

The legacy of the alphorn

by Frances Jones

This is the first of two articles concerning the abundance of alphorn music incorporated into the classical repertoire. The first article introduces the characteristics of alphorn music and looks at references in dramatic works; the second article will focus on its use in orchestral music and chamber repertoire.

Britain's leading authority on the alphorn, Frances Jones is also a freelance horn player and oboist. She performs frequently on the alphorn and gives lecture-recitals and masterclasses on the instrument throughout the UK, and in France and Switzerland. Frances is currently working on a Doctorate about the alphorn and its influence in classical repertoire. She can be contacted through her website: www.AmazingAlphorn.com.

Alphorn music has exerted considerable influence on classical repertoire, particularly through the work of composers who lived in or visited the Alps. Some quoted known alphorn phrases, others used a melodic style which resembled the music that alphorns play; some references may well have been quotations of phrases heard in the mountains by the composer, but which are now no longer recognised. It is interesting to note that many of the composers who incorporate either alphorn music or hunting horn music in their writing were the sons of horn players: not only were they thus particularly attuned to the use of the horn in classical music, but also they seem to have been especially affected by the sound of the horn in the wild.

Composers have always acknowledged that both trumpets and horns have a functional role outside that of concert music and many have written or incorporated music to reflect this. The music 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 thus more sophisticated and complex. Hunting horn calls are normally energetic and composers often use the 'horse-riding' rhythm of 6/8. Echo effects are sometimes used to represent the huntsmen communicating with each other and hunting groups often play together, *cors de chasse* ensemble music being one of the peripheral pleasures of a hunting party, so music depicting hunting horns in the concert hall is often written for 2, 3 or 4 horns playing in harmony.

Alphorn melodies use repeating motifs and echo effects too, but in contrast to fanfares and hunting calls, they are flowing and peaceful, and typically use a lone voice, either totally unaccompanied, or set against a backdrop of long held notes to depict a calm, still landscape.

The long alphorn had a unique role in the mountains and alphorn music has unique qualities. The length of the F alphorn is the same as a modern French horn in F, so its lowest notes are much lower than those of any other rustic instrument. In the middle of its range, the notes available are restricted to open *arpeggio* notes of the harmonic series and it has almost a full scale at the top of its playing range. Traditional alphorn music uses most of this range. Documentation from Ancient Greek and Roman times refers to the use of horns in farming: that animals were trained to come at the sounding of the horn. The deep timbre of the long alphorn, though, was found to draw cattle naturally without any training: they will follow or gather round an alphorn player, finding the sound soothing and reassuring. It was also noticed that the longer the horn, the further the sound would carry: a typical alphorn, 'the length of two men', can be heard up to six miles away. The alphorn therefore acquired three specific functions in mountainous regions: to call the cows, to calm

them and to communicate across large distances.

Traditional Swiss alphorn music is known as *Kühreien*, or *Ranz des Vaches* (literally 'procession of cows'). This reflects the alphorn's principal function in the life of the herdsman: each year in June in the mountains 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.

Ex.1. Alphorn player leading a Kühreien to the high pastures in a mid-18th-century prayer book. The text beneath is a prayer for his safe-keeping. Abraham Kyburtz, Theologia Naturalis, Bern, 1754.¹



Thus the music in a full *Kühreien* was of necessity extensive, typically with many different motifs following one another which varied in metre, style and shape. Phrase-length was dictated by reasonable breathing, each phrase coming to rest on a paused note. There would often be repeated motifs and sometimes, in a silence, a natural echo might rebound off a distant mountainside. The terms 'melody' or 'tune' applied to the *Kühreien* can be misleading:



Ex.2. *Der Appenzeller Kureyen*, reproduced in Rhau's *Bicinia Gallica, Latina, Germanica et Quaedam Fugae, Inferior Vox*, Wittenberg, 1545.²

music from any one alphorn player was always improvised and no extended melody as such was ever specifically created or repeated. There would be recognizable motifs, as the practice is still in use today whereby cows learn to recognise individual calls, just as a dog learns to come when it hears its name. The

cowherd would therefore play phrases to call an individual as necessary on the journey or on the mountain, and would play as required for a number of hours. Thus the music in each valley was different, with each herdsman playing to the cattle in his care. Once collectors began to write such phrases down, or they became adapted into songs with words; a snapshot of a 'melody' could easily be noted as the definitive version with other renditions described as 'variations' on it, however this is not appropriate terminology for the genre.

