

## **Brahms Symphony No. 1: the 'alphorn' melody.** **Frances Jones**

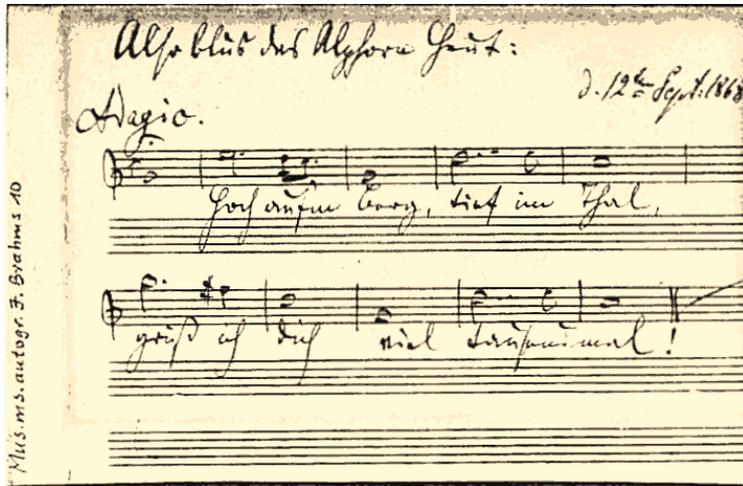


Fig. 1. Music sent by Brahms to Clara Schumann, an alphorn melody that he heard in Switzerland and later quoted in his First Symphony.<sup>1</sup>

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) grew up in Hamburg; thereafter he spent his professional life in various central European cities and settled finally in Vienna. He was fond of the countryside too, though, and his letters describe walking holidays enjoyed with his family and friends.

Although he did not write overtly descriptive music in his instrumental works, elements of rustic music pervade his musical language, not least in his writing for the French horn. His father was a horn player and Brahms's deep affinity with the instrument, and his awareness of the horn in natural surroundings, is apparent in much of his horn writing. We hear echoes of the hunting horn, for example, in the final movement of his Trio for Violin, Horn and Piano, Op. 40: the 6/8 of horse riding and the exuberant horn calls of the hunting party are the scenario here.

Alphorn music is a different sound world: gentle, peaceful, reassuring, set with a quiet backdrop. This is a different place to which Brahms occasionally takes his listener.

The alphorn was originally just a piece of equipment for the cowherd, who would use the instrument to call his animals, to soothe them during milking, to communicate with other herdsman, or just to play for his own amusement. A further vital function of the alphorn for the lone cowherd on a high alpine pasture with his cattle, was to play a melody at the end of every day for the people in the valley below, to signify that all was well. If the villagers did not hear the alphorn, they would be alerted that something was not right and would go up to see what was amiss. A similar message was given after a storm or other event of potential danger for the herdsman and his herd. Thus playing the alphorn was not only an essential part of the herdsman's daily routine. To listen for the reassuring tones of an alphorn melody at sunset was also for centuries deeply ingrained in the hearts of mountain communities throughout the Alps.



Fig. 2. Cowherd blows his alphorn at the end of the day. Schmadribach Falls, Lauterbrunnen (detail). Gabriel Lory, 1822.<sup>2</sup>

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A further role for alphorn playing emerged with the rise of tourism. The Swiss authorities were quick to make use of the appeal of the instrument to enhance an alpine experience and began to station alphorn players at popular mountain tourist destinations. Their brief was specific: melodies should be gentle and pastoral. A natural echo was utilised where possible. There were restrictions placed on the choice of notes that should be used too. The alphorn can only produce the natural harmonics of a tube, notated below. The series of harmonics includes notes that fall between normal classical pitches: harmonic no. 7 is slightly flatter than written here, and harmonic no. 11 is halfway between the notes F and F sharp. To a listener used to classical music, this latter note in particular sounds 'out of tune'.

