

Feature: The Alphorn and the Arts

Her work has been hailed as 'a distinguished contribution to musicology', with comments that 'the music history books must now treat the alphorn as a significant contributor to the composer's musical language.' Frances Jones, the UK's only professional alphorn player has been presented with the award of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Hull for her thesis 'The Alphorn in Western Art Music'. The influence on the composer of the hunting horn or the military bugle is familiar in composed repertoire. The alphorn as a source of inspiration has until now been dismissed. As a classical musician who has been championing the alphorn for the past ten years, Frances set out to discover how Switzerland's national instrument has influenced classical composers and the Arts over the centuries.

Many composers heard the alphorn for the first time on their travels to Switzerland, either being played to cows in the mountains or to tourists at the top of funicular railways. The impression left, as recorded by a number of composers and other visitors, was described as 'haunting' and 'unforgettable'.

Johannes Brahms, for example, was fond of taking walking holidays in the Bernese Oberland with his father. On 12 September 1868 he jotted down an alphorn melody that he heard at the foot of the Jungfrau. He sent the music to Clara Schumann, with the text: 'Also blut das Alphorn Heut: Hoch auf'm Berg, Tief in Tal, gruess ich dich viel Tausandmal!' (Thus the alphorn played today: from high in the mountains and deep in the valley, I send you many thousand greetings.) Twelve years later, he used the melody as the main theme of the final movement of his Symphony No 1.

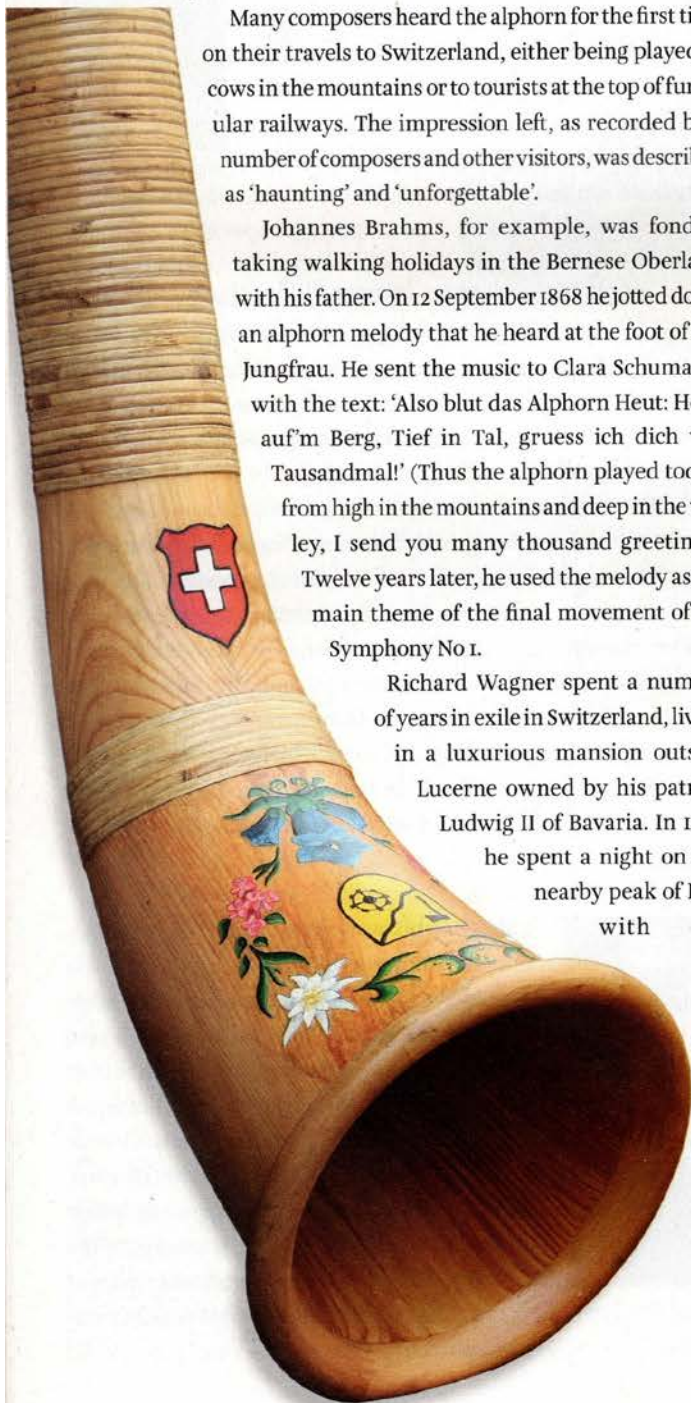
Richard Wagner spent a number of years in exile in Switzerland, living in a luxurious mansion outside Lucerne owned by his patron, Ludwig II of Bavaria. In 1858 he spent a night on the nearby peak of Rigi with the

intention of witnessing the magnificent sunrise over the surrounding peaks the following morning. The guests were roused early by a call on an alphorn, however on this occasion it was raining, so Wagner stayed in bed. He wrote later that the alphorn call went round and round in his head and developed into the extensive shepherd's horn call that opens Act III of his opera *Tristan und Isolde*.

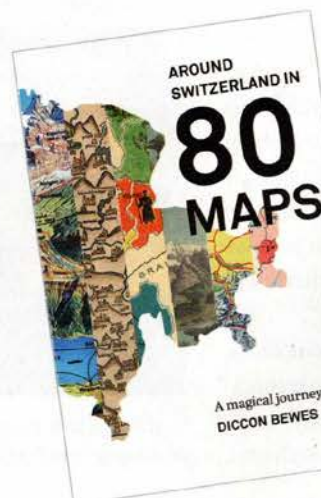
Other composers who quoted alphorn music in their compositions include Beethoven, Strauss, Mahler, Liszt and Mendelssohn.

It was not only composers, but also poets and painters who fell under the spell of the alphorn, a response that Swiss tourism encouraged – and it worked. References to the alphorn can be found in the poetry of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, and there are dozens of nineteenth-century paintings that show an alphorn in the midst of a picturesque mountain landscape. Swiss postcards have featured the alphorn since the end of the nineteenth century.

FRANCES JONES



Brahms score
Symphony No. 1 & the
alphorn on Rigi



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Congratulations to Hannes Gysin whose name was the first out of the bag.

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