

Berlioz and the Alphorn

Frances Jones

A large number of nineteenth-century composers quote alphorn music in their symphonic, operatic and chamber works, and the effect of such a quotation on the listener is undeniable. To the modern audience, the visual and aural qualities of the alphorn are quintessentially evocative of the Alps, thus an alphorn call is used in a composition to set a mountain or pastoral scene. In the hands of the composer, we, the audience, are drawn into this world, of which we may be barely aware and may indeed have no personal experience, yet the metaphors are so clear that we understand them immediately.



Fig. 1. The author plays the alphorn in high meadows at the foot of The Matterhorn, Switzerland. Photo: Martin Jones.

Alphorn music is just one of a number of distinct categories of ‘brass’ music found outside the concert hall: a brass instrument is defined by the method by which it is blown, whereby the lips are vibrated to activate a sound at one end of a tube, thus ‘brass’ can refer to instruments made of any metal, or indeed of wood or animal horn.

Composers often incorporate horn or trumpet calls in their work that reflect that these instruments flourished outwith, and long before, composed music as we know it: they draw on a particular repertoire of signifiers to convey the specific messages they require. We notice straight away when a piece of music includes a ceremonial trumpet fanfare, a rousing bugle call, gentle notes of a night-watchman’s horn, the call of the posthorn, the sounds of the hunt or music of the alphorn. Each of these categories has unique musical qualities and stylistic characteristics, and composers reflect each of these worlds with distinctive representational music.

These instruments are all restricted to the notes of their harmonic series; from this series, each of the above categories of instrument draws specific motivic material. The harmonic series for a tube with *doh* as C is illustrated in Fig. 2. The upper notes of the series are only available to longer instruments like the long fanfare trumpet, hunting horn, or alphorn.

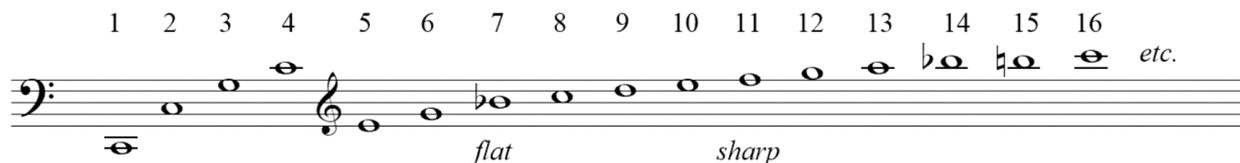


Fig. 2. The harmonic series.

Trumpet fanfares are designed to attract attention. They use bright, arresting rhythms based on a few notes in the middle range of this series (harmonics 3 to 10). Berlioz makes extensive use of fanfares in his *Grande Messe des morts*, which he scores for four separate brass groups in addition to a huge orchestra and chorus. Simpler bugle calls are used by the military to convey specific messages: there is a substantial collection of these, each with a particular meaning, which soldiers are required to learn. The night-watchman's horn call is typified by quiet single notes, as we hear at the end of Act 2 of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Music for posthorn has its own features: typically it combines an announcement fanfare with an elaborate flourish to finish. Its music is familiar from Mozart's 'Posthorn' Serenade or indeed Hermann Koenig's popular *Posthorn Gallop* (1844). Huntsmen may use a short horn of eight to twelve inches in length to summon their hounds and send signals to each other; otherwise they carry a *cor de chasse*, a metal horn of up to fourteen feet in length, coiled so that it can be worn when riding. A *cor de chasse* has many notes available and hunting horn signals can be sophisticated. *Cors de chasse* ensemble music is one of the peripheral pleasures of a hunting party: from as early as the fourteenth century there has been composed repertoire for groups of hunting horns, often incorporating echo effects to reflect communication across field and forest. Composers have found this a rich source of material for the evocative re-creation of such scenes, generally using the lively 'horse-riding' rhythm of 6/8. A typical example is Berlioz's *Chasse royale* from *Les Troyens* (The Trojans), where substantial calls are passed between the first and second horn player, the latter providing extensive echoes, later to be joined by other instruments playing typical thirds and sixths under the primary voice.