The earliest known printed alphorn music, from the Swiss valley of Appenzell, appears in Georg Rhau's collection of music *Bicinia Gallica, Latina, Germanica et Quaedam Fugae*, published in

Wittenberg, Germany, in 1545. Rhau was one of J S Bach's predecessors as Kantor at St Thomas's, Leipzig, and like Bach, he was also Music Master at the Thomasschule. He compiled a number of collections of traditional and specially composed music for his students, to assist with teaching the art of polyphonic writing. The music from Appenzell quoted by Rhau runs for three pages. He used it as the lower voice of a 2-part composition, writing a florid upper line based on the Appenzell material to create an elaborate

polyphonic work. The features to note are the opening line which was to become a trademark identification reference to the Appenzell 'melody', and on pages 2 and 3 the arpeggiations and typical 'horn-call' motifs.

Because the sound of the alphorn can carry over a great distance in the silence of the mountains, it was used by the herdsman as an essential means of communication both with each other and from up on the alp (the high grassy plateau) to the people in the villages below. Alphorns would always be played to let the villagers know that all was well after a storm and, traditionally, the herdsman would play every evening at sunset in order to signal to the people down in the valley that he and his herd were safe. It was thus a vital part of life in the Alps to wait for the sound of the alphorn at dusk every day and at the end of a spell of stormy weather. A melodic tune meant that all was well, while single, repeated notes meant that the men in the village should go to the assistance of the herdsman on the mountain.

The herdsman would always be at home in their villages for Christmas and from at least the early 13th century, it has been the custom for them to re-enact the Christmas story by bringing animals to worship around a crib on Christmas Eve, a practice still continuing in some Mediterranean rural regions to this day. Thus a body of music exists for alphorn players making music alongside other rustic instruments,

Ex.3. A herdsman plays his alphorn across the valley at sunset. Engraving by G Lory, 1818.³



like the bagpipe providing a drone accompaniment.

Classical composers often choose the sound of the alphorn to convey the atmosphere of the mountains, the herdsman, the stillness of dusk, or reassurance after a storm. They make use of the characteristic *Ranz des Vaches* repeating short motifs with final held notes, and irregularity of pulse and phrasing, and sometimes a composer will provide a quiet rustic drone as an accompaniment. At times the alphorn melody used in a classical composition will be a short fragment, occasionally it is quite an extended passage, then after some echo writing when the composer has established his pastoral reference he might develop the thematic material away from the restrictions of the harmonic series.

It may appear strange that alphorn-style music in the orchestral canon is not necessarily allocated to the orchestral horn. The cor anglais is a particularly common choice of instrument, and also the clarinet, possibly because these instruments can sound distant or exotic in the concert hall. The choice could also be because these instruments can easily play scale-like melodies that alphorns often do: melodies that were not normal on the orchestral hand-horns of the day, because with a narrower bore they were not often used so high in their harmonic series. This is particularly the case when the famous Appenzell music is being quoted. From the second half of the 19th century, the growing popularity of the valved horn enabled the more widespread use of the French horn in playing alphorn-like music in concert repertoire and the timbre of the oboe, cor anglais or clarinet could then be used to provide the distant echo, with a player sometimes actually being placed offstage.

There are two principal types of melodic phrases that appear frequently in the representation of the alphorn in classical repertoire: music beginning with the best-known Swiss alphorn 'melody', the *Kühreien* from Appenzell, and those formed from an arpeggio motif which turns

upon itself, often including an upward leap of an octave, which can be seen in a number of the quotations that follow. With the rise of tourism in the 19th century, the Appenzell *Kühreien*, with pastoral lyrics, became a popular song in Switzerland and its musical footprint became used more generally as a representation of the Swiss Alps rather than as a reference to the alphorn or the herdsman. The growth of alphorn playing as a hobby and tourist attraction meant that its arpeggio-note middle register was to supersede the Appenzell music to become the alphorn's defining musical reference and, particularly in the works of non-Swiss composers, the turning arpeggio motifs, in combination with the other features listed above, became immediately recognizable as a reference to the instrument or the herdsman within the mountain landscape.

