss selected pieces with regard to certain aspects reflecting the transformations of sonority and aesthetics of the Swiss radiophonic art over time.

¹⁵ Translation: [...] I would like to point out that we are here to award a prize to a work of radio art. Let us not forget, however, that above all it must be a work of art. That is the primary condition. We will never succeed in obtaining a work of radio art if it is not a work of art. [...] We are not here to award a prize to a work that is not of a particularly outstanding quality just because we know that it is very radiophonic.

¹⁶ This conservative tendency at *Prix Italia* was already observed by Angela Ida De Benedictis (cf. De Benedictis 2004, 157).

Swiss radiophonic art at *Prix Italia*

Since the first edition of *Prix Italia* in 1949 until 2025,¹⁷ SRG SSR has submitted 221 works of radio art in the three categories *Music*, *Drama* and *Documentary*. Out of these, 88 feature music in the credits, of which seven use pre-existing compositions, mostly classical music. For the remaining 81 productions, it can be assumed that original music was created or a mixture of newly composed and pre-existing music was used. In addition, there are another 23 works that are credited not as “music” but as “sound” or “sound track”.¹⁸ The 81 productions with original music include 42 in the music and 33 in the drama categories, plus two productions in the stereophonic and another two in the documentary categories. As the categorisation was only introduced in 1950, the two works from 1949 do not belong to any category. While productions were entered almost every year during the 1950s and 1960s into the Music category, the number of submissions gradually declined from the mid-1970s onwards and increasingly so in the 1980s. A similar tendency cannot be observed in the drama and documentary categories. In the 1990s and 2000s, only four productions per decade were submitted in the music category, and in the 2010s, only two. In the 2020s, the number of entries increased again, with one production submitted each year. However, since the 2000s, productions in the music category have mainly explored and documented various musical topics, but are not works of art themselves. Between 2002 and 2015, these belonged to the subcategory “work on music”. Most of them do not list any credits for music, indicating that no new musical content was created for them.

The productions that list music in the credits feature relatively similar sonorities from the 1950s up to the 1970s.¹⁹ The orchestral sound with voice – often including spoken word – predominates. The music is predominantly classical, but forms of popular music occasionally appear. Genres vary from opera, operetta, early music to folk music, jazz or chanson. Until the early 1960s, works designated for the music or drama categories often tend to be very similar in terms of sound. Therefore, attempts to distinguish between musical and literary works would lead to similarly extended discussions as in the examples mentioned above. Since the 1960s, fewer productions featuring music in the credits have appeared in the drama category. The categories therefore seem to have stabilised and certain criteria for the individual categories appear to have become established at the Swiss radio studios.

17 The winners of this year's edition, under the slogan “Get Real”, can be consulted under: <https://www.rai.it/prixitalia/news/2025/03/2025-Prix-Italia-Competition-b68f9f9a-716d-4da0-9971-e63e8573314f.html> [02.10.2025]. The final event took place in Naples between 20 and 24 October 2025.

18 This does not mean that the other productions do not contain sound or even music. However, as not all recordings of the productions are accessible, the initial classification had to be based on the credits.

19 Due to the available sources and the accessibility of the recordings, only selective statements can be made about the productions. The *Prix Italia* Archive contains SRG SSR radio productions dating from the mid-1970s onwards (with two exceptions from the 1950s). There is a gap between 1993 and 2009, and recordings are only available again from 2010 onwards. The recordings that have not yet been published are marked with the note “multimedia coming soon” – indicating the archive still being in the process of publishing. Some recordings from the 1950s and 1960s could be listened to on PIPnet (PlayInfo Plus), an internal database of SRG SSR.

Although the competition works of the first two decades share a similar sonority, three tendencies can be identified in their conception: There are works, such as Liebermann's dramatic cantata, which do not primarily pursue a radiophonic concept. These include, for example, *Geneviève* (1955), an *opéra comique* by Aloÿs Fornerod, *Pétrarque. Un chant d'amour et d'absence* (1958) by Jean Binet, *Meditazione su una maschera di Amadeo Modigliani* (1961) by Vladimir Vogel, *Die schwarze Spinne* (1964), an opera in one act by Heinrich Sutermeister, and Pierre Wissmer's *Le quatrième mage* (1965), an *oratorio radiophonique*. All five works submitted in the music category are regular orchestral works with choir and soloists. The implementation of a radiophonic concept is confined to smaller instrumentation adapted to the conditions of the radio studio or to the figure of a narrator commenting on the events between musical sections.

