

From Alphorn to English Horn

Nature in the Concert Hall

The first of two articles by Frances Jones.



Dr Frances Jones is a freelance oboist and French horn player and, more recently, a leading authority on the alphorn. These independent interests have come together in her recent PhD thesis 'The Alphorn in Western Art Music' in which she has made a detailed examination of the substantial use of alphorn material in classical repertoire. Surprisingly, alphorn motifs are not always given to the French horn in the orchestra: on a number of occasions, a composer has selected the cor anglais to represent the voice of the alphorn. This first of a pair of articles sets out to explore what it is that a composer is referring to with the inclusion of such calls, and why it may be that the cor anglais player is often the musician of choice for this role. A second article will examine why a composer expected his audiences to understand such references and how it is that we still do so in the twenty-first century. Any comments would be welcomed. www.AmazingAlphorn.co.uk

Why should a nineteenth-century composer give an alphorn call to the cor anglais? What is he bringing into the concert hall anyway?

Two primary uses for the horn in rural life are mirrored by composers in orchestral repertoire: hunting and herding. Hunting horn calls are generally rousing, extrovert and energetic. A composer will often use the 'horse-riding' rhythm of 6/8 and this music is frequently written for two, three or four horns playing together in harmony, a reflection that group music-making is one of the peripheral pleasures of a hunting party. In contrast, the alphorn player is a solitary herdsman, looking after his cattle in the

peaceful surroundings of high mountain pastures. His music is called a *Ranz des Vaches* or *Kühreien* (procession of cows), played as the cattle make the long journey to the summer grazing areas. The term also refers to a melody that would be played every evening at sunset, or after a mountain storm, to let the people down in the valley know that all was well.

Within the orchestra, music reminiscent of an alphorn is thus typically a lone voice, sometimes unaccompanied, at other times given a quiet backdrop of held notes. It is slow and peaceful with short repeating motifs, just as the herdsman would play to call individual cows. There is often freedom from pulse, an irregular number of bars, and phrases that end with a lingering paused note. Occasionally a composer will provide an echo or simulate a response from another alphorn player in the distance; sometimes there will be a chorus of overlapping echoes as the calls might reverberate in the solitude of the mountains.

The notes of an alphorn call reflect that the instrument is just a natural tube, therefore it can only play the notes of the harmonic series. (See Fig. 1)

From this set of notes, a typical alphorn phrase uses harmonics nos. 3, 4, 5, 6 and sometimes 8, often in an arpeggio motif that turns about on itself. (See Fig. 2)

The Romantic composer enjoyed the inferences that a quotation of an alphorn might bring to his audience. Music evocative of the Alps could carry the implication of simple beauty or other-worldliness, or it could have overtones of independence and freedom. It was often used to convey a feeling of relief and relaxation after a storm.

Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868) wrote an opera based on the story of the Swiss folk hero William Tell for a post-revolutionary Parisian audience, in 1829. The end of the second part of this opera features a storm. In the section that follows, Rossini restores the peace of the pastoral scene with a passage entitled *Ranz des Vaches* that opens with an expansive alphorn melody given to the cor anglais based on a turning arpeggio motif. It becomes an extensive herdsman's duet, with each phrase echoed an octave higher by the flute. The motifs are typical repeating three-note cells with five-bar phrases which give the impression of a pause at the end of each statement. Yodel figures are introduced later to enhance the rustic scene and the whole passage has a bagpipe-style drone accompaniment. It is quoted extensively in the overture to the opera. (See Fig. 3)

A second narrative set in Switzerland attracted the interest of composers: Byron's epic poem *Manfred*, written after a visit there in 1816. The text is partly autobiographical and partly rooted in ideas found in Goethe's *Faust*. Byron explained in a letter: 'I wrote a sort of mad drama, for the sake of introducing Alpine scenery and descriptions'.¹ Despite his insistence that it was not intended for stage performance, Robert Schumann (1810–1856) was one of a number of composers inspired to write incidental music to the poem after he too had a holiday in Switzerland in 1848. In the resulting three-act work, for which Schumann retained the title *Manfred*, Scene No.4 of Act 1 is a *recitative* that is given the descriptive title *Alpenkühreigen*. The protagonist contemplates suicide at the top of the Jungfrau. He hears distant alphorn music and reflects on his desire to be freed from his mortal self and become just the pure spirit of music itself.

