

THE ALPHORN: REVIVAL OF AN ANCIENT INSTRUMENT

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The evolution of the horn

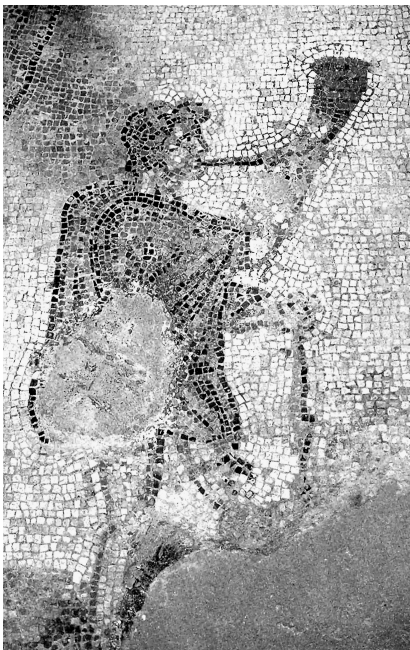
The alphorn of the present day is the product of just one thread of evolution in the vast and varied world of horns. The concept of blowing something hollow in order to produce sounds is ancient and widespread: most hollow shells, bones or horns can produce one or maybe two different notes.

Caribbean, African and Indian coastal regions have long traditions of blowing conch shells, a haunting sound used in voodoo ritual; short trumpets made from human bone are found in tribal Latin America and in the Himalayas, and the sounding of a note or two on an animal horn has had many functions throughout history and across the world. The Old Testament refers to instruments with which Joshua is said to have brought down the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6:1-16): these were *shofarim* or rams' horns, still used in Jewish rituals today.



*Ex.1. A Jewish rabbi plays a shofar.
Photo: Palphot, Jerusalem.*

A Roman mosaic dating from the 1st century at Boscéaz, near Orbe in Switzerland, shows a pastoral scene including a herdsman blowing a horn:



Ex.2. Herdsman playing a horn in one of a series of rural scenes depicted in the Roman mosaics at Boscéaz. Photo: Frances Jones.

A similar use for horns is referred to in the English nursery rhyme which begins

*Little Boy Blue, come blow up your horn:
The sheep's in the meadow, the cow's in the corn...*

This rhyme was familiar in Shakespeare's time: it is alluded to by Edgar in *King Lear* (Act 3 scene 6), written around 1604.² In medieval England, a horn was sometimes included in a deed conferring land. A charter of 830 records a gift by Ulphus the Dane of revenues and an ivory horn to York Minster; the Pusey Horn was given to William Picote by King Knut (1016-36), together with land around the village of Pusey in Oxfordshire.

A number of English towns, including Dover, Folkstone and Canterbury, preserve traditions of a burgh-mote horn: this was used to summon townsfolk to meetings of the borough court, held three times a year. There are records of horns being used to make proclamations, and night-watchmen also blew horns: Saffron Walden in Essex possesses an ancient watchman's horn, and the Wakeman's Horn in Ripon is still used today to sound the nightly 9 o'clock curfew, a thousand-year-old tradition.³ The same tradition is found on mainland Europe: Richard Wagner specifies that a *Stierhorn* (bull's horn) be played by the night-watchman in his opera *Die Meistersinger*. The sound of the chamois horn (*Gemshorn* in German) is still familiar as an organ stop today.

Instruments replicating the length and the conical, curved shape of the natural horn have been made from a variety of other substances too: wood and wound bark, metal, glass and pottery, or combinations of materials.

The search for melody

The shift from creating basic sounds by blowing hollow objects towards making instruments capable of producing full melodies occurred in two different ways. The size of an instrument's resonating space could be altered by opening or closing holes with the fingers to create different notes, as we find on a simple flute or ocarina. These instruments remained quite small, within the span of a hand, until the invention of keys. A natural horn, because of its dimensions, does not produce a pleasant sound when its resonating length is shortened in this way. If the horn is lengthened, however, it can produce a number of different notes using the harmonic series, while retaining a fixed resonating space. To fill the gaps in the series, this method of playing was later extended by the invention of instruments whose length could be altered too, as we find with a trombone or a valved brass instrument.

The first long tubular instruments were made from sheet metal, and it was easiest to make them straight and cylindrical, giving a parallel bore. Bearing little resemblance to the shape of a natural horn, this group acquired the name of trumpets, from the Old Norse *trumpa*, possibly an onomatopoeic word. Some were left straight; others were folded like a modern trumpet to facilitate transportation, and often a flared bell was added to improve the instrument's acoustic properties. Two long straight trumpets, one bronze and one silver, were found in the tomb of Tutankhamun (1350 BC)⁴, and two thousand years ago, the Celts in Europe terrified Roman armies with the *carnyx*, a parallel-bore trumpet about 5ft long played vertically upwards, with a replica of a boar's head forming a bell.⁵ Many centuries later, the much more civilised English ale-yard was created: a straight, yard-long glass tube designed for drinking ale which, by removing a stopper, could sometimes be a sounding trumpet too. Straight metal parallel-bore trumpets up to 10ft in length are still found in many countries, particularly in Tibet and other countries of the Himalayan region.

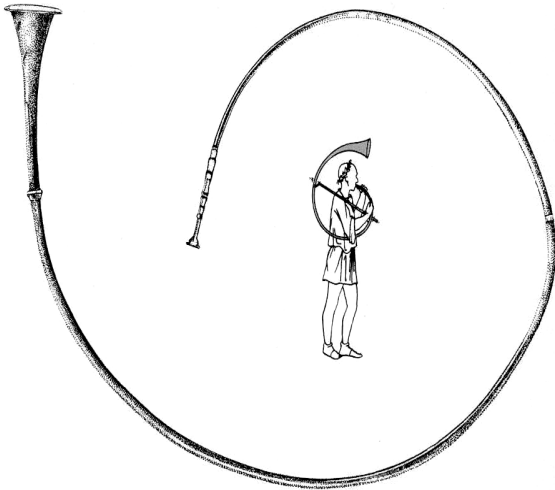
Gradually, long horn-shaped metal instruments also appeared. Today, a distinction is made between trumpets, which have a parallel bore and are made straight (although they are sometimes folded), and horn-shaped instruments, which have a conical bore and are curved. A conical tube produces the same range of harmonics as one with a parallel bore, but makes a richer, more resonant sound. Differing requirements began to dictate which type of instrument was most appropriate.