Alphorn music has a number of features that distinguish it from these other rustic references. Alphorn melodies share with the long trumpet and the *cor de chasse* a wide range of notes, alongside the use of repeating motifs and echo effects. In contrast to fanfares and hunting calls, though, alphorn music is flowing and peaceful: this reflects its primary use in the high mountain pastures by a herdsman to call his cattle. Sometimes in the silence of the mountains a natural echo might rebound off a distant crag; this may be added in a composition that imitates an alphorn call. A composer generally presents his alphorn music either unaccompanied, or set against a quiet, peaceful background of long held chords: this conveys the stillness of a mountain landscape, and that traditionally a cowherd would play his alphorn alone.

Typical of alphorn repertoire are *Kühreihen* or *Ranz des vaches* (literally: row or rank of cows). These begin with a call to assemble the animals ready for a journey up to high mountain pastures; this is followed by motifs played along the way to attract the attention of individual animals as required. These would be specific, repeated motifs, as animals can be taught to recognise

their own calls, a technique well-established by Roman times.¹ The cowherd would play a specific pattern of notes to call an animal as necessary, to attract its attention on the trail or on the mountain. The music in each area was different, with each herdsman playing to the cattle in his care, using motifs taught to them, individually created or learned by ear from his associates or predecessors. As these journeys could last a few hours, a full *Ranz des vaches* was necessarily extensive, with many different calls following one another that would vary in metre, style and shape. This was purely functional playing, so no extended melodies were ever created or repeated. Defining features of a *Ranz des Vaches*, therefore, are that it is improvised, and consists of short, repeating, contrasting motifs. In a transcription, it will be a peaceful, gentle, lone voice; sets of calls will come to rest on a paused note, there will be frequent changes of metre and style, and echo effects. It will be noticed, however, that a composer or scholar uses the term *Ranz des Vaches* to describe any alphorn-based phrase or melody, even when it is a brief motif or an extended composed passage.

A second use for an alphorn in the high meadows was to communicate with other herdsman and with those in the valley below: the sound of the alphorn can carry for a few miles in the silence of the mountains. A melody was played by the cowherd every evening at sunset to let the villagers in the valleys know that all was well; it was also used for this purpose after a storm. Thus it was an essential piece of equipment for the cowherd, alone with his animals in the high pastures. For millennia it played a fundamental part of the Alpine way of life, for the herdsman tending his cows, and for people in the valleys, who listened for the alphorn melody at the end of every day or after bad weather, to be reassured that the herdsman and his animals were safe.

Horns were also used for the management of animals in lowland regions. Monasteries and wealthy land-owners in medieval Europe controlled vast tracts of countryside, where tending livestock provided a substantial contribution to their income. The herdsman with his horn is the subject of the English children's rhyme that is parodied by Edgar in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Act 3, Scene 6), written around 1604. The song begins:

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

Thus when we consider allusions to the alphorn in concert repertoire, there is a reasonable assumption that the herdsman's horn-call will have connotations of a pastoral landscape. If in addition the scene is set in the mountains, the implications of an alphorn motif are clear. Berlioz is one of dozens of composers who knew that an alphorn phrase helps to set a scene: a mountain or a herdsman's landscape, or the peace of evening-tide; it can signal that all is well after a stormy or turbulent passage, or can convey the carefree life of the cowherd. Within these contexts it can transmit a specific message of anxiety or of reassurance.²

Berlioz refers to the world of the alphorn in a number of his compositions. The earliest is among the extant fragments of *Les Francs-juges* (The Judges of the Franconian Court), written in 1826 at the age of 23, while he was a student at the Conservatoire of Music in Paris. The plot concerns the secret medieval court in the region of central Germany formerly known as Franconia: an uncle tries to cheat his nephew out of his inheritance, by contriving to have him sentenced to death by the secret court. The young man takes refuge among a group of mountain herdsman at the beginning of Act 2. The scene is set as follows:

The theatre represents a secluded valley surrounded by dense forest, dominated by high mountains, their peaks illuminated by the last rays of the sun. A few chalets are seen in the distance. The Bohemians seen in the preceding act come down from

the high crags, and mingle with groups of shepherds and shepherdesses. We hear bagpipes calling and answering from one mountain to another.³

The music for the opening *Choeur de Bergers* is typical alphorn material, although the rustic instrument that Berlioz names here, the *cornemuse* (*musette*, or bagpipes) is drawn from a French rural scene. Alphorn music, restricted to notes of the harmonic series, has a limited harmonic palette that could be set to a bagpipe drone, but Berlioz does not provide one. He divides the orchestra into two distinct groups, with one positioned offstage to provide an echo – indeed he divides clarinets, horns and trumpets into ‘backstage right’ and ‘backstage left’ for a double echo effect. Such echoes are referred to in the text, and the vocal material is also consistently echoed by a second choir.