Such phrases are often referred to as originating from the dramatic peak named the Rigi which overlooks the picturesque Swiss tourist destination of Lucerne. Early visitors walked up the steep track to the top of the peak to enjoy the panoramic views. After a hotel was built at the top in 1816, porters were provided to carry luggage up to the Kulm (summit) and in 1871 it was the first Alpine summit to which the British built a funicular railway. Alphorn players soon began to position themselves to play from the top of this peak at dusk, presumably creating an unforgettable experience as the sounds echoed over the lakes and

mountains that fan out all around it. There are numerous contemporary pictorial representations and written descriptions of such scenes.

The alphorn was also used to wake the hotel guests in time to see the sunrise. Felix Mendelssohn at the age of 13 spent two nights there with his family in August 1822. Halfway up they had to wait out a storm, and when they finally arrived they were surrounded by low cloud for an entire day. On the second evening, though, his mother Lea described in her diary: *'the fog dispersed, and we enjoyed the most beautiful sunset in this heavenly region; only the southern mountains continued to be veiled. To wake up on Rigikulm on a lovely morning is striking and highly moving. An hour before sunrise, when the heaven is clear, the alphorn sounds, rousing all the residents of the house with its sharp, piercing tone. Now amid the darkness stirs the liveliest bustle in the narrow quarters...'*⁴

Mendelssohn returned to the summit of the Rigi in August 1831, and wrote of the cheerful alphorn and magnificent views, staying at the viewing platform for six hours soaking in the scenery around him.⁵ An inventory of music held in the Mendelssohn household includes a *Ranz des Chèvres* transcribed by Felix Mendelssohn on this tour of Switzerland.⁶

*Ex.4. Lithograph of an alphorn player entertaining tourists on the Rigi, around 1880.*⁷




Alpine music in compositions for the stage:

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.



Above: Ex.5. First page from the score of Grétry's opera William Tell, 1791.⁸

Below: Ex.6. Rossini: extract from the overture to the opera William Tell, score printed in 1830.⁹



In classical repertoire the use of alphorn motifs falls into three categories: firstly they feature in works describing the Swiss hero William Tell, who reputedly outwitted oppressors from the House of Hapsburg in 1307. An opera by Belgian composer André Grétry

(1741-1813) entitled *William Tell* was written in Paris in the wake of the French Revolution. The New Regime there turned away from the frivolity of the operas of the former aristocracy to new areas of music that either had a stirring military style, or celebrated peasant life and

heroism against tyranny. The story of William Tell provided an ideal script. Grétry's score, composed 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, and the pastoral scene is established with 40 bars of alphorn-style music with peaceful string accompaniment, supported by notes on a cow-horn in C!

The German poet and philosopher Friedrich von Schiller also wrote a drama entitled *Wilhelm Tell* in 1804. The *Ranz des Vaches* plays an intrinsic role in Schiller's text: he introduces his first three characters singing verses to a *Ranz des Vaches* melody, with words evocative of its role in the landscape. Schiller's text was the basis of a second opera that recounts this story and uses alphorn melodies to portray the Swiss mountains, that of Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868). He was a horn player, as was his father. Rossini's *William Tell* was also written for a Parisian audience, in 1829. The end of the 2nd section features a storm; the next section of the opera restores the peaceful pastoral scene with a passage entitled *Ranz des Vaches* which opens with an expansive alphorn melody based on a 'Rigi'-style turning arpeggio motif. These phrases, also featured in the overture, were originally given to the tenoroon or *alto-fagotto*¹⁰ but, by the time of a printed score dating from the following year (below), Rossini had re-allocated them to the cor anglais. However he had not yet had the part rewritten in cor anglais notation: despite the words *Corno Inglese*, the music still appears in bass clef to sound an octave higher, as written for the tenoroon. Each phrase is echoed an octave higher by the flute, and the whole passage has a bagpipe-style drone accompaniment. It is quoted extensively in the overture to the opera.