Within the horn family, instruments were selected for different situations too. Sounding the hours during the night required a relatively quiet sound, and did not need many notes, so a simple animal horn was used; warriors needed something louder, so metal instruments were chosen, with a specific repertoire of short rhythmic fanfare calls to convey signals. Huntsmen could communicate complex messages to each other by using more notes, and therefore used either mid-length bugles or long, coiled horns which could be worn over the shoulder while riding.

Two sophisticated early cultures made long horn-shaped metal instruments: the Bronze Age peoples of northern Europe, and the Romans. In Scandinavia, Denmark and North Germany, excavations have uncovered more than fifty examples of an ancient instrument known as the *lur*. These were made in sections, 6 to 9ft long, in a complex curved shape, ending with a flat disc. Some specimens are thought to be 3000 years old, and many have been found in mirror-image pairs. It is not known how the instruments were used.⁶



Ex.3 A *lur*, made of bronze.
Danmarks Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen.⁷



The Romans used metal horns and trumpets of various lengths. Both were taken into war, the cylindrical-bore trumpets making a brighter, more piercing sound. The Romans referred to any musical tube as *tuba*. Animal horns or horn-like instruments were also called *cornu*; longer metal horn-shaped instruments for ceremonial use, 2-3ft long, were named *litu* (from the Latin *litare*, 'to sacrifice'), and the long horn bent round to encircle the player was known as *buccina*, from the Latin *buccae* meaning 'puffed out cheeks'. The modern word bugle derives from this source.

Ex.4. Roman buccina, one of five found in Pompeii, 9ft long. It was held with a wooden bar on the shoulder. Museo Nazionale, Naples.⁸

Long metal conical instruments began to appear throughout Europe in straight form as posthorns, folded as bugles, or coiled as hunting horns. In the Alps, long horns were made of wood, the natural shape of a tapering tree giving a conical bore, and thus creating a rich, warm sound. A curve at the broad end projected the sound outwards when the instrument rested on the ground.

Ex.6. Trees on mountain slopes naturally grow in the shape required for a typical long alphorn. Photo: Simon Jones.

In early literature, various names were used for these wooden horns, versions of *tuba Alpina*, *cornu pastorica* or *Hirtenhorn* (herdsman's horn) appearing interchangeably. Modern Swiss terminology for the different sizes echoes the Latin descriptions: the short horn is called a *litu*, the mid-length a *büchel* (this generally has a folded form like a fanfare trumpet), and the long horn is the *cornu alpina*, *cor des alpes*, *Alpenhorn* or alphorn. This is traditionally made from a suitably shaped fir or pine tree, halved longitudinally and gouged out, then bound back together with strips of bark or flexible shoots.



Ex.7. An old French postcard showing a tree being sawn to make an alphorn.

Functions of the alphorn

Liti, *bücheln* and alphorns each had their own uses and repertoire. The shorter horns played rhythmic fanfares, while the *bücheln* and alphorns were able to produce full melodies.

*Ex.8. A modern Swiss büchel: like the alphorn, this too has a binding of bark.*⁹

The longest alphorns developed a unique role because of their lower sound and deeper resonance: it was found that cows were attracted to the sound of the alphorn and that its deep timbre soothed and reassured them. It was also found that the longer the horn, the further the sound would carry. A long alphorn can be heard up to six miles away. It therefore acquired three specific functions: to call the cows, to calm them and to communicate across large distances.

In 1030, the monk Ekkehard IV, a prolific writer and theorist from the monastery of St Gallen in eastern Switzerland, wrote a description of herdsmen in the mountains playing music on alphorns to their cows.¹⁰ The earliest known printed alphorn music is



Der Appenzeller Kureyen. LXXXIII.

is a tune from the Swiss valley of Appenzell quoted in Georg Rhaw's collection of music *Bicinia Gallica, Latina, Germanica et Quaedam Fugae*, published in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1545.

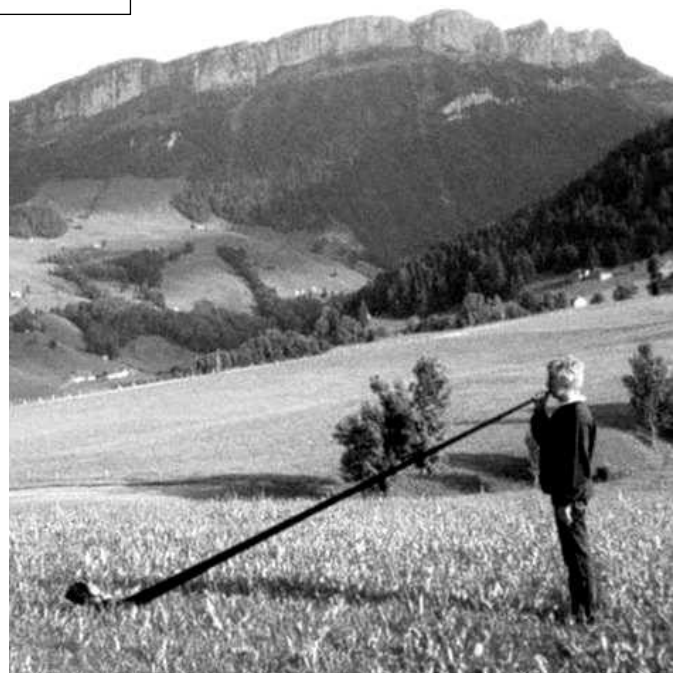
*Ex.8. Opening section of an alphorn melody from Rhaw's Bicinia Gallica, Latina, Germanica et Quaedam Fugae, Inferior Vox, 1545.*¹¹



