

The Call of Nature: Why Do We Respond When a Composer Uses an Alphorn Motif?

by Frances Jones

In the February 2010 *Horn Call*, I explored numerous occasions on which a composer quoted an alphorn motif as an evocation of an Alpine landscape. Here, I investigate some reasons why such quotations might have been included. Why was a primarily non-Swiss, urban audience expected to understand such references, and how is it that we still do so in the 21st century?

What is it that a composer brings into the concert hall, the opera house, the church, or the drawing room by the quotation of an alphorn motif? To what heritage is he referring, and upon what basis are there grounds for an assumption that an audience will understand such a reference?

Why do we feel so reassured, for example, when we hear Beethoven's gentle horn calls at the beginning of the last movement of his "Pastoral" Symphony? How can this music convey the feeling that we can finally relax – that all is well? What lies behind his assumption that his audience will feel what he wants us to feel? Or why is it that we expect a reply to the shepherd's call at the end of the *Scène aux Champs* in Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*? Isn't it extraordinary that Berlioz can produce such a profound sense of unease, and not by what he has written, but by what he has not written? What is going on? Why do we, still today, feel these effects, and repeatedly, every time we play or hear these passages? There is something powerful at work here. Such composers are tapping into reactions deep inside our subconscious. We, the audience, are led to places of which we may barely be aware, and may indeed have no personal experience, yet the metaphors are so strong that we understand them immediately. The power of such a quotation is unspoken, but unmistakable. There are a number of factors that might lie behind this power.

The profound resonance of a horn call is not restricted to humans. There is written and visual evidence of the sophisticated use of horns for animal husbandry in Roman times. Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BC), for example, tells of training young pigs to respond to a horn call. In *De Rerum Rusticum*, three volumes that describe Roman farming methods, one section documents the handling of the sow and her new piglets with the training of the young to come to the call of the horn. Events such as the provision of food were associated with a horn call, so that the animals soon learned to recognise the sounds:

During the first ten days after delivery, the mothers go out of the sty for water and to forage for food, just in nearby parts of the farmstead so that they can come back frequently to feed their piglets. As the piglets grow they are allowed to follow the mother outside; but when they come home they are separated from the mothers and fed apart, so that they get used to the lack of the mother's milk, a point that they reach after ten days. The swineherd would train them to do everything to the sound of the horn. At first they are kept in the pen and then, when the horn sounds, the

sty is opened so that they can come out into a place where barley is spread out in a line.... The idea to have them gather at the sound of the horn is that they will not become lost when scattered in wooded country.¹

A Greek chronicler, Polybius (c.203-120 BC), in his *Histories*, describes how these calls could be used with pigs on the plains of Tuscany. Families of pigs were taught their own call so that the herdsmen, by blowing their call, could divide up the family groups to take them home at the end of a day, a task which would otherwise be impossible:

They do not follow close behind the animals but keep some distance in front of them, sounding their horn every now and then, and the animals follow behind and run together at the sound. Indeed, the complete familiarity which the animals show with the particular horn to which they belong seems at first astonishing and almost incredible. For owing to the populousness and wealth of the country, the droves of swine are exceedingly large, especially along the seacoast of the Tuscans: for one sow will bring up a thousand pigs, or sometimes even more. They drive them out from their night sties to feed, in the order determined by their litters and ages. If several droves are taken to the same place, they cannot preserve these distinctions of litters, and of course they get mixed up with each other as they are being driven out, as they feed, and as they are being brought home. Thus horn-blowing is used to separate them when they have got mixed up together, without effort or difficulty. For as they feed, one swineherd goes in one direction sounding his horn, and another in another: and thus the animals sort themselves, and follow their own horns with such eagerness that it is impossible by any means to stop or hinder them.²

The earliest known visual record of the use of the horn for herding cattle in the Alps is a first-century Roman mosaic at Boscéaz, near Orbe in Switzerland, which shows a pastoral scene including a herdsman who blows a horn to lead his cattle to pasture.

There are references to herding with horns in England too. An eighth-century English drawing shows two shepherds holding long horns. These have regular bands around: either the joints of a metal instrument, or bindings where a wooden instrument is fixed together.³ A miniature in a thirteenth century English illuminated manuscript shows a monk, with tonsure,





Fig. 165.—Shepherd's Horn. Eighth Century. (MS., British Museum.)

blowing a similarly banded horn: monasteries in Medieval England owned vast tracts of the countryside, and working with sheep provided a substantial part of monastic income.⁴ Other evidence is found in the English nursery rhyme that begins: "Little Boy Blue, come blow up your horn: the sheep's in the meadow, the cow's in the corn ..." The earliest known

printed version of this rhyme is found in *The Famous Tommy Thumb's Little Story Book* of 1760, but it was familiar before that: 150 years earlier it is parodied by Edgar in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Act 3 scene 6), written around 1604. Edgar (sings):

Sleepest or wakest
thou, jolly shepherd?
Thy sheep be in the corn,
And for one blast of thy minikin mouth
Thy sheep will take no harm.