Secondly, alphorn music features in works for the stage in the context of the representation of homesickness. There is much documentation about the profound effect on Swiss people working abroad of hearing a *Kühreien*: it was forbidden on pain of death to play or sing one among soldiers serving outside Switzerland. In 1821, the English composer Sir Henry Rowley Bishop, famous for the immortal song *Home, Sweet Home* and as the first Englishman to be knighted for his services to music, was commissioned by the London firm of Goulding, d'Almaine and Potter to edit a collection of national airs entitled *Melodies of Various Nations*. It included the now famous Swiss song referred to as the Appenzell *Kühreien*. Two years later he completed an opera which was performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, entitled *Clari, or The Maid of Milan*; the libretto for the opera was a play written by the American actor and dramatist John Payne and the plot revolves around the theme of homesickness. The song *Home, Sweet Home* appears in the opera, with the caption 'adapted from a national melody and arranged by Henry R Bishop, 1823'. Thus its thematic resemblance to the Appenzell *Kühreien* is not just a coincidence. It is given lyrics which transfer the connotations of homesickness, with which the Swiss melody was associated, to the American hearth and the song reappears at telling moments throughout the work. It was to become the most widely sung and reproduced tune of its time, especially adopted by soldiers away from home and their families left behind.



Ex.7. The melody of *Home, Sweet Home* by Sir Henry Rowley Bishop, based on the Appenzell *Kühreien*.

It became so popular that Bishop used it again in a sequel to *Clari*, another opera to which he actually gave the title *Home, Sweet Home* or the *Ranz des Vaches*, which was produced at Covent Garden and in New York in 1829.¹¹

The third circumstance in which alphorn music appears in dramatic music is a more general use, to depict Alpine or pastoral scenes, and in particular it occurs where there is reference to herdsmen, to the close of the day, or to reassurance when a storm is over. Josef Haydn (1732-1809) wrote an oratorio based on the story of *The Creation* in 1798. Alphorn motifs appear in both of the arias which describe the creation of the meadows and animals which graze them. One has a clarinet melody and one a flute melody, both with quiet pastoral accompaniment. The first of these, Aria No.9, gives us a few bird calls on the clarinet before the first solo appearance of the French horn, in a turning arpeggio alphorn phrase. The text of this aria reads:

Nun beut die Flur das frische Grün dem Auge zur Ergetzung dar; Den

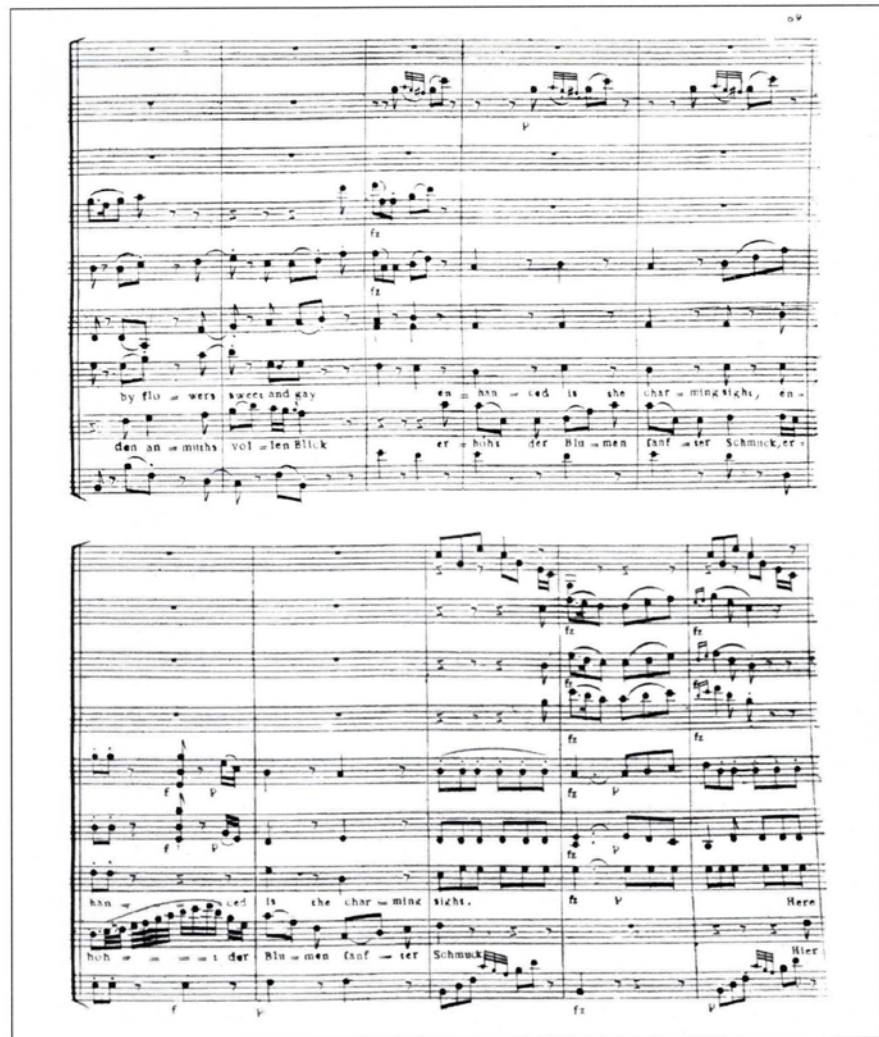
anmuths vollen Blick erhöht der Blumen sanster Schmuck, Hier düften Kräuter Balsam aus; hier sprosst den Wunden Heil.