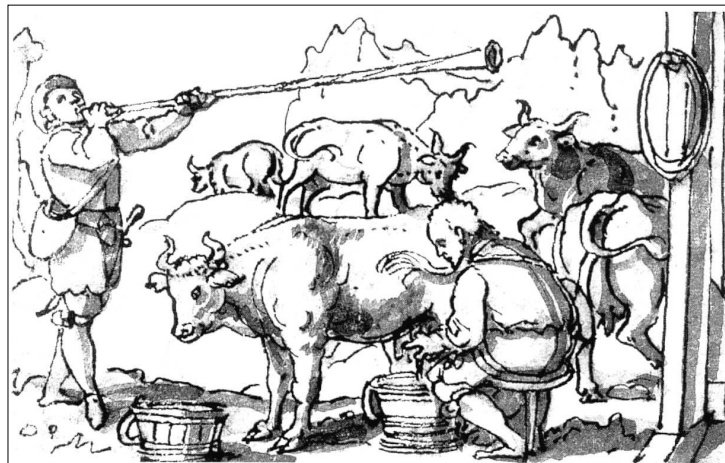
Ex.9. The author playing the Appenzell melody in Appenzell, Switzerland. Photo: Sue Barlow.

In 1550 there was a performance in Bern of a play by Hans Rüte entitled *Goliath*, in which the script specified that a melody be played on an alphorn.¹² In 1555, the Zürich naturalist Conrad Gesner wrote one of the first detailed descriptions of the Alps, a volume entitled *Commentariolus de raris et admirandis herbis*. In it he described a scene on Mount Pilatus, above Lucerne, where he came across a herdsman in a cow byre high on the mountain playing 'an alpine horn, 11ft long, made from two slightly curved pieces of wood, hollowed and bound together with willow shoots'.¹³

Herdsman played melodies on the alphorn to



soothe the cattle while grazing and milking, or during stormy weather: playing was an essential part of their work. Even Renaissance royalty sought their skills. In 1563 Prince Léonor of Orléans wrote to the Governor of Neuchâtel to ask for a Swiss alphorn player to work for him. The Governor's reply is preserved in the Neuchâtel Cantonal



Archive: 'Sir, further to your request I have found you a horn player from Schwyz... You can get him to play songs on his horn, and other little soothing sounds, which he is used to playing to his cows to help them digest well.'¹⁴

*Ex.10. Playing to the cows during milking, by Daniel Lindtmayer, 1601.*¹⁵

During the winter months, however, the herdsmen were often unemployed. They wandered the streets of towns, and were regarded as beggars. In 1527 the accounts of the monastery of St Urban in the canton of Lucerne record the gift of two coins to a strolling alphorn player from the canton of Valais.¹⁶ Michael Praetorius in his music encyclopedia *Syntagma Musicum* (1619) described the long wooden horns bound with bark with which Swiss herdsmen used to wander about the cities in search of food.¹⁷

Alphorn repertoire

Traditional Swiss alphorn melodies are known as *Kühreien*, or *Ranz des Vaches* (literally 'processions of cows'). Each year in June the villagers' cattle would be collected together and the herdsman would lead them, by playing his alphorn, up to the high mountain pastures to graze through the summer. In 1767 the scientist Moritz Anton Capeler described the *Kühreien* in another book about Pilatus, entitled *Pilatus Montis Historia*. He included a sketch of an alphorn and notated a section of a melody, with the following description: 'No.6 is in a completely different style, because this has a true melody. It is usually played on a large horn, called an alphorn, in the mountains around the Pilatusberg. This alphorn is from 4 to 12ft long and gives a very deep, penetrating sound, which calms the cows in the processions' (see exx.11 and 12).



*Ex.11. Alphorn and melody reproduced in Capeler's Pilatus Montis Historia, 1767.*¹⁸

Every valley had its own traditional melodies, which each herdsman learnt by ear from his predecessors. The *Kühreien* melodies were of necessity long, and consisted of many sections which varied in metre and style, with much improvisation too. The length of a phrase was dictated by reasonable breathing, each one generally finishing with a paused note. Often the player either repeated a passage as an echo, or left a space for a natural echo to rebound off a distant mountainside. Many of the same melodic shapes also appear in songs, since people walking with their cattle would sing along too. Intervals found in Swiss yodel tunes typically follow patterns dictated by the limited notes which an alphorn can produce.



Ex.12. Alphorn player leading a Kühreien to the high pastures; the text beneath is a prayer for his safe-keeping. Abraham Kyburtz, Bern, 1754.¹⁹

Because the sound of the alphorn can carry over a great distance, it was used by the herdsmen to communicate both with each other and from up on the alp (a high grassy plateau) to the people in the villages below. The alphorn was played each evening at sunset to let the people in the village know that all was well, and it was sometimes also used instead of bells to summon the faithful to church on Sundays.

It was not uncommon for 'rustic' music and instruments to be used in 'art' music too. The genre was enjoyed for its own sake as an enrichment of musical language; it was also used to depict pastoral scenes, in particular at Christmas in the Catholic Church. From the 17th century, instrumental *pastorelli* became a common feature of Christmas celebrations, and a significant collection of these works comes from Moravia, notably composed by Heinrich Biber (1644-1704) and Gottfried Finger (c1655-1730).²⁰ The *pastorelli* told the story of the nativity in music, and in order that a congregation could follow a narrative in a purely instrumental work, the musical material was drawn from familiar local sources.

Features of the *pastorella* include herdsmen calling to each other on their horns before hurrying to Bethlehem, a reference to animals and birds, such as the nightingale or cuckoo, coming to worship the baby, and people bringing their offerings, represented by local folk tunes and sometimes folk instruments. Mary soothes the infant Jesus with a lullaby, commonly one found in the secular repertoire, while Joseph and the visitors celebrate Christ's birth. Gradually over the century that followed, the Christmas *pastorella* spread through many of the Catholic regions of central Europe, and composers from different areas began to write their own nativity *pastorelli* too. Instrumentation varied from solo keyboard to trio sonatas, recorder consorts, string groups or mixed ensembles. A number of these works specify the use of *bücheln*, *hirtenhörner* or *tubae pastoritia*.