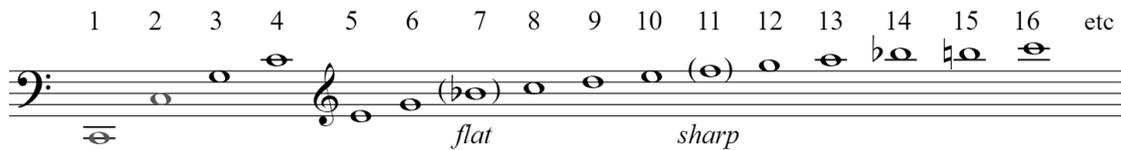


Fig. 3. The harmonic series, notated in C (an 8ft tube).

Alphorn melodies played to tourists were only to use the notes that create a major tonality (e.g. harmonics 3, 4, 5, 6, 8). They were to use neither the minor timbre (such as that built on harmonics 6, 7 and 9) nor the 'out of tune' note (no. 11) commonly found in the instrument's rural repertoire. Alphorn music played to visitors should portray a positive ambiance and demonstrate that this was lovely, normal music. An alphorn figure that tourists would hear was typically formed from a gently turning major arpeggio-based motif that might include a leap of an octave, because when such notes are played in an environment where there is natural resonance, these notes linger to create a pleasing chord:



Fig. 4. Typical 'turning arpeggio' alphorn motifs.

We find these motifs reproduced in the works of such composers as Beethoven, Richard Strauss and Mahler.<sup>3</sup> They are generally given a quiet backdrop, and not infrequently they are incorporated in order to signify reassurance after a stormy or turbulent episode in a composition.

A particularly lovely example of Brahms's use of gentle, pastoral music evocative of the alphorn occurs in the final stages of the first movement of his dramatic Piano Concerto No. 1. This composition was conceived as a work for two pianos, sketched out in 1854. It was gradually expanded into a work on the scale of a full symphony, although Brahms prepared it in two-piano score for subsequent orchestration since at that time, aged 21, he felt inexperienced in writing for the orchestra. Its final form as a Piano Concerto was realised in 1858.

The first movement is powerful and full of drama, of symphonic proportions. Documentation suggests that the work was a tribute to his musical mentors and close friends Robert and Clara Schumann. As Robert was becoming increasingly ill, Brahms gave much support to their family, and following Robert's death at the end of July 1856, Brahms took Clara to Switzerland for a month, together with two of her sons, and his own sister. The turbulence of the opening movement of this Piano Concerto is eventually brought to rest with the calm reassurance of an alphorn-like horn solo: it may have reflected this period of recuperation in the Swiss Alps that followed the trauma of Robert's last years. The solo, with typical peaceful horn-call figurations, is marked *piano, marcato, ma dolce* (quiet, deliberate, but sweetly). It is set over gentle piano arpeggios while the rest of the orchestra is silent. Echoes are provided by the timpani.

Fig. 5. Alphorn-like horn solo in Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 1, bars 434–437.<sup>4</sup>

Brahms's decision to make use of an alphorn motif again at a similar significant point in his First Symphony over a decade later, then, is not a unique occurrence. What is unique, is that posterity has been provided with Brahms's transcript of the original alphorn melody that he had heard.

He jotted it down in 1868 while taking a walking holiday in central Switzerland with his father, and sent the transcription (reproduced at the beginning of this article) to Clara on her wedding anniversary, 12 September, which was the day before her birthday. He was in the area above Lauterbrunnen, a dramatic wide gorge with 1,500ft vertical limestone cliffs facing each other. Cows graze every summer on the surrounding verdant alpine pastures and the sound of an alphorn blown by the cowherd in this landscape would resonate all around.

