

# A day in the life of an Alp horn player.

'We have recently been asked about the possibility of a main ring appearance at Crufts. We thought it would be nice to have the accompaniment of an Alpine Horn to play us into the main arena. Would this be something you would like to do?'

As a classical orchestral horn player, happily minding my own business with a circuit of orchestras, recitals and a keen (mostly) band of students to keep me busy, this was a rather unexpected request to appear among my emails one morning at the end of last year. Admittedly I'm a dog owner, and I've occasionally even watched some of Crufts on TV, but our Bella, though we love her to bits, is a rescued mongrel, and so was her predecessor, so I've never had any contact with the clubs of individual breeds before. I was about to be invited into the select world of the magnificent Bernese and the even more rarified world of Bernese carting by Wendy Murray of the Bernese Working Cart Group.

I fell in love with the alphorn in 2004. My husband was working occasionally in Geneva and on a whim brought me back a CD of alphorn music after one of his visits. The CD contained loads of evocative traditional Swiss alphorn melodies, and also a little-known work by Mozart's father for alphorn and string orchestra. I was knocked sideways by the beauty of the sound and the music. When an opportunity came for me to perform a solo with a local orchestra a few months afterwards, I volunteered this concerto. 'Have you got an alphorn?' asked the conductor in surprise. 'No, but I'll get one,' was my response. 'Fine. You're on.' I borrowed one, taught myself to play it in two months and did my performance. I was hooked.

I was about to have a 'big' birthday and hadn't thought about what to ask for from my family. The answer seemed to come from nowhere after that concert! My new alphorn wasn't cheap, and I realised that it couldn't be just another strange thing to put in a corner and look at occasionally. It needed to be used and to earn its place in my life. 'What you need is a website, Mum,' said our younger son. He designed one for me, and it's very nice. So now I get all sort of unexpected requests, to play for Swiss weddings, parties, the launch of new flight route to Switzerland from London City Airport and another in Jersey, an Iron Age Hillfort Festival, the opening of the new Swiss Consulate in Cardiff, to give some masterclasses on it in Switzerland, experiments with the TV fun science programme Brainiac, and now something completely different again, to play at Crufts! What an exciting new world has opened up for me!

Well, the Crufts date fell through in the end. But Wendy said that if I ever wanted to come along to a Bernese carting weekend, I'd be most welcome. It sounded like a good idea to see how the dogs would respond to the sound of the alphorn before such public (and televised) exposure in fact, as cows are attracted to the sound, but in my experience, horses run away! So when Wendy told me that there was a Bernese gathering coming up at Wellington Country Park, close to Reading where we live, we came home from our holiday a day early to see what it was all about.

I was invited to come and meet the group at their Saturday evening barbecue, then if the dogs were happy about it, maybe I might play for the display on the Sunday. What an amazing experience it was. What gorgeous dogs! They all looked absolutely identical to me – all big, with the same markings, and soft and gentle and affectionate and beautiful! Wendy and Tom and the gang made me very welcome, and every dog I stroked responded to me as if it had known me all its life. I went a little way away, assembled my horn, and played a few notes. Some dogs near me instantly turned and looked intently at the source of the sound. A pair pulling a cart nearby were intrigued, and they both cocked their heads to the right in one synchronised movement to listen to the sounds emerging. Then they went on their way – just another harmless event that they accepted without any worry at all.



All was looking good for the display on the Sunday afternoon. I turned up feeling slightly overdressed in my Swiss costume, to find dogs harnessed to carts being taken round a specially designed obstacle course, others snoozing, others pottering about as their owners did the same. I talked to them all, dogs and owners, and then it was time to walk through a practice routine. I stood in the middle of the ring playing 'How Much is that Doggy in the Window' and other sort-of relevant tunes, then they decided that they wouldn't parade like that but just do what felt right on arrival! Soon Swiss outfits emerged from tents and caravans, and carts were transformed with beautiful displays of flowers,

flags, cheeses and milk churns, tinkling with cowbells, each spectacular and all completely different. It was a truly magnificent sight and sound. Some carts were pulled by one dog, some by two, and although I still couldn't work out one Bernese from the next, I did begin to pick up that some were slightly sleeker, some had marginally more white between the eyes, some sported slightly longer caramel-coloured socks, and one was called Henry.

I walked into the centre of the arena with Wendy, and after she had introduced the event to the crowds who had gathered to watch, she invited me to start playing. As soon as I began, the bells started tinkling, the harnesses clinking, the parade entered the ring and I was slowly encircled with handlers, dogs and carts in the most gorgeous sight you can imagine. I played a number of traditional Swiss alphorn melodies and the dogs were not distracted at all – they walked round their circle steadily and purposefully until, when all were arrived, they stopped in a line either side of Wendy and me. It was a magical feeling, playing the instrument I love, the music which is so evocative of the Swiss mountains, being surrounded by these adorable dogs with a magnificent display of costumes and carts in attendance.

The dogs were then invited to show off their carting skills, all requirements if working in a crowded mountain village market, like stopping and staying still on command, reversing with their carts, going either gently or fast when requested to do so, and weaving carefully zig-zag through a line of volunteer children. When the display was finished, and the delighted children had each helped themselves to a lollipop out of one of the milk churns, I was again invited to play some Swiss melodies while the dogs and tinkling carts were led away out of the display ring. Everyone agreed it was a truly wonderful sight and that the sound of the alphorn made it really special. Could I come next time?

I promised to come again when I was next free to do so. The occasion presented itself at Billingshurst and again I was welcomed most warmly by handlers and dogs alike. I was discovering that there isn't just one Bernese Mountain Dog Club: that this event was a Southern Group weekend, and that events like this happen up and down the country on many weekends every year. There is often an opportunity for Bernese owners to try their dogs in a cart harness for the first time and be taken round a specially designed obstacle course. I spoke to a number of owners who were delighted to discover that their dogs enjoyed pulling a cart when they had never done so before.



In the ring there were lots of skills and beauty competitions, but the highlight for me again was the display of the Bernese Working Cart Group – as spectacular a visual and aural experience as one could wish for. We were blessed with excellent weather too. Lots of people commented on the beautiful sound of the alphorn and the magical experience of the whole display.

I reckon that if the request to play at Crufts does materialise in the future, we'll have our act well practised by then, and an audience of millions will be able to enjoy this delightful and unique experience too.

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