

Switzerland Celebrates 30 Years of ESO Membership

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This year Switzerland celebrated the 30th anniversary of its accession to ESO. The Swiss contributions to ESO are briefly summarised and a half-day symposium to mark this anniversary is reported.

This year is rich in astronomical celebrations: as well as the 50th anniversary, on 5 October 1962, of Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden pooling their resources and ambitions under the flag of ESO, the 30th anniversary of the membership of Switzerland to ESO, through the completion of the accession process on 1 March 1982, is also being commemorated.

During these last five decades, the (currently 14) Member States of ESO have advanced European astrophysical activities to the level of excellence they enjoy today. The role of ESO as the world leader in ground-based astronomy is confirmed by some recent decisions by the ESO Council in relation to the construction the European Extremely Large Telescope (E-ELT). The Swiss membership of ESO has made a strong impact in instrumentation and observational astrophysics, covering many fields from the search for extrasolar planets to the most distant galaxies.

In order to acknowledge the manifold contributions of the Swiss people to all activities related to astrophysics, the Swiss Commission for Astronomy, a board of the Swiss Academy of Sciences, organised a small symposium, which was hosted in the Federal Capital by the University of Bern, on the afternoon of 5 October 2012. The general theme was: Astronomy in Switzerland: The Quest for Summits! Nearly 150 participants attended this event, among them numerous members of the Swiss academic and

federal governing bodies, along with astronomers from all the Swiss universities and institutions involved in astrophysics. The event was organised and chaired by G. Meylan from EPFL, who is also the Chair of the Swiss Commission for Astronomy and science delegate for Switzerland on the ESO Council. The oral presentations were split into two groups, first political, then scientific, but in both cases past achievements and future challenges were described.

The welcome address, by T. Courvoisier, from the University of Geneva, who is also President of the Swiss Academy of Sciences, emphasised the essential benefits of Swiss participation in ESO, in the past and the future. L. Woltjer, former ESO Director General and “father” of the Very Large Telescope (VLT), followed with a presentation on the theme of Europe and ESO. Then, M. Steinacher, from the State Secretariat for Education and Research, and also head of the Swiss delegation to the ESO Council, presented the path of Switzerland into ESO, the main highlights of the Swiss participation and the major phases of the development of ESO, with the observatories at La Silla, Cerro Paranal, Chajnantor, and Cerro Armazones as major cornerstones.

Three scientific reviews summarised the activities of Switzerland in three scientific areas where numerous recent discoveries have been achieved. S. Udry, from the University of Geneva (UniGE), summarised the activities related to the search for extrasolar planets with ESO telescopes. The excellent synergy between the universities of Geneva, Bern (UniBE) and the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zurich (ETHZ) is the best way to maintain and develop the leadership established by UniGE during the last 20 years. M. Carollo, from ETHZ, presented the intense research activities in the field of galaxy formation and evolution undertaken at ETHZ, UniGE, Universität Zurich, and EPFL, from the points of view of observations and numerical simulations. B. Leibundgut, Director for Science at ESO, and incidentally the highest ranked Swiss staff member at ESO, presented the impact of ESO telescopes on recent progress in cosmology, e.g., through the direct contribution to the discovery of the accelerated expansion of



the Universe, which was awarded the 2011 Nobel Prize in Physics.

All three speakers emphasised past Swiss participation in the instrumentation related to the New Technology Telescope (NTT) and the VLT/VLT Interferometer (VLTI), and, hopefully, in the future to the E-ELT. The complementarity between these ESO facilities and some of the NASA/ESA satellites (HST and JWST) and ESA satellites (CHEOPS, EUCLID) was also emphasised, allowing astrophysicists in Switzerland to acquire both ground-based and space-borne observations, a key component in maintaining Swiss activities at the forefront of astrophysical research.

An aperitif allowed everybody to discuss further the future of astronomy and astrophysics in Switzerland through the ESO and ESA projects, with some grateful thoughts for our Swiss predecessors who pushed for direct participation of Switzerland in these outstanding international organisations.

Acknowledgements

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