A second tendency is represented by works in which the text plays a primary role and the music has more of an illustrative character, serving as introduction, accompaniment, and connecting element or functioning entirely independently in self-contained sections. In these works, text and music interact only marginally. These include, for example, Rokuro Kurachi's *Otohimè, principessa del mare* (1951), *Le petit garçon de l'autobus* (1958) by Julien-François Zbinden, *La Danseuse et le Maréchal* (1961) by Pierre Métral, or Heinrich Sutermeister's *Der gestiefelte Kater* (1954) and *Der Papagei aus Kuba* (1962). The first three productions competed in the drama category, the last two in the music category. They are characterized by long spoken sequences without musical interaction, and conversely, relatively long musical sequences are presented without any interaction with the spoken word. In most cases, both tendencies are characterized by a substantial musical component. Remarkably, the interaction between music and words is not the main focus of their artistic ideas and radiophonic concepts.

In the works of the third tendency, significantly more emphasis is placed on the constitutive potential and interaction between spoken word and music, which often intertwine. Examples for this third group are Hans Haug's radio opera *Die verirrte Taube* (1952), *Microbus 666* (1956), a *fantaisie radiophonique* by Julien-François Zbinden, and the radio ballad *Quatembernacht* by Walter Furrer. Among the productions of this third tendency, the following three are particularly remarkable as examples of a gradual change of sonority: *La nique à Satan* (1956) by Frank Martin, *Léon coeur d'accordéon* (1959), and *Le Passager* (1961), both by Voumard. These pieces achieve their new sound by employing chamber music instrumentation with individual or fewer instruments. New timbres are created through innovative instrumentation with unusual instrumental combinations – such as accordion and harpsichord in *Léon coeur d'accordéon* – as well as through the use of musical styles such as jazz (*Le Passager*) or chanson (*Léon coeur d'accordéon*). Experimental elements such as an imitative interaction between a voice (shrill high male voice) and an instrument (bassoon) in *La nique à Satan* further contribute to this new sonority. These productions which oscillate between music and radio drama, seek to connect these genres and explore their boundaries through experimental approaches, represent important milestones in a gradual process of breaking away from traditional forms.

In the works of the 1950s and 1960s radiophonic effects such as filtering, echo or delay, as well as radio practices such as manipulation of speed or direction, are barely used. The few echo or delay effects are produced to create a spatial ambience. Therefore, these Swiss pieces are not comparable to the experimental and innovative radiophonic works produced in electronic studios at broadcasting corporations in Europe, foremost in Paris by the *Groupe de Recherche de Musique Concrète* (cf. Dack 1994; Héron 2006; Cohen 2015) or by the *BBC Radiophonic Workshop* (cf. Niebur 2010; Eichenberger 2021b) in London in the 1950s. The first production to achieve a new sound quality through electroacoustic means and to clearly stand out from other productions was the winner of the 1962 *Prix Italia* in the music category, *Le damné* by Marcel van Thienen. It features a balanced mix of music, speech, and sounds, and makes use of radiophonic effects and electronic sounds. With a radio voice being used as sound material, the radio itself becomes a subject of self-reflection for the first time.

Further productions involving a more comprehensive use of electroacoustic means appear in the competition only at the end of the 1960s/beginning of the 1970s and still represent unique cases. These are the pieces *Les vêtements de la demoiselle ou "Lentomologiste Naturalisé"* (1968) by Werner Kaegi (music) and Roland Sassi (text) and *Martyrs* (1970) by Jean Derbès (music) and Gérard Lucas (text). Both were produced at *Radio Genève* at the *Centre de Recherches Sonores de la Radio Suisse Romande*, an electronic studio established in 1956 that was primarily dedicated to productions for radio, television, and film, but also produced compositions of electroacoustic music (cf. Muggler and Spoerri 2010). While in the first piece, electroacoustic effects such as echo and filter are used throughout the entire piece to create a dreamlike artificial environment and a somewhat mysterious atmosphere, in *Martyrs* they are used much more extensively and sophisticatedly. The introduction ushers in a completely different sonority compared to the 1950s and 1960s: it begins with voices played backwards and sped up or slowed down. The five parts of the Catholic mass on which the piece is based are presented conceptually and sonically in very different ways; the use of electroacoustic means and the treatment of voices, sounds, and noises as elements of the composition stand in total contrast to the very traditional liturgical form.