Fig. 1

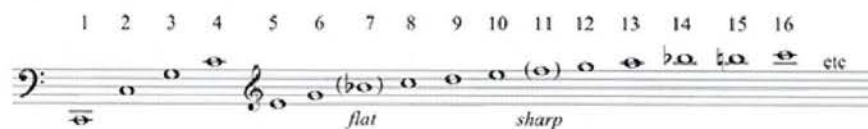


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Rossini, overture to the opera Il Guglielmo Tell, bars 176–185. The cor anglais part is on staff 7, echoed by the flute (staff 1). A drone effect is provided by horns, clarinets and bassoons.²

In Schumann's setting, Manfred's spoken musings appear against the backdrop of a lone cor anglais playing typical alphorn figures. The scene is introduced with the text: *Man hört eine Hirtenschalmel in die Ferne und später Heerdengeläute* (You can hear a herdsman's pipe in the distance and later, a herd on the move). The cor anglais is given slow phrases, then fast ones, then the slow ones return, contrasting as in a *Kühreien*. There are motifs marked *echo* and many repeating cells. The score shows how the text is declaimed while the music is played. (See Fig. 4)

Hector Berlioz (1803–1869), completed his *Symphonie fantastique*, also inspired by Goethe's *Faust*, in 1830. At the opening of the third movement, entitled *Scène aux Champs*, the cor anglais plays *Ranz des Vaches* phrases with distant answering calls provided by an offstage oboe. At the end of the movement the cor anglais phrases are heard again but receive no response: Berlioz presents the absence of the reply of another herdsman as a statement of loneliness and abandonment. In his own description of this movement in the preface to the score, he explains that he is using the sounds of the *Ranz des Vaches* at evening time: *Un soir d'été à la campagne, il entend deux pâtres qui dialoguent un Ranz des Vaches; ce duo pastoral, le lieu de la scène, le léger bruissement des arbres doucement agités par le vent (...) L'un des pâtres reprend sa naïve mélodie, l'autre ne répond plus. Le soleil se couche ...*

bruit éloigné du tonnerre ... solitude ... silence. (One summer evening in the countryside, a *Ranz des Vaches* is heard from two herdsmen; the pastoral duet, the gentle rustling of the trees gently shaken by the wind, some recent signs of hope, all combined to fill his heart with an

Fig. 4

Nº 4. Alpenkühreien.

(Man hört eine Hirtenschalmel in der Ferne und später Heerdengeläute.)

Nicht schnell.

Englisches Horn. *p* *ppp* (Echo) *ppp*

Manfred. Horch, der Tou! – Des Alpenrohrs natürli-

che Musik – denn hier ward nicht zu blosser Hirtendichtung die Patriarchenzeit – in freien Lüften vernimmt dem

Klinggeläute munterer Heerden; die Töne trinkt mein Geist. – O wär' ich doch solch sanfter le. bend'ge Stimme,

Lebhaft. *mf* *p*

athmende Harmonie, lieblose Wonne, – sterbend wie ge. boren im seligen Töne, der mich