Documentation is found at the Deutsches Hirtenmuseum (German Museum of Herding) in Hersbruck in central Germany, where texts and film archive describe the scene whereby a herdsman would gather the villagers' cattle daily by blowing a long horn, in order to lead them to pastureland outside the village.

Until the 1960s, the cowherd was employed by the local council. In the 1920s he was paid 26 marks a year, which meant that he was very poor indeed. In the alpine regions the cows stayed on the pastures for the whole summer. Here in the lowlands, the herdsman drove the cows to the pastures every morning and brought them back in the evening.... Typical for the region around Hersbruck is the so-called "Franconian Longhorn." This instrument is made of juniper. The shaft is hollowed out and wrapped with cherry tree bark. Every herdsman played his own tune with which he called the herd together in the mornings. The cows recognised the call and ran out of their stalls to gather on the square.

In the museum is this photograph, which depicts a herdsman blowing a "longhorn."

In the Baroque and Classical periods, mainstream composers generally only included rustic horn music in a descriptive context for the representation of hunting scenes. There is, however, a fascinating and little-known



pool of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century compositions that actually used herdsman's horns. It emanates from the lowlands of what is now the Czech Republic. The instrument was known there as the pastoral trumpet, or *tuba pastoralis*, and the genre in which it was used was the *Pastorella*, a cantata composed for use in church at Christmas, often during midnight Mass on Christmas night. Around 100 *Pastorellas* feature parts for the *tuba pastoralis* alongside more conventional instruments and voices: they recreate the story of the nativity, with the *tuba pastoralis* generally used in the scenes that concern the shepherds. The genre was able to flourish because musical literacy was widespread in this region by this time. The works were typically composed by the village pastor, cantor, organist, or schoolmaster – in many cases the same person held these positions. The works provide unique samples of herdsman's motifs from this period and reflect the fundamental importance of the herdsman and his horn to his animals, his landscape and his village. A painting from 1835 shows a Czech herdsman with a horn.⁵



Elsewhere, the music of the herdsman's horn had had little impact on classical repertoire before the turn of the nineteenth century. There was also scant familiarity outside the Alps of the use of the horn for herding there. Swiss writers describe their instruments: in 1767 Moritz Anton Capeler wrote of the alphorns used on Mount Pilatus, above Lucerne. They were between four and twelve feet in length.



He explains how the alpenhorn was made, its sound, and the style of music that it played. Capeler includes both a sketch of an alpenhorn and some alpenhorn music.

The alp-horn, as it is generally known, is a long tube made entirely of wood, the length varying between 4 and 12 feet: the curve follows the exact shape of a geometric cissoidal curve: from the bottom opening of 3 to 5 fingers wide it gradually becomes narrower so that where the mouth is placed there is an opening of 1½ thumb widths, internally it is jointed, with long thin lengths, and for its whole length it is tightly bound together externally with flexible twigs: and so that there are no gaps to let air out it is covered all over with pitch and wax. It gives a very deep, penetrating sound which, though not too powerful close by, can be heard a long distance away, and in order to give all information, I add that it is used for calling by the herdsman...⁶

From the late eighteenth century, the use of herdsman's horns in the Alps was becoming gradually more familiar, for a

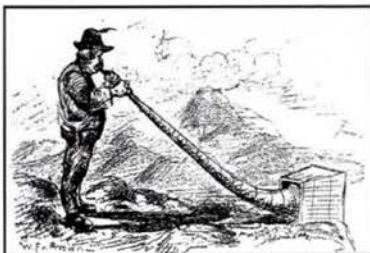


The Call of Nature

number of reasons. Young northern-European aristocrats spent months, or even years, in exploration of the Classical heritage of Italy and the culture of other major European centres on a Grand Tour. Initially the Alps were a feared barrier but, inevitably, Switzerland was gradually becoming better known. In addition, as the industrial revolution took hold, a new middle class was emerging with wealth that was not dependent upon heredity or noble birth. A successful entrepreneur was increasingly able to achieve financial independence and enjoy the benefits that this could bring. A new type of gentleman, educated and with time on his hands, was becoming interested in exploring the world around him. Travel across Europe was also substantially improved from the beginning of the nineteenth century with developments in road and rail transport. The concept of tourism was born.

There was now an opportunity for a visit to the Alps where one could come across the sound of the alphorn played by herdsmen during their daily routines in the mountains. Switzerland began active promotion of its assets. It noticed the delight engendered by an encounter with an alphorn, and soon players were stationed at the top of funicular railways and in prime tourist locations, to create an unforgettable atmosphere that would complement, and soon become associated with, stunning mountain views.⁷ The use of the instrument as a symbol of Switzerland since the nineteenth century on countless postcards, chocolate boxes, and Swiss products is still very much in evidence today.