Berlioz sets this chorus to the music of the most widely documented Swiss *Ranz des vaches*, material that appears in many different transcriptions, and under various titles. It is referred to as ‘The Swiss Air’, or other headings that reflect the origin of the material in many regions of Switzerland, from the easternmost German-speaking canton of Appenzell to the westernmost French-speaking canton of Vaud: the *Appenzell Kùhreihe*n, and the *Ranz des vaches des Ormonts*, *Gruyère*, or *Fribourg* are among the many titles found.⁴ The music is slightly different in each transcription, which reflects that it originated as an improvised collection of motifs. Some transcriptions are vocal, some instrumental. The earliest is found in a compilation of music by Georg Rhau, written in Leipzig in 1545;⁵ it is also referred to and quoted in many later sources including documents relating to Queen Anne of England, and texts by Theodor Zwinger (Basel, 1710)⁶ and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Paris, 1768). This typical example below (Fig. 3), from Rousseau’s *Dictionnaire de Musique*, shows the opening call to gather the cows in the village, followed by a sequence of repeating motifs that attract individual animals on the journey to the high pastures. The fact that this harmonically simple music could be accompanied by a drone is again reflected in Rousseau’s designation for this transcription that it is played on a *cornemuse*.⁷



Fig. 3. *Air Suisse appelle le Ranz des Vaches*, reproduced in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Dictionnaire de Musique*, 1768.⁸

Quotations of this music in composed repertoire are numerous. Two examples are found in operas written in Paris in the late eighteenth century: *Guillaume Tell* (1791) by André Grétry, and *Le Triomphe de la République, ou Le Camp de Grand Pré* (1794) by François-Joseph Gossec. Both are instrumental versions. Other quotations from this time appear in the piano writing of Muzio Clementi and in two violin works of Giovanni Battista Viotti. After *Les Francs-juges* it appears in many compositions including works by Franz Liszt, Giacomo Meyerbeer and Richard Strauss.

In the earliest versions of this music with text, distinct motivic features reflect different elements of the journey to the high pastures, for example gathering the cattle together, and calling individual animals by name. In the nineteenth century, the music acquired new lyrics unrelated to this: rather, narratives appear that describe innocent mountain life, love, and even intrigue. It is said that this *Ranz* would incite the most intense feelings of homesickness among the Swiss abroad, an attribute that eventually led to its transformation by Henry Rowley Bishop in his immortal song that reflects homesickness, *Home Sweet Home* (1814).

In *Les Francs-juges*, Berlioz uses this melodic material for a typical pastoral text provided by his librettist Humbert Ferrand. At 128 bars in length, this chorus is the most extensive rendition of the music of ‘The Swiss Air’ in the classical repertoire. It is not clear why Berlioz chooses to use a Swiss melody: in Grétry’s opera, the setting is Switzerland, while Gossec’s scene is a celebration of Swiss mercenaries fighting in the French Revolution. One can only assume that by the 1820s it was the best-known music to use for the representation of mountain herdsmen.

Four years later Berlioz completed *Symphonie fantastique*. At the opening of the third movement, *Scène aux champs* (Scene in the Meadows), a lone voice of a cor anglais plays an extensive series of alphorn-evocative motifs, with distant answering calls from an offstage oboe (Fig. 4). At the end of the movement the cor anglais is heard again, but receives no response: Berlioz uses the absence of a reply to signify loneliness and abandonment. In his explanation in the score, Berlioz collates the idea of a *Ranz des vaches* with the calls of herdsmen at evening time:

One summer evening in the country, a *ranz des vaches* is heard from two herdsmen; the pastoral duet, the gentle rustling of the trees gently shaken by the wind, some recent signs of hope, all combine to fill his heart with unaccustomed calm, to lift his spirits; but she appears again, his heart is filled with foreboding; what if she deceived him ... One of the herdsmen resumes his simple melody, but the other answers him no more. The sun sets ... distant sound of thunder ... solitude ... silence⁹

Adagio

Cor anglais (sounding pitch) Oboe (derrière la scène)

Fig. 4. Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique*, third movement: *Scène aux champs*, bars 1–4.