Leopold Mozart and the alphorn

Gottfried Finger's employer, the Bishop of Olomouc in Moravia, was well known to the Prince Archbishop of Salzburg, whose resident composer was Leopold Mozart (1719-87). Leopold Mozart used a number of folk instruments in his compositions, including a hurdy-gurdy, a dulcimer and a set of bagpipes, and in 1755, during the winter in which his son Wolfgang was born, Leopold Mozart wrote at least two Christmas *pastorelli* with parts for alphorn. One was scored for two flutes, alphorn and strings: on 15 December 1755 he wrote the following to the Augsburg publisher, Johann Lotter.

*'Monsieur Gignox wants a couple of new Pastorell Sinfonies? He seems to think that it's as easy to produce them as it is to put bread on the table, but there's no way I have time to compose them. He must know this because he accused me of not even having enough time to read a letter he sent me. But you know, I do have a brand new Pastorell Sinfonie, but I'm telling you I don't want to give it to him. I had intended to send it to Wallerstein along with some other works. It is a really good piece. It's for obbligato herdsman's horn and two flutes. Shall I send this then? OK, I'll send it in the next post, but above all, please don't tell anyone, otherwise Wagner will get to hear about it and will certainly gossip about it to Rehling. You know my circumstances.'*²¹

Unfortunately no manuscript of a work with this instrumentation has been found. A second work, however, has survived: a *Sinfonia Pastorella*, scored for alphorn and strings. It had by now become customary to use a specific set of Czech folk melodies in a *pastorella*, although the regional music used in these *pastorelli* was so localized that its intended effect would have been lost on a foreign audience.²² Leopold Mozart's *Sinfonia Pastorella*, however, is an interesting example of the next step in the evolution of this genre: melodies which had been chosen because they were songs familiar to Czech congregations became known in other regions as music which represented the Christmas story.

Leopold Mozart's *Sinfonia Pastorella* is a typical Moravian Christmas *pastorella*, with its musical material derived almost entirely from the Czech folk repertoire. Its three sections reflect the three principal elements of the *pastorella*, and Leopold's choice of instrumentation is pertinent. The first movement consists of thematic material, played here by the strings, from Slovak folk songs used in the *pastorelli* of Olomouc, interspersed with traditional alphorn calls summoning the herdsmen to Bethlehem.

Mary's gentle lullaby to the baby Jesus forms a middle movement: the two melodic components used here are both found in the *pastorelli* of Finger and others. One of these is a secular Czech lullaby with the words *hajej můj synáčko* ('hush my little son'). The use of these melodies to represent the Christmas story was recognised in other parts of Europe at that time too: the same lullaby is the basis of the instrumental *Pastoral Symphony* signalling the nativity in Handel's *Messiah*, written fourteen years earlier in Dublin. Like Handel, Leopold Mozart scored this movement in his *Sinfonia Pastorella* for strings alone, since the loud alphorn had no place in this section, nor was it able to play all the notes of the lullaby melodies. The alphorn returns in the 3rd movement, where a joyous Czech Christmas song about Joseph is used as a recurring Rondo theme. Its melody resembles a horn call and is commonly used in other Christmas *pastorelli*:

The image shows a musical score for an anonymous *Pastorella*. It consists of two systems of music. Each system has three staves: a vocal line (treble clef), a second vocal line (treble clef), and a bass line (bass clef). The time signature is 3/4 and the key signature has one sharp (F#). The lyrics are written below the vocal lines. The first system has lyrics: "Jo - seph ad - sta - bit cu - nas a - gi - ta - bit coe -". The second system has lyrics: "lum ar - ri - de - bit sol fri - gas ar - ce - bit". The music is in a simple, folk-like style with a mix of quarter and half notes.

*Ex.13a. Extract from an anonymous Pastorella, (F.L.) Lowicz, Moravia (1699) PL Wtm XVII.II, bars 30-37. Its text is translated: Joseph will stand by and rock the cradle, heaven will smile and the sun will banish the coldness.*²³

Ex.13b. Leopold Mozart *Sinfonia Pastorella* for Alphorn and Strings, 3rd movement, bars 66-73.²⁴ The alphorn is in G, with the part written here at sounding pitch. Edition: Frances Jones.

Three other elements in Leopold Mozart's *Sinfonia Pastorella* deserve attention. The first movement opens with a rhythmic *tutti* for strings, but when the alphorn player begins, the strings play long held notes until the soloist stops, at which point the metric string-playing continues. This style of accompaniment occurs through much of the work: it might be an evocation of a peaceful pastoral landscape as the shepherds watch their sheep before hurrying to Bethlehem, depicted in the first movement, (see ex.14) and the serenity of the stable in the third (ex.13b), or it is possible that the alphorn player was unused to performing with others, and this was a way to accommodate a purely technical hurdle in performance. It is a style also used by other composers such as Vivaldi when they wrote for players of folk instruments.

Ex.14. L. Mozart *Sinfonia Pastorella*, 1st movement, bars 5-13. Edition: Frances Jones.

A second point of interest is Leopold Mozart's choice of key for the alphorn. By the 18th century the length, and therefore the pitch, of the long alphorn appears to have become standardised. A common description was that it should be 'the length of two men',²⁵ and apart from the constraints of the natural length of a tree, it was found that an instrument 11ft long produces the most resonant sound. This gives a fundamental, or lowest note, of G flat, which is the key of most alphorns today. However, because of the gradual rise of standard pitch over the last few centuries, this sound in Leopold Mozart's day in Salzburg was referred to as G, which is therefore the specified key of the accompanying string parts of

parts of this *Sinfonia Pastorella*. With G at modern pitch, the work can no longer be played on a traditional instrument, and some compromise has to be made, therefore, when performing the piece today.

