

The Alhorn through the Eyes of the Classical Composer

by
Frances Jones

Series in Music



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The author with alphorn in context, Männlichen, Bernese Oberland, Switzerland.

Preface

To the modern audience, the visual and aural qualities of the alphorn are quintessentially evocative of the Swiss Alps. A number of nineteenth-century composers quote alphorn music in their symphonic and chamber works, and the power of such a quotation is unspoken but unmistakable. What lies behind this effect?

Why is it, for example, that we expect a reply to the shepherd's call at the end of the *Scène aux Champs* in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*? How is it that Berlioz can convey such a profound sense of unease, and not even by what he has written, but by what he has *not* written? Upon what basis can he assume that we will understand his meaning? Alternatively, how is it that we understand Beethoven's intention when he writes those reassuring horn calls at the beginning of the last movement of his 'Pastoral' Symphony? How can his music convey to us that we can now relax, that all is in fact well? These are not random melodic choices. There is something powerful at work here. Such composers are making use of a rich heritage of extra-musical reference. We, the audience, are led to places of which we may barely be aware, and may indeed have no personal experience, yet the metaphors are so strong that we understand them immediately. The composer is drawing on a particular repertoire of such signifiers to convey the specific moods that he requires.

But why is it that a reference to a sound made on an unsophisticated piece of hollow tree trunk can have such a profound effect on us? That in itself is extraordinary. Who first discovered that the alphorn was the perfect piece of equipment to use in the management of cattle in the mountains, why is it that cows are soothed by the low, rich sound of an alphorn—and what about other animals, and indeed, does this relate to our own natural affinity with the sound?

When we turn to these musical allusions in the hands of the composer, we find that such references penetrate beyond the realm of superficial delight: they communicate with our inner spirit, our unconscious mind.

This book has grown and evolved from material researched for my PhD thesis 'The Alphorn in Western Art Music: a Cultural and Historical Study' (University of Hull, UK, 2015). It explores the use of the musical language of the alphorn call to ascertain why and how such references as those of Berlioz or Beethoven can convey so much meaning. I seek out what it is that a composer brings into the concert hall, the theatre, the opera house, the church or the drawing room by such a quotation, to what heritage he is referring, and upon what basis there are grounds for an assumption that such a reference will be understood by an audience.

There's lots to unravel. The magic of the alphorn will not be spoiled by this voyage of discovery—rather, enhanced, and all the more to be wondered at. It is a fusion between a love of the mountains, of nature, of Swiss people with a passion for their country and their instrument, of gentle Swiss cows, of haunting alphorn music, of the profundity of classical music and of the genius of composition. It is a remarkable synthesis.

All translations are my own unless otherwise acknowledged. All manuscript, illustration and document source and credit details are given in a caption or an endnote. Every effort has been made to contact copyright holders of materials and illustrations. We shall gladly respond to and rectify any substantiated omissions.

I wish to thank all my Swiss alphorn-playing colleagues and friends for their insider information and endless encouragement in the preparation of this book, my Professor Christopher R Wilson at the University of Hull for believing in the project and my husband Martin for lots of technical and moral support, and for buying me a CD of alphorn music at Geneva airport in 2004 which inspired me to set off on this amazing journey. Special thanks are extended to The Delius Trust for a generous grant to help with the costs of reproduction of some of the images included.

I hope that this unique and extraordinary journey brings you as much pleasure and delight as it has brought to me.

Frances Jones. Summer 2020
www.AmazingAlphorn.com

Foreword

This book is one of the most fascinating and thought-provoking musical publications of the decade. Dr Frances Jones is an acknowledged authority on the alphorn, its history and its music; furthermore, she is a highly skilled player of the instrument. Her remarkable achievement in 'The Alphorn through the Eyes of the Classical Composer', as a result of many years of meticulous research and fieldwork, is that she conclusively demonstrates that the alphorn has constantly influenced the music of an enormous number of composers, over a period of more than 400 years.

Dr Jones postulates very convincingly that the plangent sonority of this acoustically primitive instrument is powerfully and imaginatively evoked in the musical creations of Bach, Handel, Haydn, L. and W.A. Mozart, Grétry, Gossec, Viotti, Clementi, Beethoven, Rossini, Schubert, Berlioz, Schumann, Liszt, Wagner, Raff, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Mahler, Elgar, R. Strauss, Delius, Bax, Walton and Britten. I am especially pleased to see the inclusion of the memorable alphorn-like passage in Delius's *A Mass of Life*.

Chapter 6, 'Alphorn for the Modern Composer', is a particularly valuable resource, in that it includes several delightful and highly effective original alphorn works, including an impressive one by the author's husband. Of particular interest are Frances Jones's thoughts in the closing Epilogue at the end of this chapter (pages 288-291). Her concluding evaluation of the alphorn and its place in musical history is enshrined in her final sentence: 'The outstanding beauty and unique voice of the alphorn will ensure that it will continue to be enjoyed long into the future'. I must confess that my own previously rather dormant interest in the alphorn has now been re-kindled to the extent that I am determined to acquire one of these magnificent instruments.

I very much hope that this beautifully written book will be enjoyed by a much wider public than alphorn enthusiasts; indeed, it deserves a place in the library of every brass player.

Anthony Halstead

Chapter 1

The Alphorn

The sound of the alphorn is an unmistakable evocation of the Swiss mountains. That composers should use this sound, either literally or metaphorically, in representation of the Alps, is a remarkable phenomenon. To explore this subject, first of all we need to look at the key ingredients: what is an alphorn, and what is alphorn music.

Terminology

What do we understand by the word 'alphorn'? In fact, what is an 'alp' and what is a 'horn'? Both components have multiple meanings, and many of these are relevant to the instrument.

'Alp' has two meanings, one specific (upper case A) and one general (lower case a). The Romans used the word Alps to describe the mountainous regions of central Europe: these form what is today the major part of the northern border of Italy, part of eastern France, southern Switzerland and western Austria. In more general terms, though, an alp is an area of pasture on a high mountainside, generally above the tree line and below the snow line, used for grazing in the summer months. Both of these meanings have significance in this book.

The word 'horn' in musical terminology can be used in the context of an animal horn that can be blown; the term is also used for an instrument made of another substance that generally has similarities with the shape of a natural horn, in other words, it has a conical bore and is curved. This contrasts with the category of trumpet, which refers to an instrument that is cylindrical and straight or folded.

The word 'alphorn' exists in many versions: in German or English we find alphorn, alp-horn, alp horn or alpenhorn; in addition, its equivalents in the other Swiss national languages are *cor des Alpes* and *corno alpino*. While the use of the word alphorn or its equivalents by the Swiss always refers to a man-made horn, both of the implications of the word alp, as examined above, are relevant; moreover, it can be seen that over time, the usage has changed. In the sixteenth century, the term referred to the horn that was used by the herdsmen in the mountains. The accounts of the monastery of St. Urban in the canton of

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