Berlioz does not use material from the famous ‘Swiss air’ here. He grew up near the French Alps in La Côte-Saint-André, and the music of the herdsmen in the Chartreuse mountains close by could have been the source of these motifs, as they bear little resemblance to those found in Swiss, Bavarian, Austrian or Italian alphorn music. He also uses notes found on horns longer than those typical of the central Alps at this time.

In his renowned treatise on instrumentation and orchestration of 1843, *Grand Traité d’instrumentation et d’orchestration modernes*, Berlioz quotes this example as a demonstration of the evocative use of the cor anglais and oboe for a pastoral dialogue:

In the *Adagio* of one of my symphonies, the cor anglais, having repeated the oboe phrases an octave lower, as in a pastoral dialogue the voice of a youth answering that of a young girl, restates its phrases (at the end of the movement) with a soft accompaniment of four timpani, while the rest of the orchestra is silent. Feelings of absence, of being forgotten, of painful solitude, aroused in the souls of some listeners by evocation of this forlorn melody, would have only a quarter of its effect if played on any other instrument than the cor anglais.¹⁰

Thus Berlioz explains that the distinctive tone of the cor anglais is particularly appropriate for a gentle, pastoral melody. The tenor voice of the instrument has a tessitura close to that of the alphorn's middle range; the fact that it is a relatively unusual instrument within the orchestral sound palette could also lend the music a sense of being from a less familiar world. On a more practical level, though, this choice of instrument reflects that until the adoption of a French horn with valves during the second half of the nineteenth century, a composer could not develop an alphorn motif in any harmonic sense on an orchestral horn. Alphorn phrases given to pre-valve orchestral horns are just simple statements, for example at the end of Beethoven's storm in his 'Pastoral' Symphony. In *Symphonie fantastique*, an alphorn motif is not merely presented: it is the root of an organic process within an orchestral narrative, a substantial dialogue between cor anglais and oboe that runs for twenty bars and uses much chromaticism. For this purpose, Berlioz needs a chromatic instrument.

But Berlioz's metaphor here reaches a deeper level. In his Treatise, he mentions 'the voice of a youth and the response of a young girl', which implies that this represents a sung interchange. The world of the alphorn and the yodel intertwine: vocal calls replicate the alphorn's arpeggio-based material, and a *Ranz des vaches* uses free melodic phrases and calls in the same manner as a voice. Berlioz's texts reflect the symbiotic relationship of the voice and the alphorn in the pastoral landscape.

The opening alphorn phrase in *Symphonie fantastique* is also found in Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'Après-Midi d'un Faune* (1894). This too has a pastoral setting, derived from a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé. A faun (a rural deity, part goat, part human) plays on pan-pipes, unsuccessfully chases nymphs, then falls asleep and pursues them in his dreams. Mallarmé disapproved of having his text set to music: he felt that his words created their own music in the reader's imagination. However, when Debussy played a piano version of his score to the poet, the response, after a prolonged silence, was delight at the way in which he had captured and enhanced the spirit of the text.¹¹ Debussy's opening for unaccompanied flute comprises two typical musical references to the pastoral landscape: a flowing panpipe-like phrase, followed by an alphorn motif that closely resembles the opening phrase in Berlioz's work:

Debussy:

Berlioz (transposed)

Fig. 5. Comparison between the opening of Debussy's *Prélude à l'Après-Midi d'un Faune* and Berlioz's alphorn motif in *Symphonie fantastique*.