In the 1980s, the auditive quality of Swiss productions reached a new level. Sound elements like speech, music, noise, and electronic sounds merged in the electroacoustic milieu to such a degree that the term "sound design" lends itself to describing the processes and the sound results. Prime examples for this new standard are the productions *Ville* (1984) and *Juste une dernière question* (1988), both produced by Gérard Suter. The contrast between *Ville* and Rudolf Kelterborn's *Die schwarze Spinne*, an orchestral work with choir and soloists, is striking. Submitted in the music category in the same year, the two works operate in completely different sound worlds. In *Ville*, Suter uses live music played on electric and acoustic instruments (guitars, bass, percussion instruments) together with recordings from around the city of Geneva and a narrative voice. These elements flow together into a homogeneous soundtrack of impressions and atmospheres. *Juste une dernière question* explores the subject of radio itself: radio voices

and sounds form a substantial part of the sound material. Although Suter's productions of the 1980s opened up a new direction in Swiss radiophonic art, they stayed exceptions in several respects: Firstly, not many Swiss composers seem to have been interested in radiophonic art based on experimental use of electroacoustic techniques. Secondly, during the 1980s and 1990s, significantly fewer Swiss productions were entered into the music category of the competition. And thirdly, most of the productions sent by SRG SSR to the *Prix Italia* did not feature any music in the credits.

Since it is currently impossible to listen to the productions from the 1990s and 2000s due to the unavailability of the recordings, I will now leap into the 2010s. This entails a significant change, not only in terms of sonority, but also in terms of the types of the submitted works: There has been a complete shift of Swiss productions in the music category towards documentaries and discussion programmes about music. With a few exceptions, talking about and reporting on music have replaced artistic forms and no new radiophonic works of musical character are created for the competition. Examples from this new vein of productions include the radio documentation *Moulin Rouge, la leggenda della culla del can-can* (2012) by Marco Kohler, Jean-Guy Coulangé's portrait of double bassist Nicolas Crosse from the radio programme series *La sarabande* (2017), and, in the last two years, the programme *Russian Music: To Play or Not to Play?* (2024) by Florence Baeriswyl and Nicole Freudiger from the radio series *Kontext*, as well as *Luci e suoni di Notre Dame tornano a vivere* (2025) a documentary about the destruction and reconstruction of the Notre-Dame cathedral by Alessandro Bertellotti.

All of these entries belong to the subcategory "work on music" introduced in 2002, which, although it has not explicitly existed since 2016, still remains eligible for submissions in the music category. One notable exception among the latest Swiss entries is *Lettre à Irma* (2020) by Benoît Bories and Aurélien Caillaux. They work with sound material from field recordings, acousmatic composition, as well as the voices of an infant and a narrator. The piece reflects on the transformed soundscape of the outside world during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Lettre à Irma* is an original production and would have fitted into the music subcategory "composed" that was abolished in 2016. Like Suter in the 1980s, Bories' and Caillaux' *composition sonore* represents a form of radiophonic or electroacoustic art that to this day remains an exception among Swiss entries for the *Prix Italia*.

Conclusion

The examination of the SRG SSR productions participating in the *Prix Italia* throughout the competition's 75-year history provided insights on two different levels: On the one hand, it was pointed out how the understanding of radiophonic art has transformed in the course of technical, political and cultural developments in international European perspectives, with the competition serving as a reference point. On the other hand, the examination of Swiss radiophonic art and its development in the course

of the competition provided an initial insight into this hitherto rather neglected subject matter.

At the outset of the competition in the early 1950s, considerable disagreements emerged within the jury, with partly very controversial arguments regarding the understanding of radiophonic art. These controversies became particularly apparent within the musical editions of the competition. Some jury members tended to assess only aesthetic qualities of the music rather than considering the radiophonic qualities of the pieces. These controversial views were rooted in two different concepts of radiophonic art with regard to music: On the one hand, it was the concept of "radiophonic music" from the early days of radio developed in the 1920s. It referred to compositions in classical forms created for radio broadcasting but differed from pieces for the concert hall only in smaller adaptations to the specific acoustic conditions of early radio studios and technology. On the other hand, in the electronic studios of radio broadcasters a new experimental electroacoustic art form has been developing alongside electroacoustic music since the late 1940s. The creative use of electroacoustic means and composition with sound material played a primary role in this innovative concept. Although the *Prix Italia*'s definition of radiophonic art was indeed forward-looking insofar as it was intended to promote art that "enriches and expands the radio experience," the jury's discussions revealed a clear preference for conventional "radiophonic music," which met such requirements only to a very limited extent. In other words, the majority of the jury members leaned towards the familiar rather than engaging with the unknown.