Composers who visited the Alps wrote eloquently about the effect of hearing an alphorn, both that of the herdsmen and that played to visitors. In 1797 Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755-1824) wrote in a letter of the magical effect of the music and its setting:



I was walking alone, towards the end of the day... I descended the valleys and traversed the heights. At length chance brought me to a valley, which, on arousing from my waking dream, I discovered to be full of delight. It reminded me of one of those wonderful retreats so beautifully described by Gesner: flowers, meadows, small streams, all united to form a picture of perfect harmony. There, without being tired, I sat against a rock ... While thus sitting, wrapped in this slumber of the soul, sounds broke upon my ear which were sometimes hurried, sometimes prolonged and sustained, and which were softly repeated by the echoes around. I found they came from a mountain-horn, and their effect was heightened by a plaintive female voice.... and a procession of cows was descending calmly down the mountain. Struck as if by enchantment, I started from my reverie, listened with breathless attention, and learnt, or rather engraved upon my memory, the *Ranz des Vaches* which I enclose ... in order to understand all its beauties, you ought to be

transported to the scene in which I heard it, and to feel all the excitement that such a moment inspired.⁸

At the age of 13, Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) spent two nights with his family on the Rigi mountain above Lucerne. His mother, Lea, wrote in a letter:

... we enjoyed the most beautiful sunset in this heavenly region; only the southern mountains continued to be veiled. To wake up on Rigikulm on a lovely morning is striking and highly moving. An hour before sunrise, when the heaven is clear, the alphorn sounds, rousing all the residents of the house with its sharp, piercing tone. Now amid the darkness stirs the liveliest bustle in the narrow quarters ...⁹

Mendelssohn returned to the summit of the Rigi in August 1831 and wrote of the cheerful alphorn, the magnificent views and his happy memories of his previous visit with his family.

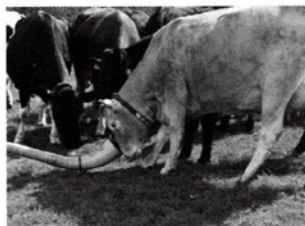
The educated classes were able to read about the travels of others in published material. Descriptions of experiences in the mountains, frequently including references to the alphorn, began to appear in articles, newspapers, published diaries, poems, and novels. Guidebooks began to be written. The firm of Karl Baedeker first produced a guide to Switzerland in 1844; the first version in English appeared in 1863. This includes a description of the sounds of the alphorn in the Grindelwald valley in the heart of the Alps: "The alphorn (an instrument from 6ft to 8ft in length, of bark or wood) is often sounded.... while tourists are passing. Its simple notes are re-echoed a few seconds later from the precipices of the Wetterhorn, the effect of which is extremely pleasing."¹⁰

The changes in European social structure brought both positive and negative effects. The rapid growth of cities in the wake of industrialisation brought the potential for affluence; however for an increasing proportion of the European population, individuals had less and less contact in their daily lives with the natural world. The newly emerging middle classes might now have disposable income, but they often lived in a dirty, noisy, or pressured urban environment. They could, however, go to a concert or the theatre, and the writer, the actor, the painter, and the composer increasingly sought to bring the flavour of the natural world into the urban environment. The arts could now play a major part in city life and of all forms of art – music was considered pre-eminent in this endeavour. The Alps provided a backdrop for narratives set in an alternative place, which could carry the implication of simple beauty or other-worldliness, or have overtones of independence and freedom, which resonated deeply with those at the mercy of changing political forces.

Audience awareness has evolved and changed. Those of the eighteenth century may have been familiar with the use of the horn by a local herdsman. We read that Beethoven enjoyed long walks in the country – it is possible that many nineteenth-century town and city dwellers similarly refreshed themselves with country walks and may have come across the local herdsmen with their horns. As the century progressed, an urban audience might have read about or even visited the Alps.

Contemporary audiences are more aware of the alphorn through the media, through tourist paraphernalia, or from vis-

its to the Alps ourselves. More fundamentally, though, a cow is invariably bewitched by a gentle call on an alphorn. Perhaps we, in the end, merely respond in the same way.



Dr. Frances Jones is a freelance horn player and oboist who is also Britain's leading authority on the alphorn. She performs, teaches, and gives masterclasses on the alphorn around the world. She recently completed her PhD at the University of Hull, UK, entitled The Alphorn in Western Art Music: a Cultural and Historical Study, which explores many ideas relating to the topics outlined above. Contact is welcomed, through her website, www.AmazingAlphorn.com.

Notes

¹Marcus Terentius Varro, *De Rerum Rusticum* (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1934), 2:364 5. All translations are by the author.
²Polybius, *Histories*, trans. Evelyn Shuckburgh (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1927), 12:313-4.
³British Museum.
⁴Illumination of the letter E, beginning of Psalm 97, English, early 13th century: Psalter with Canticles, British Library BL ms. Harley 5102.
⁵Adrian Ludwig Richter: *Der Schreckstein bei Aussig* (now Ústí nad Labem, Czech Republic). Detail.
⁶Capeler, Moritz. *Pilati Montis Historia*. Basel: Rodolphi, 1767.
⁷Illustration in Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880), 296.
⁸Manuscript in the Collection of papers of or relating to Giovanni Battista Viotti, Royal College of Music Library, London, ms. 41 18, 26 June 1792.
⁹Quoted in R. Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99.
¹⁰Karl Baedeker, *Switzerland, with neighbouring Lakes of Northern Italy, Savoy, and the adjacent districts of Piedmont, Lombardy and the Tyrol. Handbook for Travellers* (Koblenz: Baedeker, 1863), 81.

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