[With verdure clad the fields appear, Delightful clad to the ravished sense By flowers sweet and gay, Enhanced is this charming sight.]

The motif is later quoted in Aria No. 22 by the flute to conclude its pastoral melody. It is a typical classical cadential figure, but in the context of the text that it accompanies, it could have more significance:

Auf grünen Matten weidet schon das Rind, in Heerden abget heilt. Die Triften deckt, als wie gesät, Das wollenreiche sanste Schaf.

[The cattle in herds already seek their food On fields and meadows green, And o'er the ground, as plants, Are spread the fleecy, meek and bleating flock.]



Ex.8. Haydn *The Creation* Aria No.9: the clarinet (stave 2) plays some bird calls followed by the herdsman's horn motif on the French horn (stave 1).¹²

Flauto

Fagotto

pizzicato

pizzicato

pizzicato

pizzicato

pa = tiens neighs the sprightly steed. The

Muth und kraft, das ed = le Rofs. Auf

Andante

pizzicato

pizzicato

Ex.9. Haydn
The Creation. Aria
No.22. The music
introduces the
pastoral scene with
a gentle flute
melody which
terminates with the
horn call from Aria
No.9.

ARIA. Allegretto.

Violino I.

Violino II.

Viola.

Flauti.

Oboi.

Fagotti.

Corno solo.
in F.

LUCAS.

Bassi.

Allegretto.

p

f

p

Ex.10. Haydn
The Seasons.
Aria in which the
herdsman, Lucas,
sings of taking his
animals up to the
high pastures,
accompanied by
the French horn
playing alphorn-like
music.¹³

Haydn wrote a secular oratorio
The Seasons in the following year.
It tells the story of the yearly cycle
of farming life in a small Alpine
village. This time he used extended
'Rigi'-style phrases played on the
French horn as the obbligato
melody to accompany Aria No.11,
a song about the herdsman leading
his cattle to pasture at the beginning
of summer.

The lyric reads:

*Der muntre Hirt versammelt nun die
frohen Herden um sich her; zur
fetten Weid' auf grünen Höh'n
treibet er sie langsam fort. Nach
Osten blickend steht er dann, auf
seinem Stabe hingelehnt, zu dehn
den ersten Sonnenstrahl, welchem er
entgegen haart.*

[The cheerful herdsman gathers the
lively herds around him, to lead them
slowly on their journey to the rich
green pastures up above. He leans on

his staff and gazes eastwards as the
sunrise sends forth its first rays.]

Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864) used
alphorn music in the herdsman's duet
Sui prati il fior in another work
written in Paris, his comic opera
Dinorah (1859). The action takes
place in a community of herdsman;
the text at this point is:

*Sui prati il fior, sui piani ai piedi del
mandrian, andiam, caprette, per voi*

crescean l'erbette, per voi si rinverdi già il prato e si fiore. Ah! andiam! All'ombra assiso io son Su la molle erbetta, ecerco una canzon per la bell' Ivonetta! [On the pastures full of flowers, on the meadows I walk with my flock, come on, little goats, the grass is growing for you, it is coming up green again for you. I'll sit in the shade on the cool grass and sing a song for my beautiful Ivonetta!]

Right: Ex.11. Meyerbeer *Dinorah*: herdsmen's duet, full of alphorn motifs.¹⁴

Below: Ex.12. Wagner *Tristan*, Act 3: herdsman's melody written for the cor anglais.¹⁵

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) also wrote down alphorn music that he heard on the Rigi and used it for the extensive herdsman's tune at the beginning of Act 3 of his opera *Tristan*, written in 1859. He gave it to the cor anglais, to be played offstage.