Another example of Berlioz's use of alphorn motifs is in his song, *Le jeune pâtre breton*, composed three years after *Symphonie fantastique* in 1833. The text by the Breton poet Auguste Brizeux tells of a young cowherd, Luc, who yearns for the company of Anna who tends the goats. Although herdsmen's horns were in use in non-mountainous locations, the landscape described in the text bears little relation to Brittany, since the second and third stanzas talk of valleys and mountain ranges that separate the herding boy from his sweetheart. Berlioz expanded the original setting for voice and piano in a second version that includes an *obligato* horn part, published in 1835; a setting for voice and orchestra followed in 1839, and he later included it in the collection *Fleurs des Landes* Op. 13 (1850). The addition of a horn part to his initial vocal version enabled him to increase the alphorn symbolism in this music. The voice and horn parts and the simple piano accompaniment are all based on alphorn arpeggiation such as a herdsman would play to his animals: almost every bar contains alphorn-like motifs. Appropriately, the horn part begins in the second stanza, where mountains are first mentioned:

The image displays a musical score for three parts: Horn, Chant, and piano accompaniment. The Horn part is in E-flat major and 6/8 time, starting with a *pp* dynamic. The Chant part is for mezzo-soprano or tenor, with lyrics in French. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves, with the right hand playing a gentle arpeggiated pattern. The lyrics are: "À son tour An-na, ma com-pag-ne, Con-duit der-riè-re la mon tag-ne, Près des su-reaux, Ses noirs che-vreaux;"

Fig. 6. Berlioz, *Le jeune pâtre breton*, version for French horn in E flat, voice and piano, bars 27–40.

Although in this example our understanding of Berlioz's references to the alphorn is less vital to the narrative, his choice of the horn, the arpeggio-based vocal motif and the constant gentle alphorn-like piano figurations set the scene perfectly. This is not a random choice of instrument, nor are the melodic and accompaniment arpeggiations merely attractive: they provide an appropriate enhancement of the landscape described in the text.

In 1834, Berlioz completed his symphony with viola *obligato*, *Harold en Italie*: musical depictions of a number of scenes that reflect his experiences in the Abruzzi mountains. In the third movement, *Sérénade d'un Montagnard des Abruzzes à sa maîtresse* (Serenade of an Abruzzi mountain dweller to his sweetheart), after a lively dance we hear a wistful alphorn-like melody that begins on the cor anglais. It has a gentle rocking accompaniment. This melody is the subject of

extensive elaboration before the rustic dance returns. Once again, Berlioz chooses the unusual tone of the cor anglais to represent a lone voice in the seclusion of the mountains.

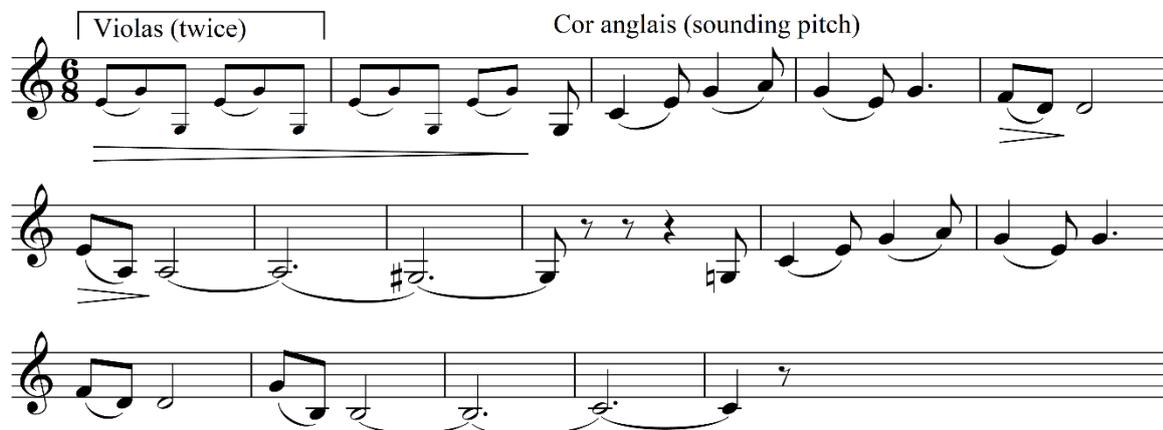


Fig. 7. Berlioz, *Harold in Italie*, third movement, bars 32–48.

