

# The story of the Alphorn : a brief survey of the national instrument of Switzerland

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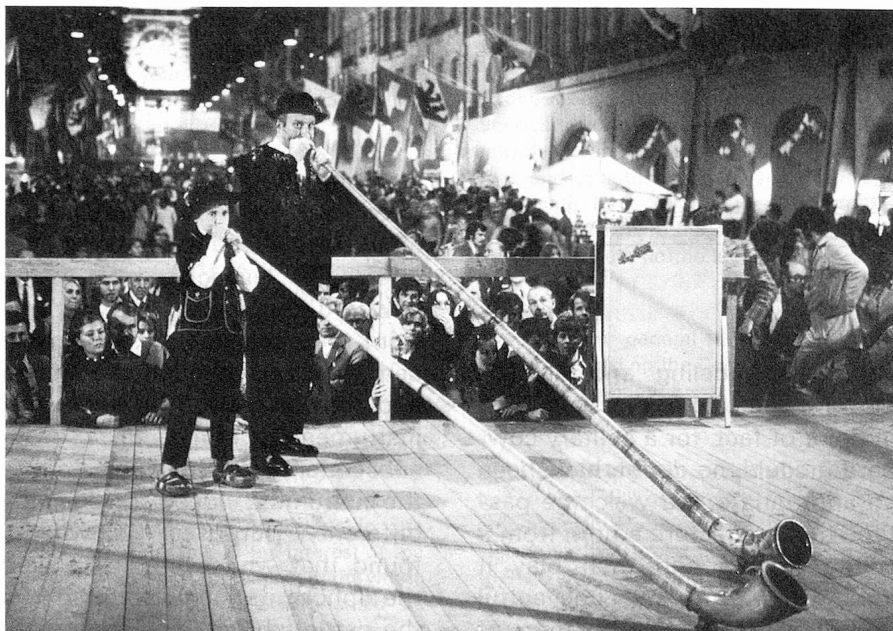
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During the 50th. Congress, Berne 1972.

(Schlegel photo)

foremost for personal pleasure. On the other hand, in the 16th and 17th centuries Swiss cowherds, in wintertime when they had nothing to do, would roam through the streets of the cities, even in Germany, trying to make a little money blowing their alphorns. Actually, the oldest historic reference to the instrument in Switzerland is found in the account books of the Monastery of St. Urban in the canton of Lucerne for the year 1527, a payment of «two pennies to man from the Valais region with an alpine horn». It may also be that Leopold Mozart was inspired by one of those wandering Swiss alphorn blowers to write his «Sinfonia pastorella in G a 2 violini, viola e basso, con un corno pastoritio, ma non obbligato, benchè d'effetto assai buono» (Pastoral Symphony in G for 2 Violins, Viola and Bass, with a herdsman's horn, not absolutely obligatory, but of a very pleasant effect).

A hundred years later, Brahms, after hearing an alphorn on a walk in the Swiss mountains, jotted down the melody on a piece of paper and sent it to Clara Schu-

mann with his greetings; later, he even used the phrase in the fourth movement of his Symphony No. 1 in C Minor.

But only in recent years did the alphorn make its entry into the fields of classic music as a solo instrument. Contemporary Swiss composers began to write for the alphorn, above all Jean Daetwyler who has created a number of works for alphorn and orchestra, including three concerti, one of which was performed by the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy not so long ago, while another will be played in October 1981 by the Houston Symphony Orchestra within the framework of the Swiss Festival in that city. In the person of French horn player Jozsef Molnar, who for years has also been perfecting the art of playing the alphorn, a rare virtuoso has been found for this instrument.

Lately even pop music has been showing an interest in the mighty Swiss horn and this very special tone. Pop musicians, however, often change the embouchure in order to make it easier to play the instrument. In 1977 the Swiss entry