This part of the opera was written while he was living for six months in Lucerne. He wrote to his wife, Minna, of the source of the melody: it originated during an excursion up the Rigi, on which he stayed overnight in order to view the sunrise from the top. 'At four in the morning we were roused by the Boots with an Alphorn – I jumped up and saw it was raining and returned to bed to try to sleep; but the droll call went droning round my head and out of it arises a very lusty melody which the herdsman now blows to signal Isolde's ship, making a surprisingly merry and naive effect.'¹⁶ Wagner was so intoxicated with the music he had heard that he wrote some out thus in a telegram to Minna: gg gde cde gde cde gef df gfe de. However, the Postal Officer refused to accept the telegram, fearing it was some secret code.¹⁷ Wagner's empathy with the sound of the horn was summed up by his father, who was a professional horn player: 'Richard's talent for composition comes from God, but his love, feeling and sympathy for the horn comes from me.'

Both Wagner and Richard Strauss (1864-1949) used actual alphorns in their orchestral scores for stage works. While living in Paris in 1841, Wagner wrote incidental music for a vaudeville production entitled *La Descente de la Courtille*. It is scored for chorus and large orchestra, and includes traditional Swiss melodies and a part for alphorn too. Richard Strauss wrote for three alphorns in his pastoral tragedy *Daphne*, composed in 1936. For the opening scene, he specified that the stage should be set as a mythological mountain landscape with a herdsman on the stage playing an alphorn, and a short melody for an alphorn in G is written in the score. The phrase is repeated twice by offstage alphorns, once in A flat and then in A. Strauss added in a footnote that the alphorn parts could be played on trombones.¹⁸

In the next article, the extensive use of alphorn material in orchestral and chamber repertoire will be explored.

DAPHNE
von
RICHARD STRAUSS

Alphorn
Bläsermusik

Andante con moto

*) Partiturnotiz: Alphorn auf der Bühne durch 2 Posuonen zu verstärken.

Ex.13.
*Alphorn part in Strauss's opera Daphne.*¹⁹

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NOTES:

- 1/ Reproduced in B Bachmann-Geiser *Das Alphorn vom Lock - zum Rockinstrument* Paul Haupt, Bern, 1988, p 27.
- 2/ G Rhau *Bicinia Gallica, Latina, Germanica et Quadam Fugae* Wittenberg, Germany, 1545, BL K2c3
- 3/ Copper engraving in *Schwizer-Kühreihen und Volksliedern*, Bern, 1818, BL 87d34, title page.
- 4/ Details and diary quotation from R. Larry Todd *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music*, OUP US, 2003 P. 99.
- 5/ <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de> Mendelssohn letters. No other source given.
- 6/ Mendelssohn-Studien 5, 1982 P. 123.
- 7/ Reproduced in Bachmann-Geiser op. cit P 53.
- 8/ A. M. Grétry *William Tell*, Paris 1791, BL G278j. P. 1.
- 9/ Rossini *William Tell*, score of 1830, BL Hii817, pp 19 & 20.
- 10/ G. Grove *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Macmillan and Co, London 1889, Vol 1. P 56.
- 11/ Duncan, *Home Sweet Home*, University of Rochester Bulletin Vol 4. No 2, Winter 1949.
- 12/ Haydn *The Creation*, Breitkopf and Härtel, Leipzig, 1820. BL H1051b, and the following extract
- 13/ Haydn *The Seasons*, Breitkopf and Härtel, Leipzig 1802 BL h1051f, P 142.
- 14/ Meyerbeer *Dinorah*, piano reduction, Boosey and Hawkes, London 1861, BL f1 15c, P 1.
- 15/ Wagner *Tristan Act 3* score of 1860, BL h636c, P 306
- 16/ J Braunstein *Richard Wagner und die Alpen*, quoted in *The Musical Quarterly*, 1928, Vol 4 P 411.
- 17/ Linder *Richard Wagner über Tristan und Isolde*, Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, 1812. P 255.
- 18/ R. Strauss *Daphne*, Oertel, Berlin, 1938.19 Reproduced in Bachmann-Geiser op. cit. P 113.
- 19/ Reproduced in Bachmann-Geiser op. cit. P 113.