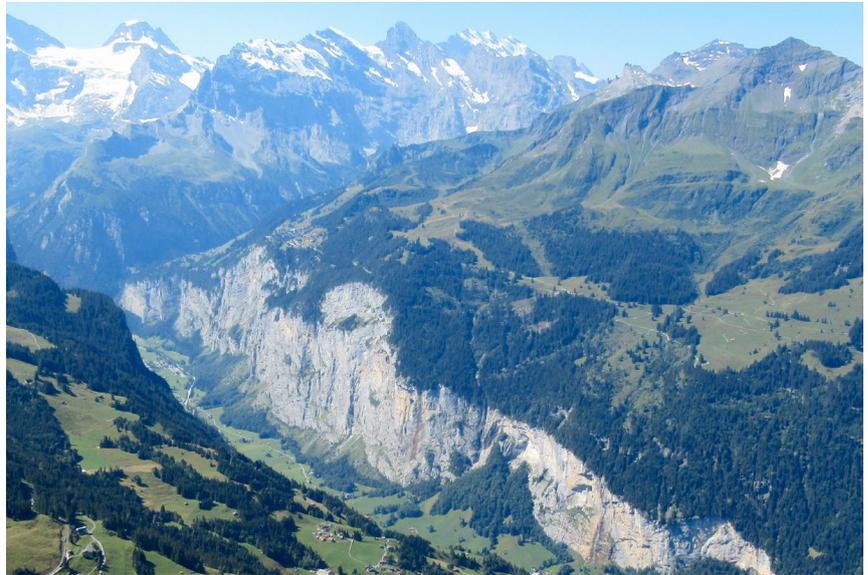


Fig. 6. Lauterbrunnen Valley, Switzerland. Photo: Frances Jones.

The experience of hearing an alphorn here was described by the Victorian diarist Jemima Morell, in an account of her visit to Lauterbrunnen on the first tour of Switzerland to be organised by Thomas Cook in 1863:

*In the sward was stationed a man and some boys with a horn. It is a wooden tube from five to six feet long bound round with split withies of willow. This he rested on a wedge-shaped hollow trough, and blew as we approached. He must have practiced long to emit such a flow of mellow, sonorous sounds from so unmusical-looking an instrument. The notes died away in softest cadence, which notes were taken up by the mountains and reverberated by them again and again. We had scarcely a moment's interval to remark on their sweetness, when the rocks echoed the notes in fainter strains, another pause and we heard their vibrations still lingering among the cliffs till they expired in but a musical sigh.<sup>5</sup>*

Brahms gives his transcription the caption *Also blüt das Alphorn Heut:* (Thus the alphorn blew today:) and writes the following text under the notes: *Hoch auf'm Berg, tief im Tal, grüß ich dich viel tausendmal!* (From high on the mountain and deep in the valley, I send you many thousand greetings!).

Fig. 7. *Jour de Repos.*  
c.1870. Artist unknown.<sup>6</sup>



This manuscript is mentioned in most texts that refer in detail to this symphony; it is, however, the subject of numerous inaccurate claims! The majority of references erroneously state that it was on a card, or specifically that it was on a postcard. One source writes that the 'postcard' was sent to Clara 'in a painted box from Switzerland'.<sup>7</sup> Enquiry at the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, where it is now kept, reveals that there is no knowledge of a box and it is not a card, or a postcard, but a sheet of paper, blank on the reverse. It was donated to the library by Clara's youngest daughter Eugenie in 1936, before which it had been kept in a picture frame.<sup>8</sup>

Many sources also state that it was sent from the Rigi, a peak above Lucerne, however this is also incorrect. Details of Brahms's Swiss holiday with his father in 1868 are recorded in the father's diary notes. They crossed into Switzerland at Basel on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September, visited Lucerne and Meiringen, thence travelled on horseback across Grosse Scheidegg to an overnight stop in Grindelwald. On Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> they spent the night just over the Kleine Scheidegg ridge, at the Jungfrau Hotel at Wengernalp. On Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> they descended into the valley of Lauterbrunnen: this is the day when Brahms wrote '*Also blüt das Alphorn Heut*' (Thus the alphorn blew today).