in the Eurovision Song Contest was a tune about an alphorn referred to as «My Swiss Lady». This renewal of interest in the alphorn actually started as early as the beginning of the last century, after vagrant alphorn blowers had reduced the reputation of the instrument to an unprecedented low. In 1805, the organizers of the first Herdsmen's Festival at Unspunnen near Interlaken in the Bernese Oberland included a competition for alphorn blowers. The whole festival, incidentally, was meant to bring again more closely together city and countryside of the Canton of Berne after a period of political trouble and strife, and to rekindle interest in typically Swiss rustic sports and pastimes, such as wrestling, heaving stones, and alphorn blowing. But only two candidates showed up for the alphorn competition, and they had to be given the two available prizes, a medal and a black sheep for each, without any contest being held. The festival as such was a great success and its fame spread far and wide, even beyond the borders of Switzerland. It was repeated in 1808, but this time only one alphorn blower turned up. Shortly afterwards, however, the art of alphorn blowing was revived somewhat thanks to the efforts of the Mayor of the City of Berne, Niklaus von Mülinen, who sent out a young musician to the village of Grindelwald in the Bernese Oberland, where he was to pick out several talented singers whom he could teach how to play the alphorn. But the young music teacher, Ferdinand Fürchtgott Huber, who did much for the preservation and development of Swiss folk music generally speaking, was only partially successful in his efforts to promote alphorn playing, and almost a hundred years later similar impulses had again to be given, luckily this time with more success. The alphorn blowers of the region of Berne joined the association of the yodelers, and the same affilia-

tion soon occurred nationwide, one of the results being that special alphorn courses have since been organized regularly. In 1971, at the Swiss Federal Yodeling Festival, 156 alphorn blowers presented themselves for the competition; it is expected that at the 1981 Festival at Burgdorf, the number will even be much higher. The alphorn, totally devoid now of its function as a work and communications instrument of cowherds, seems well on its way towards becoming a popular musical hobby for many Swiss, including even the actual manufacture of the instrument.

An alphorn is best made from a young pine-tree growing on a slope and bent by the winter snow. The tree is freed from its bark and cut in halves lengthwise with a band-saw. Today, however, this natural form is often replaced by several carefully chosen blocks of wood on which the outline of the horn is first drawn and then sawn out. The two halves of the instrument are hollowed out and smoothed with spokeshave, gouge and sandpaper, creating a uniform wall thickness of about one sixth of an inch. The wooden sections, completed after about 70 hours of work, are then glued and clamped together and bound with split rattan. Whereas in earlier times, alphorn were made without any special mouthpiece but with just a thickening of the wall in the horn itself, today separate mouthpieces of turned boxwood are used. There are different types of such alpine wind instruments:

– The traditional alphorn with an

upward-turning mouth or bell and a length of up to 12 feet. (There's even a super alphorn now with a record length of over 30 feet!) Originally, this type was used above all in the Canton of Berne, in the Appenzell and in Central Switzerland, but nowadays it is found all over the country.

– The coiled Büchel, a wooden trumpet, formed in a flat loop, is played in Central Switzerland, especially around Lake Lucerne.

– The straight Büchel, some 7 feet long, but rarely found anymore.

– And a number of shorter and longer, slightly bent or straight conical horns which were made in different parts of the country, but in the course of time went out of use, like the straight Tiba of the Grisons which was sometimes even made of sheet metal.

Everyone who has ever tried to blow an alphorn knows that this is no easy matter, but requires even greater skill than sheer lung power. The pitch of the tones, produced by lip vibrations of varying strength and speed, depends on the length and the thickness of the horn. Moreover, the alphorn having no holes, keys or valves by means of which the length of the air column can be influenced, only natural tones can be played on that instrument. Among the 13 tones which are normally played on the alphorn, there are three which do not seem to fit into our conventional tonal system: the seventh, a B which is too low; the eleventh, an F which is higher than normal, but not quite F Sharp and which is known as the



«Alphorn FA»; and the thirteenth, an A Flat which is slightly too high. Alphorns are either in F, G, B Flat or C and this depends on the size of the alphorn which in earlier times was dictated by the length of the pine-tree from which it was made, but now can be chosen at will. Thus, for some time polyphonic playing of alphorn has become possible, a practice which is fast growing in popularity and for which even competitions are now being held. But while blowing in close harmony may have opened a new dimension to this instrument and may have gained it wider appeal, it is still the sound of the lone alphorn in all its romantic melancholy which makes it unique among the sources of tonal expression in the mountains.

*Lance Tschannen  
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*Note: An excellent and richly illustrated book about the alphorn in German, French and English has been published by Paul Haupt Verlag, Berne. Its author, the prominent Swiss ethno-musicologist, Dr. Brigitte Bachmann-Geiser, has also produced a companion record to this book «In Praise of the Alphorn» (Claves DP 500)*



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