A third noteworthy feature of the work is the manner in which Leopold captured the spirit of the alphorn: besides using traditional alphorn calls in the 1st movement, he used echo effects, and another characteristic sound, the ‘alphorn *fa*’. This is one of the notes which it is possible to play on a narrow tube, but which is rarely used in classical music. Any tube produces a specific pattern of notes, called the harmonic series: the longer the tube, the more of these sounds are playable. They occur at the following distances apart (for simplicity of notation, the harmonics for a 16ft tube, which has a fundamental note of C, are shown):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

8ve...'

* ‘alphorn *fa*’

then chromatic

*Ex.15. The Harmonic Series. The 7th harmonic sounds slightly lower than written here; the 11th (the ‘alphorn *fa*’) is about a quarter-tone higher.*

These notes are the basis of early temperament, although two of them are avoided in classical music: harmonic no.7 which is considered to be unpleasantly flat, and no.11 which falls between two notes in standard use. When composing for trumpets and horns, these two harmonics are normally avoided. All the harmonics from about no.3 to no.14, however, are used in alphorn music, including these two ‘odd’ notes: when playing to cows, or on a high mountain alone, or even with other alphorns, they cause no problem. Thus, to classically-attuned ears, the presence of these unusual notes in alphorn music creates a haunting, other-worldly effect.

Referring to the fundamental, or first harmonic, as *doh*, the note produced at the 11th harmonic falls above the normal note used in classical music for *fa*, and in alphorn repertoire, this note is now referred to as the ‘alphorn *fa*’. Rather than avoid it in his *Sinfonia Pastorella*, in the 3rd movement Leopold wrote a passage for the alphorn which contains the ‘alphorn *fa*’, as a conscious reference to the world of alphorn music. In the orchestral passage that follows, the strings repeatedly mimic the ‘strange’ note, adjusting it both upwards and downwards for maximum effect:

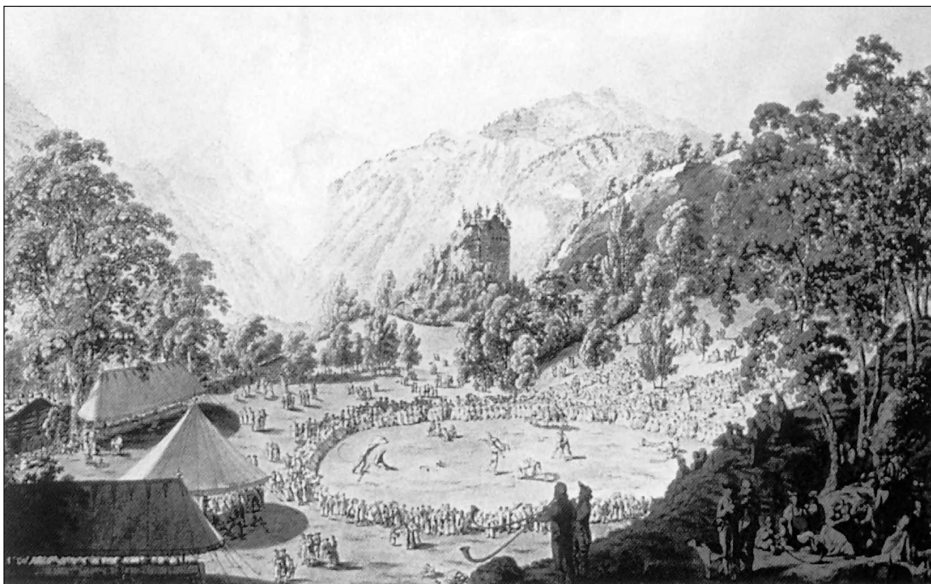
*Ex.16. L Mozart Sinfonia Pastorella, 3rd movement, bars 96-104. The unusual ‘alphorn *fa*’ (marked *x*) is imitated by the orchestra with two different notes at *y* and *z*. Edition: Frances Jones.*

The alphorn: national symbol of Switzerland

The sound of the alphorn had become deeply rooted in the Swiss psyche, and it inspired national fervour. In 1653 during a peasant uprising in the Entlebuch region, people were summoned to fight with the sound of an alphorn.²⁶ In 1710, the German physician and medical writer Theodor Zwinger wrote in his *Dissertationem Medicarum Selectorum* a detailed account of the illness of *pothopatrídaecia* (homesickness), a serious condition which, he wrote, could cause death in severe cases. Zwinger observed that Swiss people working in foreign lands could be overcome by this condition when hearing a *Kühreien*. He printed a version of the *Kühreien* melody from Appenzell, so that the reader could judge whether the tune itself had peculiar properties or whether its power lay purely in the minds of those for whom it had special associations.²⁷ The phenomenon was also described by the Swiss writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Dictionnaire de Musique* (1767), who reported that when Swiss mercenaries were employed in other countries, it was forbidden on pain of death to play the alphorn among the troops because it caused those who heard it to burst into tears, to desert or die, so much did it arouse in them a longing to see their country again.²⁸

Yet the alphorn itself had fallen on hard times in Switzerland. John Calvin (1509-64) was forced to flee from Paris because of his radical Protestant teachings, and was given sanctuary in Geneva. His doctrines took root in many parts of Switzerland, supplanting the Roman Catholic faith. One of Calvin's beliefs was that instrumental music was the work of the devil, and instruments were destroyed, with severe penalties imposed on people who continued to play them. Church organs were dismantled and their pipes melted down.²⁹ Around two-thirds of Switzerland became Calvinist, and in these regions the alphorn quickly died out: only in cantons which remained Catholic did the instrument survive.