In his grand opera *Les Troyens*, written two decades later, Berlioz’s hunting scene with evocative horn calls, mentioned earlier, is interrupted by a violent thunderstorm. As the storm abates, melodic fragments from the opening of the scene reappear on flute, clarinet and oboe. To mark that the storm is finally over, he reintroduces the horn melody to close the movement (Fig. 8). Now he gives it a quiet backdrop of held string chords in C major. His choice of instrument and the setting here must be significant: the horn is selected, out of the full orchestral palette available to him, as the most appropriate voice to convey the calm atmosphere he wishes to create, as an alphorn would signal that all is well after a storm in the mountains.

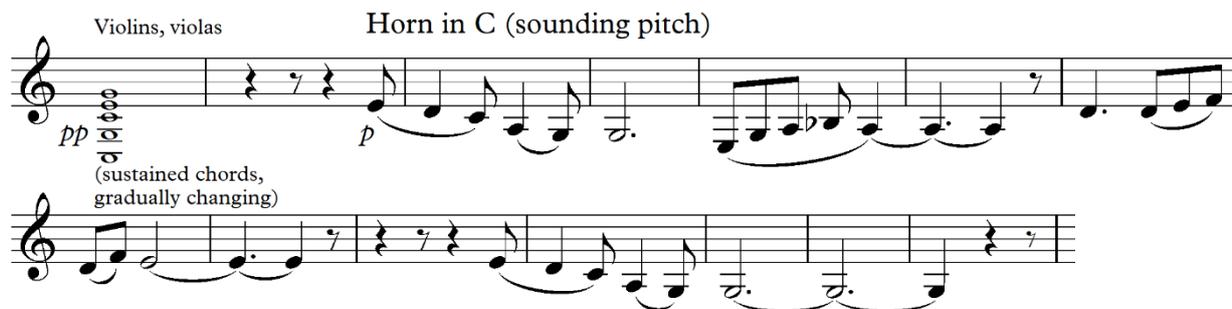


Fig. 8. Berlioz, *Les Troyens: Chasse Royale*, final bars.

Berlioz’s references to alphorn music, alongside varied and distinctive representational music from other rustic brass instruments, demonstrate his familiarity with the unique repertoire of each of these genres, and the extent to which he uses this material to enrich his own musical language. Alongside many composers from the fourteenth century to the present day, Berlioz makes use of a number of clear musical signifiers to enhance his work and give chosen passages greater relevance to the narrative he wishes to convey. That these references are still understood by audiences today is a remarkable testament to the power of music to communicate specific messages even to a predominantly urban public who may well never have heard any of this music in its original setting.

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Notes.

- ¹ Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BC), for example, describes training young pigs to respond to the horn in *De Rerum Rusticum*, three volumes that document Roman farming methods.
- ² Dozens of alphorn quotations in well-known compositions are discussed in Frances Jones, *The Alphorn through the Eyes of the Classical Composer* (Vernon Press, 2020).
- ³ See New Berlioz Edition Vol. 4 (*Incomplete Operas*), 111–125. Translation: Frances Jones.
- ⁴ This musical material is the subject of Chapter 4 in *The Alphorn through the Eyes of the Classical Composer*.
- ⁵ Georg Rhau, *Bicinia Gallica, Latina, Germanica et Quaedam Fugae* (Wittenberg, 1545).
- ⁶ Theodor Zwinger (1658–1724), *Dissertationum medicarum selectorum* (Basel: Koenig, 1710), 102–6.
- ⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de Musique* (Paris: Duchesne, 1768), 315. The *cornemuse* (*musette*, bagpipe) is a French folk instrument not found in Switzerland. Rousseau was born in Geneva, but spent most of his life in France. When his *Dictionnaire* was published he was living in Grenoble.
- ⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de Musique* (Paris: Duchesne, 1768), 315, [https://imslp.org/wiki/Dictionnaire_de_musique_\(Rousseau,_Jean-Jacques\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Dictionnaire_de_musique_(Rousseau,_Jean-Jacques)).
- ⁹ Translation: Frances Jones.
- ¹⁰ Berlioz, *Grand Traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* (Paris: Schonenberger, 1843), 124; ed. Peter Bloom (New Berlioz Edition, Vol. 24), 181. Translation: Frances Jones.
- ¹¹ Jessica Wiskus, *The Rhythm of Thought: Art, Literature and Music after Merleau-Ponty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 39–40.