A number of elements in Brahms's transcription of the alphorn melody indicate that this was not a performance for tourists played by a professional alphorn player. It is not a 'tourist' melody: alongside harmonics 6 and 8 to 12, it includes the 'out of tune' note, harmonic no. 11, known as the 'alphorn *fa*'. In that this note falls exactly halfway between F and F sharp, it could be notated as either of these pitches. Brahms specifically chooses to convey the rustic connotations of the 'alphorn *fa*' by writing F sharp, the raised fourth degree of the scale: this indicator of folk music was commonly used by eighteenth-century composers. Here it is the second note on stave 2 of Brahms's manuscript.<sup>9</sup>

There are other signs that this was someone playing just for their own amusement. The player blows a 'trial' note before the commencement of the melody. Brahms writes down this note (the initial semibreve), and gives it a lingering pause. He also reproduces its faltering beginning, as an *acciaccatura*. Brahms knew that this was purely a preamble to the intended melody, so he does not begin his greetings text underlay until after this. Furthermore, nowhere else in traditional alphorn repertoire is a motif found with a short note (written here as the semiquaver D) in an otherwise straightforward arpeggio passage. However, to mis-pitch an intended note is as common on the alphorn as it is on the modern orchestral horn. Brahms includes this split note in his transcription, indeed with his text he makes use of it for a separate syllable.

Brahms's choice of pitches used to notate what he heard do not necessarily replicate the actual pitches that were played. It had long been the convention for all orchestral instruments that played only the natural harmonics (horns and trumpets) to write everything in the key of C, and add an instruction to tell the player which length of instrument to use, with markings such as 'in G' or 'in E flat' as needed. Although valved horns were becoming increasingly widespread from around

the middle of the nineteenth century, Brahms never liked them, never wrote for them and did not adopt what was to become the convention of writing all horn parts 'in F'. Thus he notated the melody in C in his transcription, having identified *doh* out of the harmonics played, but he gives no indication of the actual pitches that he heard.

We can only guess at what notes were played. In general, contemporary artwork shows an instrument around the same length as the height of the player, i.e. between 5ft and 6ft long (see the two historic images already included).<sup>10</sup> Such an instrument would produce pitches about a fourth higher than those that Brahms notated. The earliest photographs, that date from around 1900, though, show alphorns standardised at around twice the height of the player, around 11 or 12ft. This is the approximate length of a modern alphorn, where *doh* is G flat or F (around the

same length as a French horn in F). On an instrument of this length, the harmonics in Brahms's manuscript would sound around a fifth lower than the pitches that he writes. Surviving written documentation about alphorns in the nineteenth century is minimal, and details of the development of the longer horn are currently unknown. As we will see later, there are indications that Brahms heard these notes played somewhat lower than in his transcription.



Alphornbläser und Spitzenklöpplerin im Lauterbrunnenthal

*Fig. 8. Postcard from Lauterbrunnen, circa 1900: an early photograph of an alphorn player and a girl offering hand-made lace to visitors. The length of the alphorn appears to be around twice the height of the man.<sup>11</sup>*

Eight years after the music was sent to Clara, Brahms incorporated the melody at the beginning of the fourth movement of his Symphony No. 1. The theme is used for a bridge passage that links an intensely turbulent, stormy slow movement to a sunny, almost celebratory Finale. Here Brahms perfectly reproduces one of the principal functions of the alphorn: to let the people in the village below

know that all was well after a mountain storm. Walter Frisch, in *'Brahms, The Four Symphonies'* eloquently expresses the effect of this music on the ear: *'There is an overpowering mass of heaped and strained expectation. As the answer sings 'mid softest hum of light wood and lowest brass and strings, in clear and passionate notes of the horn here is one of the most overwhelming moments of sublime beauty in all poetry.'*<sup>12</sup>

Brahms sets the alphorn melody over held *pianissimo* chords, a typical accompaniment for an alphorn-like episode in a classical composition. With this backdrop, the principal horn part is given the instruction *forte sempre* and *passionato*: this endows the phrases with an aura of majesty and grandeur, a perfect reminder of the magnificent scenario in which Brahms heard the music.