In 1797 Napoleon invaded Switzerland, and for eight years the country was under French occupation. Upon Napoleon's overthrow in 1805, Switzerland was in turmoil. At best only ever a tenuous confederation of cantons, it was a region more divided than united: a place of deep schism on geographical, religious, political and linguistic grounds; furthermore, an affluent urban class was in prolonged and bitter conflict with the impoverished rural community. In an attempt to overcome these divisions, the Governor of the canton of Bern, Niklaus von Mülinen, mounted a Festival of Alpine Traditions in a meadow alongside the ruins of Unspunnen Castle above Interlaken, with the object of fostering unity among the peoples of the Swiss Confederation. His aims were to celebrate the nation's freedom from foreign domination and to promote a sense of Swiss national identity. On 17 August 1805, the Unspunnen Festival took place, with displays of regional dancing, singing, costume and food, competitions in alphorn playing, crossbow shooting and wrestling, and demonstrations of strength with boulder-throwing. More than 3000 people attended the festival, coming from across western Europe.³⁰



*Ex.17. The Alpine Herdsmen's Festival at Unspunnen, by Franz Niklaus König, 1805.*³¹

The Festival was a major success, but the near demise of the alphorn was sadly apparent: from the whole of the Alps, only two alphorn players entered the competition. Therefore no contest was held: both players performed, and each was presented with the prize of a medallion and a black sheep.

*Ex.18. Zur Ehre des Alphorns ('In Praise of the Alphorn'):
medallion struck for the winners of the alphorn-playing
competition at the Unspunnen Festival, 1805.³²*



The Festival was held again at Unspunnen in 1808. This time only one alphorn player came. The Governor of Bern contacted Ferdinand FÜRCHTEGOTT Huber, an alphorn player teaching at the Fellenberg Institute, an establishment in Bern set up to bridge the divide between the rural lower class and the urban upper class by offering both agricultural and academic instruction. The Governor of Bern saw in Huber useful partner in furthering his vision of a united Switzerland. He had six new alphorns made and asked Huber to find some students and teach them to play:

*'I heard you play the alphorn. I would like to prevent this beautiful national instrument from disappearing completely from our mountains and valleys. I will have half a dozen new instruments made, and would like you to go into the mountains and find six young people and teach them to play. I think Grindelwald would be the best place for this.'*³³

In the years that followed, Mülinen had many more instruments made; courses in alphorn playing were established and gradually alphorn-playing spread throughout Switzerland. Only a small amount of traditional music remained, but Huber and others composed a new repertoire. As groups of alphorn players were formed, alphorn ensemble playing developed, in unison and up to four parts, with the lower notes from the harmonic series providing simple harmonies for the melodies. Music in echo was played from the opposite sides of valleys. Thus alongside the alphorn's ancient role in the mountains, it gradually became one of Switzerland's primary pastimes too. It was promoted as a symbol of Swiss culture and became a valuable tourist attraction.

International interest

For many centuries, visitors to Switzerland have been bewitched by the sound of the alphorn. A copy of the famous Appenzeller melody was sent to Queen Anne of England (1665-1714), with whom it was a great favourite.³⁴ Northern European aristocrats on the Grand Tour found Switzerland a magnificent scenic resting place en route to the classical ruins of Italy, and *Ranz des Vaches* melodies were taken all over Europe by visitors who bought Swiss musical jewellery boxes and musical clocks as souvenirs: these often played traditional alphorn tunes. Besides being popular melodies of the day, alphorn tunes using only the notes of the harmonic series required less mechanism than melodies using a full musical scale.

These early tourists were well read: two notable British travellers referred to Rousseau's comments about homesickness caused among Swiss soldiers by the sound of the alphorn, the first being James Boswell in his *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791),³⁵ and in an anthology entitled *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent*, William Wordsworth wrote the following sonnet in 1820:
*On hearing the Ranz des Vaches on the top of the Pass of St Gothard.*³⁶

*I listen – but no faculty of mine
Aavails those modulations to detect,
Which, heard in foreign lands, the Swiss affect
With tenderest passion; leaving him to pine
(So fame reports) and die, his sweet-breathed kine
Remembering, and green Alpine pastures decked*

*With vernal flowers. Yet may we not reject
The tale as fabulous. Here while I recline,
Mindful how others by this simple Strain
Are moved, for me – upon this Mountain named
Of God himself from dread pre-eminence –
Aspiring thoughts, by memory reclaimed,
Yield to the Music’s touching influence;
And joys of distant home my heart enchain.*

The Italian violinist and composer Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755-1824) heard an alphorn playing while walking in the canton of Valais. He wrote to his English landlady:

‘I was sauntering alone, towards the decline of day... I descended the valleys and traversed the heights. At length chance conducted me to a valley which, on arousing from my waking dream, I discovered to abound with beauties. It reminded me of one of those delicious retreats so beautifully described by Gesner: flowers, meadows, small streams, all united to form a picture of perfect harmony. There, without being fatigued, 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 proceeded from a mountain-horn... Struck as if by enchantment, I started from my lethargy, listened with breathless attention, and learnt, or rather engraved upon my memory, the Ranz des Vaches which I now send you. But 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 enthusiasm that such a moment inspired.’³⁷



Ex.19. Ranz des Vaches written down by Viotti in the canton of Valais.³⁸

The influence of alphorn music

Alphorn music has exerted considerable influence on orchestral and chamber repertoire, generally through the work of composers who visited or lived in the Alps. Some quoted known alphorn tunes; others used a melodic style which resembled the music that alphorns play; some references may well have been quotations of melodies which are now no longer recognised.

Composers have always acknowledged that both trumpets and horns have a functional role outside that of concert music, and often write or incorporate music to reflect this. Writing for both trumpets and horns is traditionally restricted to the notes of the harmonic series. Trumpet fanfares are to attract attention, and therefore have arresting rhythms on just a few notes. Hunting horns, being longer, have more notes available, and their signals are therefore more sophisticated and complex. They are normally energetic, and composers often use the ‘horse-riding’ rhythm of 6/8; echo effects are sometimes used to evoke the huntsmen communicating with each other, and hunting groups often play in harmony together, *cors de chasse* ensemble music being one of the peripheral pleasures of a hunting party. Alphorn melodies also use repeating motifs and echo effects, but in contrast to fanfares and hunting calls, they are flowing and peaceful, and typically use a lone voice. Composers often also incorporate the characteristic *Ranz des Vaches* irregularity of phrasing, with final held

notes.

