

# 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.

Alphorn music has exerted considerable influence on the classical repertoire, particularly through the work of composers who lived in or visited the Alps. Some composers quoted known alphorn phrases, others used a melodic style which resembled alphorn music, and some phrases may have been from melodies heard in the Alps but are no longer recognized. Many composers who incorporated either alphorn music or hunting horn music in their writing were the sons of horn players – they were thus particularly attuned to the use of the horn in classical music and 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 performed a role outside concert music, and many have written or incorporated music that reflects this. This 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 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 two, three, or four horns.

Alphorn melodies use repeating motifs and echo effects too, but in contrast to fanfares and hunting calls, they are flowing and peaceful, and are typically performed by 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 thus alphorn music has unique qualities. The length of the F alphorn is the same as a modern 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 diatonic 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 – animals were trained to come at the sounding of the horn. The deep timbre of the long

alphorn was found to draw cattle naturally without any training – they followed or gathered round an alphorn player, finding the sound soothing and reassuring. It was also noticed that the longer the horn, the further the sound carried – 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 cattle, to calm them, and to communicate across large distances.

Traditional Swiss alphorn music, known as *Kühreien* or *Ranz des Vaches* (literally “procession of cows”) reflects the alphorn’s principal function in the life of the herdsman. Each year in June, mountain villagers’ cattle would be collected and the herdsman would lead them, by playing his alphorn, up to the high 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.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the music in a full *Kühreien* was of necessity extensive, typically with many different motifs following one another which varied in meter, 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 – music from any alphorn player was always improvised and no extended melody was ever specifically created or repeated. There are recognizable motifs, as is the practice today, whereby cows learn to recognize individual calls, just as a dog learns to come when it hears its name. The shepherd would therefore play phrases to call an individual cow during the journey or in





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the mountains, and might be required to play 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 notate such melodies, 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"; 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



for the purpose of 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 two-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 reference to the Appenzell "melody," and, on pages two and three, the arpeggiations and typical "horn-call" motifs.

Ex. 2. *Der Appenzeller Kureyen*, reproduced in Rhau's *Bicinia Gallica, Latina, Germanica et Quaedam Fugae*, *Inferior Vox*, Wittenberg, 1545.<sup>2</sup>

Because the sound of the alphorn can carry over a great distance in the silence of the mountains, it was used by the herdsmen 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 villagers in the valley below 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.

Ex. 3. *A herdsman plays his alphorn across the valley at sunset*. Engraving by G. Lory, 1818.<sup>3</sup>



The herdsmen would always return home to their village for Christmas and, from at least the early 13th century, it was customary to re-enact the Christmas story by bringing animals to worship around a crib on Christmas eve, a practice continued in some Mediterranean rural regions today. Thus a body of music exists for alphorn players, with other rustic instruments such as the bagpipe providing a drone accompaniment.

Classical composers often chose the sound of the alphorn to convey the atmosphere of the mountains, the herdsman, the stillness of dusk, or reassurance after a storm. They often used the characteristic *Ranz des Vaches*, repeating short motifs with final held notes, an irregularity of pulse and phrasing, and sometimes with a quiet rustic drone. Frequently alphorn melodies used in classical compositions are short fragments. Occasionally there is an extended melody and then, after some echoes to establish the pastoral reference, the composer might develop the thematic material away from the restrictions of the harmonic series.

It might seem strange that alphorn-style music in the orchestral repertoire is not necessarily given to the horn. The *cor anglais* is a particularly common choice of instrument, and the clarinet or oboe, 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 typical of alphorns in their upper range, which were more treacherous on orchestral hand horns. This is particularly the case when the famous Appenzell music is quoted. From the second half of the 19th century, the growing popularity of the valved horn enabled a more widespread use of the horn for alphorn-like music, and the timbre of the oboe, *cor anglais*, or clarinet could then be used to provide the distant echo, with a player sometimes even placed offstage.

Two principal types of melodic phrases appear frequently in the representation of the alphorn in classical repertoire: music based on the best-known Swiss alphorn "melody," (the *Kühreien* from Appenzell), and those phrases formed from an arpeggio motif that turns upon itself, often including an upward leap of an octave, as shown in a number of examples 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 came to be heard more as a general representation of the Swiss Alps rather than as a reference to the alphorn or herdsman.



The growth of alphorn playing as a hobby and tourist attraction meant that its arpeggiated middle register was to supersede the Appenzell music as its characteristic motto. Particularly in the works of non-Swiss composers, the arpeggio motifs, in combination with the other features listed above, became immediately recognizable as a reference to the instrument or mountain herdsman. Such motifs often came from the Rigi, the dramatic peak that overlooks the picturesque Swiss tourist destination of Lucerne. Early visitors hiked up the steep track to the top of the peak to enjoy the panorama. After a hotel was built at the top in 1816, porters were provided to carry luggage up to the Kulm (summit), and in 1871 the British built the first funicular railway in Switzerland to its summit. Alphorn players soon began 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 around it. There are numerous contemporary pictorial representations and written descriptions of such scenes.