He writes the same pitches in his symphony as the ones on his manuscript: following the contemporary convention for horn notation, the orchestral horn part is written in C. Here he gives the instruction that it is actually to be played on a horn in C. Crucially, though, orchestral Horn in C parts sound an octave lower than written. We cannot say whether Brahms originally heard these notes at the pitch that he requires them to be sounded in his symphony, but this lower tessitura is quintessentially evocative of a peaceful alphorn call. An orchestral horn in C is 16ft in length. At a

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fourth lower than today's normal horn in F, his choice of a horn in C would have given him a rich dark tone for this melody: maybe he chose this resonance to best replicate the timbre of the instrument that he had heard.

Brahms had given the melody on his manuscript the description *Adagio* (very slow). This is the same tempo marking that he chooses for his slow movement in the symphony. At the introduction of the horn motif, he writes *Più Andante* – to move forward with more of a walking pace, in preparation for his Finale which is marked *Allegro non troppo, ma con brio* (cheerful, not too fast, but with brightness).

Brahms adapts his original transcription in a number of ways. Neither the first 'warm-up' semibreve nor its tentative acciaccatura are included. Twice, the original rhythm of a double dotted minim followed by a quaver is replaced with a dotted minim followed by a crotchet.

The semibreve at the end of each short phrase is shared between two horn players. This is not only a practical consideration that allows the first player to take another full breath for each successive phrase with no interruption to the melody. The quality of sound when the two horns play in unison also gives an appropriate extra echo-like resonance, a subtle technique found in the works of other composers such as Haydn, Mozart and Schubert. Brahms gives each of these notes a subtle *crescendo* and *diminuendo* too, to further enhance the resonance.

Fig. 9. Brahms, *Symphony No. 1*, fourth movement, bars 28-43:  
introduction of the main theme on the horn.

Brass parts, with horns in C on staff 1, to sound an octave below the printed pitch.<sup>13</sup>

The entire melody is repeated by the flute, three octaves higher; thereafter, further echoes come thick and fast until everything gradually decays into *pianissimo* once more. Brahms then gives us a moment of total silence before the fourth movement proper sets out on its cheerful journey. He later revisits the alhorn theme, with echoes, in the final stages of the work.

In the magnitude of this symphony, 21 years in gestation, the quotation of this melody here could represent a significant point of resolution and relief after a long struggle towards his personal compositional voice. This work has also been called Brahms's 'Clara' Symphony, in which, with this peaceful alhorn theme, perhaps, the dark days of Robert's long illness are finally laid to rest.<sup>14</sup> Nowhere does Brahms explain his reasons for the inclusion of this simple alhorn tune, played by a cowherd in the meadows above Lauterbrunnen, though. His metaphor speaks for itself. He knows that with this horn call, his audience will feel at ease and reassured by the strong tones of the alhorn melody, the same feeling of relief that one would experience in knowing that all was well after a storm in the mountains. The atmosphere that Brahms creates here taps subliminally into the listener's own aural awareness to lead them to a comfortable place.

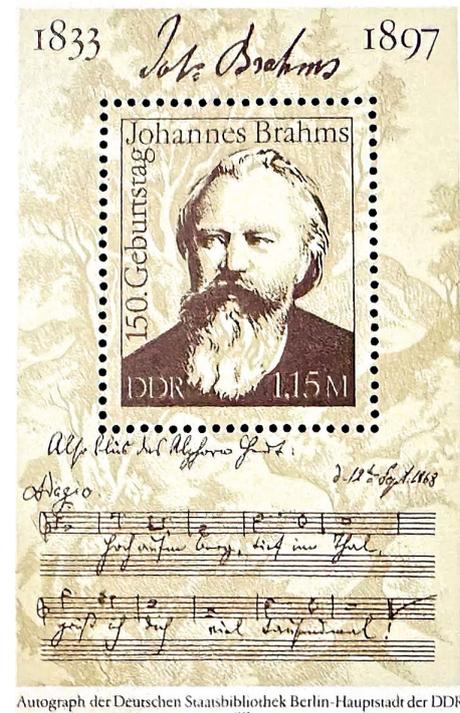
The significance of Brahms's quotation of this alhorn fragment has been widely recognised. This melody was chosen above all others to represent Brahms in 1972 when a five-mark copper-nickel coin was issued in East Germany to mark 75 years after the composer's death. The coin has the opening of the alhorn tune on its reverse, although unfortunately the engraving of Brahms's music was incorrect: the third note given on the coin (B instead of C) is not the note that Brahms wrote, nor is it possible to play on the alhorn.