Apart from the music for Christmas *pastorelli* described earlier, alphorn-style music in the classical repertoire falls into two categories: firstly it features in works describing the Swiss hero William Tell, who reputedly outwitted oppressors from the House of Hapsburg in 1307. Two significant compositions recount this story and use alphorn melodies to evoke the Swiss landscape. An opera by Grétry entitled *William Tell*, written in 1791, opens with the words: *Scene 1. The theatre represents the Swiss mountains at daybreak; a small meadow; in the distance William Tell's son is seen on a crag playing a Ranz des Vaches. The opening strains of music are the Appenzell melody played on the clarinet.*

GUILLAUME TELL.

ACTE PREMIER.

SCENE PREMIERE.

Le Théâtre Représente les montagnes de la Suisse, le lever de l'aurore; un petit Pâtre; le fils de Guillaume Tell, est vu sur la pointe d'un rocher dans le lointain il joue le Ranz des Vaches: On voit dans les entre deux des montagnes des Pâtres des Vaches qui passent.

SCENE II.

Cornet ou Corne de Vache il y en a trois de différents sons dans le courant de la Pièce.

Ex.20. First page from the score of Grétry's opera *William Tell*, 1791.³⁹

The more famous opera with the same title is by Rossini, written in 1829. An expansive alphorn melody appears in the score, originally given to the tenoroon or *alto-fagotto*,⁴⁰ but by the time of a printed score dating from the following year, Rossini had reset the melody for the cor anglais. Each phrase is echoed an octave higher by the flute.

Secondly, alphorn music was used more generally to depict Alpine or pastoral scenes, and in particular any dramatic reference to herdsmen. Haydn's secular oratorio *The Seasons* (1799) tells the story of the yearly cycle of farming life in a small Alpine village. An alphorn melody from the Rigi mountains above Lucerne is played on the French horn to accompany aria no.11, a song about the herdsman leading his cattle to pasture at the beginning of summer. Nine years later, Beethoven used the same *Ranz des Vaches* melody from the

Rigi in his *Symphony no.6 Pastoral* (1808); it is played on the horn at the opening of the final movement, which is entitled *Herdsmen's Song: joyous, thankful feelings after the storm*. In the 3rd movement of the same symphony, entitled *Peasants' merrymaking*, the oboe plays another alphorn-like melody, with an irregular beat structure and echo effects.

It is interesting that alphorn melodies are not necessarily allocated to the orchestral horn. In Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830), at the opening of the *Scène aux Champs*, the cor anglais is again given an alphorn melody with an echo provided by an offstage oboe, and the same melody was used by Debussy in his *Prélude à l'Après-Midi d'un Faune* (1894), played on the flute. In Schumann's music-drama *Manfred*, written after a holiday in Switzerland in 1848, Scene no.4 is a *recitative* entitled

Alphorn melodies also appear in solo and chamber music. Schubert wrote one of his last compositions, *Der Hirt auf den Felsen* for voice, clarinet and piano in 1828.⁴⁶ The work is known in English as *The Shepherd on the Rock*, although *Hirt* means ‘herdsman’ in German. The description in the lyrics of sounds echoing across the valleys, and the many typical alphorn phrases in the music, imply that the song describes a cowherd playing a long horn, rather than a shepherd with a natural horn which can sound only one or two notes. The scene depicted by Schubert, that of a herdsman playing his alphorn on a crag overlooking a valley far below, was a common romantic subject. It was described, as we have seen, in Grétry’s *William Tell*, and was often portrayed in 18th- and 19th-century paintings, drawings, etchings and engravings (see ex.22).

Liszt wrote a series of piano works entitled *Album d’un Voyageur* in 1836, during one of his long European tours.⁴⁷ It comprises 18 musical depictions of the landscape through which he passed. A number of these pieces were written in Switzerland, and these include both yodelling and alphorn melodies, the latter providing the main thematic material in *William Tell’s Chapel*, *Melodic Flowers of the Alps*, *Ranz des Vaches* and *An Evening in the Mountains*. In 1876, at the age of sixteen, Richard Strauss wrote a work for his father entitled *Alphorn*, op.16, a trio for French horn, soprano and piano. This setting of a poem reflecting on the alphorn’s haunting qualities contains many alphorn-like melodies.⁴⁸



Ex.22. A herdsman on a crag plays his alphorn across the valley at sunset.
Engraving by F Hegi, 1818.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The alphorn has the dual distinction of being one of the longest instruments in the world, yet having the fewest notes. It is unique in that it evolved for a specific function, in a niche occupied by no other musical instrument. Although we know nothing of its beginnings, for at least a thousand years its much-loved sound has resonated through the Alps. Its power lies in its rich, deep sonority, which affects both animals and people, and it has survived near-extinction to become one of the most popular symbols of Switzerland today.

Although the alphorn’s traditional repertoire has been used by composers to portray mountain scenes, today new works are being created for the instrument, particularly by Swiss composers, because of its attractive tone quality. The new generation of carbon-fibre, telescopic, tunable alphorns has created further potential, with a choice of keys in which the instrument can play, so that now, at last, it can more readily be used with standard orchestral or keyboard accompaniment, thus bringing the instrument’s haunting sound to a wider 21st-century audience. The last two hundred years have

witnessed a remarkable revival of this ancient symbol of mountain life and culture.