Erstes Tempo. *mf*

zeugte! Gensenjäger. Hier entsprang die Gemse: auge -

Schumann, Manfred, Scene 4: Alpenkühreien.³

Fig. 9



Strauss, Ein Heldenleben, wind parts from rehearsal figure 99: the opening of the section reminiscent of the alphorn playing at twilight.¹¹

the number of significant instances of use of the oboe and particularly the cor anglais is fascinating. Berlioz, in his renowned treatise on instrumentation and orchestration of 1843, *Grand Traité d'Instrumentation et d'Orchestration Moderne*, gives detailed explanations of the effects and capabilities of every orchestral instrument. In the section about the cor anglais, he quotes his *Ranz des Vaches* in *Symphonie fantastique* as an example of the evocative use of the instrument in an echo passage to create a pastoral dialogue: 'Dans l'Adagio d'une de mes Symphonies, le Cor anglais, après avoir répété à l'octave Basse les phrases d'un hautbois (...) n'aurait pas le quart de leur force si elle était chantée par un autre instrument que le cor Anglais'.¹³ (In the Adagio of one of my symphonies, the cor anglais, having repeated the phrases of an oboe an octave lower, as if it were a pastoral dialogue, the voice of a youth and the response of a girl, it restates the phrases (at the end of the movement) with a soft accompaniment of four quiet timpani, and the silence of the rest of the orchestra. The feelings of absence, of being forgotten, of painful solitude which arouse in the souls of some listeners the memory of this forlorn melody, would have only a quarter of its effect if it were played on any instrument other than the cor anglais.)

Thus Berlioz told his readers that the plangent tone of the cor anglais was a particularly attractive orchestral voice for a gentle, pastoral alphorn-like melody.

The tenor voice of cor anglais has a tessitura close to that of the alphorn; the fact that it is also a relatively unusual instrument within the orchestral sound palette could lend the music a sense of being from a different world. Possibly more fundamentally though, this choice reflects that until the widespread use of a French horn with pistons or valves, a composer could not develop an alphorn motif in any harmonic sense when it was

played on an orchestral horn, without a change of instrument. Only a fully chromatic instrument could enable him to allow an alphorn motif to evolve and grow beyond the original notes. Many alphorn motifs given to an orchestral horn are just a simple statement, as we hear after Beethoven's storm in the 'Pastoral' Symphony. In all of the works quoted above, alphorn motifs are not merely presented: rather they are used as the motivic root of an organic process within an orchestral narrative. In these circumstances, the composer needs a fully chromatic instrument.

It is likely that many factors have combined to bring the cor anglais to prominence in the mind of a composer when he wished to use an alphorn motif in the orchestra, although the instrument would appear superficially not to be the most obvious choice. Nevertheless, for a significant number of mainstream composers, the preferred selection from the full range of orchestral sounds at his disposal, has indeed been the cor anglais.

Fig. 10



Strauss, Eine Alpensinfonie. Arrival at the alp (Auf der Alm), wind and cowbells parts. The beginning of the alphorn calls.¹²

- ¹ Quoted in Philip W. Martin, *Byron: A poet before his Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 111.
- ² Gioachino Rossini, *Il Guglielmo Tell* (Rome: Ratti, 1830), 19. There is an interesting anomaly in this original manuscript: despite the designation 'Corno Inglese', the part is written at concert pitch in the bass clef. Later printed scores show the part as we know it today, written in the treble clef, in F, to sound an octave higher. Some inconsistency of ties and slurs can also be seen.
- ³ Schumann, *Manfred*, 71.
- ⁴ Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique* (Paris: Schlesinger, 1845), 51.
- ⁵ Franz Liszt, *Les Préludes* (London: Eulenburg, 1997), 55.
- ⁶ Letter reproduced in Edwin Lindner, *Richard Wagner über Tristan und Isolde* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1912), 101-2.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.
- ⁸ Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde* (Leipzig: Peters, 1912), Vorwort, 6.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, Act 3, 306.
- ¹⁰ Richard Strauss, *Don Quixote* (London: Eulenburg, 1974), 53-5.
- ¹¹ Richard Strauss, *Ein Heldenleben* (London: Eulenburg, 1958), 19.
- ¹² Richard Strauss, *Eine Alpensinfonie* (London: Eulenburg, 1996), 55.
- ¹³ Hector Berlioz, *Grand Traité d'Instrumentation et d'Orchestration Modernes* (Paris: Schonenberger, 1843), 124.