The new experimental art form was incorporated into the *Prix Italia* regulations explicitly only in the early 1970s, when the wording "or new sound elements" was added to the definition of admissible musical compositions with words. The adapted definition of 1971 took into account new technological and aesthetic developments of the experimental radiophonic art. The productions submitted by SRG SSR only marginally reflected the newer developments. Until the 1970s (and in some cases even the mid-1980s), Swiss radiophonic art predominantly adhered to the conservative concept of "radiophonic music". Whether a similar tendency could be found in the contributions of other European broadcasters could not be assessed here and would require further comparative research. Throughout the history of the competition, only few Swiss productions employed the technical possibilities of radio in innovative ways or reflectively explored radio as a medium. The kind of auditory art in which all sound elements merge into new experimental forms is largely absent from the radiophonic works selected by the SRG SSR for the music category at the *Prix Italia*.

Furthermore, the analysis of the Swiss submissions has revealed a fundamental shift in focus from highly musical productions to journalistic documentary programmes on various kinds of music: Until the end of the 1980s, these consisted of predominantly musical works without obvious radiophonic concepts. Part of the pieces explored innovative approaches of combining speech and music. This changed completely in the 2010s at the latest. Since then, no new original radiophonic compositions are being produced. Instead, programmes from regular radio production are submitted.

Several reasons can explain this shift towards journalistic nature of the “music” productions. One is the development of *Prix Italia* in the 1990s and the increased interest in journalism, high-quality reporting, and topicality. Another reason can be found in the changes the Swiss broadcasting landscape underwent since the 1980s. A growing number of private competitors forced the introduction of new SRG SSR stations and programmes. Due to these new expenditures, the SRG SSR’s cultural programmes found themselves under constant pressure to reduce their costs (Sandmeier and Eichenberger 2025, 256ff.). This mainly affected the music departments, which had to almost completely abandon commissioning new compositions. Nowadays, the SRG SSR awards commissions only on a very sporadic basis – with decreasing frequency.

In general, the high aesthetic standards demanded at the outset of *Prix Italia* no longer seem to play any role today: according to the current regulations, reporting and the dissemination of information have become the main focus. As far as the Swiss entries are concerned, the artistic works of high aesthetic quality that were so important at the beginning of the competition have become rare exceptions. Swiss radiophonic art is not tangible at the *Prix Italia* any more.

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SWISS RADIOPHONIC ART AND COMMISSIONED COMPOSITIONS BY THE SWISS BROADCASTING CORPORATION (SRG SSR) AT THE *PRIX ITALIA*

(summary)

This contribution presents the results of a completely new research on Swiss radiophonic art submitted at the international *Prix Italia* competition, covering the entire 75-year history of the competition. The research is based on a compilation of works commissioned by the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR) to composers since its founding in 1931, in which 16 works that participated in the *Prix Italia* could be identified so far. In a new systematic research in the *Prix Italia* archives, an additional collection of 221 radiophonic works (including the 16 already known) could be registered. This body of works constitutes a representative selection of Swiss radiophonic production over the last 75 years. The examination of the history of the competition and developments in the categories within the radio section on the one hand, and the corpus of Swiss

competition entries on the other, revealed significant aspects of the transformation of radiophonic art in the context of technological, social, political, and cultural changes since the end of the Second World War.

Since both *Prix Italia* categories *Drama* and *Music* considered radiophonic productions with music, the submitted works have the particularity of oscillating between the two fields of music and radiophonic art. At the beginning of the competition in the early 1950s, there was a strong emphasis on aesthetic qualities of a work of art in both music and drama categories. Analysis of the jury minutes from the first editions of the competition revealed uncertainty amongst the jury in assessing the specific radiophonic characteristics of the productions. The Swiss productions from the first three decades of the competition display a very similar sonority. Most of them are orchestral works with spoken word, some of which are without a particular radiophonic concept, while others are innovative and place more emphasis on the constitutive potential and interaction between spoken word and music. In the 1970s, the competition's reflections on technological developments can be observed. Among the Swiss productions, there are also individual cases since the late 1960s that demonstrate a more extensive use of electroacoustic means. These, however, remain exceptions. Since the 1990s, there has been a gradual trend towards a focus on information in reporting within the competition. The last two decades show a remarkable transformation of the radiophonic productions submitted by SRG SSR: hardly any new original musical compositions of radiophonic art have been submitted in the music category, but rather journalistic programmes on various musical topics. The reasons for this shift can be attributed on the one hand, to the development of *Prix Italia* in the 1990s and the increased interest in journalism, on the other hand, to the changes in the broadcasting landscape in general, which has been confronted with permanent cost-cutting measures in the cultural sector of SRG SSR since the 1980s.