Notes

- ² I and P Opie, eds *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, Oxford University Press, 1951, p.99
- ³ R Morley-Pegge *The French Horn*, Ernest Benn, London, 1973, p.8
- ⁴ www.housebarra.com/EP/ep05/13/music.html
- ⁵ Booklet for CD BML024 *Forest, River, Ocean*
- ⁶ <http://abel.hive.no/oj/musikk/trompet/history/lur.html>
- ⁷ Reproduced in B Tuckwell *Horn*, MacDonald, London, 1983, p.4
- ⁸ Reproduced in R Midgley *Musical Instruments of the World*, Paddington Press, New York, 1978, p.61
- ⁹ Basel Historisches Instruments Museum. Photo: Frances Jones
- ¹⁰ A L Gassmann *Blast mir das Alphorn noch einmal*, Musik Hug, Zurich, 1938, p.11
- ¹¹ Georg Rhaw *Bicinia Gallica, Latina, Germanica et Quaedam Fugae* Wittenberg, Germany, 1545, BL K2c3
- ¹² Gassmann *op. cit.*, p.11
- ¹³ <http://swiss-alpage.iffrance.com/swissalpage/p2a2.html>: 'lituú alpinum – longum ferè ad pedes undecim, duobus lignis modicè incurvis et excavatis compactum, et viminibus scitè obligatú.'
- ¹⁴ <http://swiss-alpage.iffrance.com> *op. cit.*: 'Monseigneur, suyvant vostre commandement, j'ay mis poyne de trouver un cornet de Schwiss... vous luy pourrez faire dire chansons sur son cornet et alters petites carraces qu'il a accoustumé faire à ses vaches pour leur feire trouver leur desjuné bon.'
- ¹⁵ Reproduced in F Schüssele *Alphorn und Hirtenhorn in Europa*, Gälfiässler, Friesenheim, Germany, 2000, p.49
- ¹⁶ B Bachmann-Geiser *Das Alphorn vom Lock- zum Rockinstrument* Paul Haupt, Bern, Stuttgart, Wien, 1988, p.24
- ¹⁷ M Praetorius *Syntagma Musicum*, 1619, vol.2 p.33
- ¹⁸ Reproduced in booklet for CD Claves 50-500 *op. cit.*, p.18
- ¹⁹ Reproduced in Bachmann-Geiser *op. cit.*, p.27
- ²⁰ R Rawson 'Gottfried Finger's Christmas pastorellas' in *Early Music* vol.33 no.4, November 2005, pp.591-606
- ²¹ R Angermüller *Programme Notes, Mozart Festival*, Mozarteum, Salzburg, 1981, p.32: 'Monsieur Gignox will ein paar neue Pastorell Synfonien? Ich glaub er meint sie sind immer so fertig, wie das Brod auf dem Laden liegt, denn itzt geschwind solche zu machen hab ich nicht allemal Zeit. Und diess muss er selbst glauben, weil er meint ich hätte nicht einmal Zeit einen Brief von ihm durchzulesen, wissen sie, ich hab zwar eine nagelneue PastorellSynfonie: allein, ich sage es aufrichtig, ich gieb sie nicht gerne her; denn ich dachte sie nach Wallerstein nebst anderen Stücken zuschicken. Ich dachte sie also recht wohl anzubringen. Es ist ein Hirten Horn and 2 Flauto traversi obligat dabey. Soll ich es denn schicken? Basta! Ich will es mit nächster Post schikken; nur bitte um alles nichts zu melden, dassich es geschickt habe: denn sonst ist es bei dem Wagner, und durch sein Geschwätze beym H.v.Rheling aus. Sie wissen meine Umstände.'
- ²² R Rawson 'Gottfried Finger's Christmas Pastorellas' *op. cit.*, p.591
- ²³ R Rawson *op. cit.*
- ²⁴ The original manuscripts of this work are in the archive of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna, and in the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, West Berlin. They are published in the 3rd edition of the Köchel Catalogue, appendix 294, as Leopold Mozart's Divertimento (Sinfonia Pastorale) for string quartet and *corno pastoriccio*
- ²⁵ Booklet for CD Claves 50-5000 *op. cit.*, p.8
- ²⁶ http://www.alphornbau.ch/geschi_e.html
- ²⁷ T Zwinger *Dissertationem Medicarum Selectorum*, J L Koenig, Basel, 1710, p.102
- ²⁸ J-J Rousseau *Dictionnaire de Musique*, Paris, 1768, p.315
- ²⁹ www.educ.msu.edu/homepages/laurence/reformation/Calvin/Calvin.html
- ³⁰ M Baumann and C Wyss *Unspunnen Festival* UBS Aargau, Basel, 2005, p.13
- ³¹ Reproduced on the information board at Unspunnen
- ³² Reproduced in R Gallati and C Wyss *Unspunnen 1805-2005*, Schlaefli & Maurer, Interlaken, 2005, p.88
- ³³ www.alphornbau.ch *op. cit.*: 'Sie blasen, wie ich vernommen habe, das Alphorn. Nun möchte ich gern verhüten, daß dieses schöne Nationalinstrument ganz aus unseren Bergen und Tälern verschwände. Ich will ein halbes Dutzend neue machen lassen, wenn Sie sich damit befassen wollen, ins Oberland zu gehen, dort sechs junge Leute aufzusuchen und sie zu lehren, und dazu wäre Grindelwald, dünkt mich, der beste Ort.'
- ³⁴ Quoted in *Musical Quarterly* vol.31 no.4, 1945, p.400
- ³⁵ J Boswell *Life of Samuel Johnson* R Cross, London, 1797, vol.3 p.198
- ³⁶ W Wordworth *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent*, Sonnet 21, Longman, London, 1822
- ³⁷ Quoted in *The Music Box* vol.4 no.1, 1969, pp.55-6
- ³⁸ *Ibid*
- ³⁹ A M Grétry *William Tell*, Paris, 1791, BL G278j
- ⁴⁰ G Grove *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Macmillan & Co, London, 1889, vol.1 p.56
- ⁴² R Strauss *Daphne*, Oertel, Berlin, 1938

⁴³ J Raff *Symphony no.7*, Robert Seitz, Leipzig, 1876

⁴⁴ R Strauss *An Alpine Symphony*, Eulenburg no.8046

⁴⁵ www.corndellealpi.it/storia.html

⁴⁶ F Schubert *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen*, Augener no.8959

⁴⁷ F Liszt *Album d'un Voyageur*, 1836, facsimile 1st edition re-issued as Kalmus Miniature Score KO9369

⁴⁸ R Strauss *Alphorn, Op 16*, Edition Schott no.8389

⁴⁹ Copper engraving in *Schweizer-Kühreihen und Volksliedern*, Bern, 1818, BL 87d34, title page

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