Fig. 10. East German commemorative coin with an erroneous quotation of the alhorn melody.<sup>15</sup>

In 1983, to celebrate 150 years after Brahms's birth, a special issue postage stamp was produced in a collectable presentation minisheet that features his manuscript of the alhorn melody.

Fig. 11. East German commemorative stamp and surround of 1983 that includes a facsimile of Brahms's alhorn transcription.<sup>16</sup>



Few of us have actually heard an alhorn played in the mountains. Few of us have heard a horn played on a hunting expedition. Few of us have heard fanfare trumpets herald the arrival of royalty. Thankfully, few of us have heard a bugle on a battlefield. And yet, these scenarios are fundamental elements of a composer's sound palette. Such references are not random – they are evocative of other worlds that we instantly recognise, though with no personal experience; we are immediately stirred, with no overt explanation. Brahms's choice of the horn to play this particular melody, at this particular moment, with this accompaniment, was inevitable. His assumption that we would feel what he wants us to feel, is taken as read. That such a response is indeed felt, is remarkable. Audiences of today, many generations later and with very different backgrounds and personal experiences, still feel the intended effects of these few plaintive notes played on the horn. Music can convey emotion where words are unnecessary, irrespective of whether we know why. Few melodies speak more eloquently than this one.

**Notes.**

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- <sup>1</sup> Staatsbibliothek, Berlin.
- <sup>2</sup> British Museum, London.
- <sup>3</sup> See many dozens of quotations examined in Frances Jones, *The Alphorn Through the Eyes of the Classical Composer* (Vernon Press, 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> Johannes Brahms, *Johannes Brahms Sämtliche Werke, Band 6* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1926-27), 39.
- <sup>5</sup> Paul Smith, ed. *Thomas Cook and the Origins of Leisure Travel Vol. 2: Miss Jemima's Swiss Journal: The first conducted Tour of Switzerland 1863* (London: Routledge, 1998), 64.
- <sup>6</sup> Reproduced in Pierre Grandjean, *Le Cor des Alpes* (Lausanne: Edition 24 Heures, 1984), 31, Collection M Barberis.
- <sup>7</sup> Books with this incorrect information include Malcolm MacDonald, *Brahms* (New York: Schirmer, 1990), 246; David Lee Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15; Brigitte Bachmann-Geiser, *Das Alphorn* (Bern: Haupt, 1999), 111; Styra Avins, *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 225.
- <sup>8</sup> Detail from Staatsbibliothek, Berlin: email from the curator, Roland Schmidt-Hensel, July 2012.
- <sup>9</sup> Found in many works to portray a rustic character, alongside bagpipe-like drones, for example in Haydn's Symphony No. 60 or Chopin's *Waltz Op. 68 No. 2*.
- <sup>10</sup> Over 400 images can be examined in the author's public access searchable database *Alphorn Historic Artwork Archive*, accessible by a search on that title or via [www.AmazingAlphorn.com](http://www.AmazingAlphorn.com). Postcards, i.e. the photographic record, can be viewed in the companion *Alphorn Historic Postcard Archive*.
- <sup>11</sup> There are two early alphorns similar to the one depicted here, though undated, in Lauterbrunnen village museum. Both are approximately 12ft long.
- <sup>12</sup> Walter Frisch, *Brahms, The Four Symphonies* (Yale, 2003), 157.
- <sup>13</sup> Johannes Brahms, *Symphony No. 1* (Berlin: Simrock, 1877).
- <sup>14</sup> This is suggested by Michael Musgrave in 'Brahms's First Symphony: Thematic Coherence and its Secret Origin', *Music Analysis* Vol. 2 No. 2, 117.
- <sup>15</sup> Author's collection.
- <sup>16</sup> Author's collection.

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