Ex. 4. Lithograph of an alphorn player entertaining tourists on the Rigi around 1880.<sup>4</sup>

The alphorn was also used to wake 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 clouds 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 . . .”<sup>5</sup>

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 to soak in the scenery around him.<sup>6</sup> An inventory of music held in the Mendelssohn household includes a *Ranz des Chèvres* transcribed by the composer on this tour of Switzerland.<sup>7</sup>

## Alphorn Music in Compositions for the Stage

In the classical repertoire the use of alphorn motifs falls into three main categories: William Tell, homesickness, and pastoral themes.

First were works describing the Swiss hero William Tell, who reputedly outwitted oppressors from the House of Haps-

burg in 1307. In the wake of the French Revolution, France’s New Regime turned away from the frivolity of the operas of the former aristocracy to works that either had a stirring military style, or celebrated peasant life and heroism against tyranny – the story of William Tell provided an ideal script. Belgian composer André Grétry (1741-1813) wrote an opera entitled *William Tell* in Paris in 1791. Grétry’s score 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!

## GUILLAUME TELL. ACTE PREMIER.

### SCENE PREMIERE.

*Le Théâtre. Représente les montagnes de la Suisse; le lever de l'aurore; un petit Père; le fils de Guillaume Tell, est vu sur le point d'un rocher dans le lointain; il joue le Ranz des Vaches. On voit dans les entrées deux des montagnes des Pères des Vaches qui paissent.*

### SCENE II.



Ex. 5. First page from the score of Grétry’s opera William Tell, 1791.<sup>8</sup>

The German poet and philosopher Friedrich von Schiller 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, by Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868), that recounts this story and uses alphorn melodies to portray the Swiss mountains. Rossini, a horn player, as was his father, composed *William Tell* for a Parisian audience in 1829. The end of the second section of the opera features a storm, and the next section restores the peaceful pastoral scene with a passage entitled *Ranz des Vaches*, which opens with an expansive alphorn melody based on a “Rigi-style” arpeggio motif. These phrases, also featured in the overture, were originally given to the *tenoroon* or *alto-fagotto*.<sup>9</sup> However, by the time the score was printed the following year (below), Rossini had re-allocated the solos to the *cor anglais* but had not yet rewritten the part in F. So, despite the designation *Corno Inglese*, the music still appears in bass clef but sounds 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.



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Ex. 6. Rossini: extract from the overture to the opera William Tell, score printed in 1830.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, alphorn music is featured in stage works to represent homesickness. The profound effect on Swiss people working abroad upon hearing a *Kühreien* is well documented. It was forbidden with the threat of death to play or sing alphorn music among soldiers serving outside Switzerland!

In 1821, the English composer Sir Henry Rowley Bishop, famous for the immortal song "Home, Sweet Home" and 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 that was performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, entitled *Clari, or The Maid of Milan*. The opera's libretto came from 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 was given lyrics that transfer the connotations of homesickness, with which the Swiss melody was associated, to the American hearth, and the song reappeared 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. It became so popular that Bishop used it again in a sequel to *Clari*, an opera to which he gave the title *Home, Sweet Home* or the *Ranz des Vaches*, which was produced at Covent Garden and in New York in 1829.<sup>11</sup>



Ex. 7. Melody to Home, Sweet Home by Sir Henry R. Bishop, based on the *Appenzell Kühreien*.

The third type of dramatic music in which alphorn music appears is more general – to depict alpine or pastoral scenes, and in particular in reference to herdsmen, the close of the day, or for reassurance after a storm. 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 that graze them. One has a clarinet



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 horn (stave 1).<sup>12</sup>

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 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 at the conclusion of 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. 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.

Haydn wrote a secular oratorio *The Seasons* 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 horn as the obbligato in Aria No. 11, a song about a herdsman leading his cattle to pasture at the beginning of summer.

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

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 dehnen 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 his comic opera *Dinorah* (1859) written in Paris. The action takes place in a community of herdsman and the text at this point is: *Sui prati il fior, sui piani ai piedi del mandrian, andiam, caprette, per voi crescean l'erbetta, per voi si rinverdi già il prato e si fiore. Ah! andiam! All'ombra assiso io son Su la molle erbetta, e cerco 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!")

Ex. 11. Meyerbeer *Dinorah*: herdsman's duet, full of alphorn motifs.<sup>14</sup>

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

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

This part of the opera was written during the six months he was living in Lucerne. He wrote to his wife Minna about the source of the melody that he first heard during an excursion up the Rigi, where he stayed overnight in order to view the sunrise from the summit. "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 naïve effect."<sup>16</sup> Wagner was so intoxicated with the alphorn music that he notated some of it 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. 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 come from me."<sup>17</sup>

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 with a part for alphorn. 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<sup>b</sup> and then in A. Strauss



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added in a footnote that the alphorn parts could be played on trombones.<sup>18</sup>



Ex. 13. Alphorn part in Strauss's opera *Daphne*.<sup>19</sup>

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

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Reproduced in G. Metraux *Le Ranz des Vaches*, Edition 24 Heures, Lausanne, 1984 p.139
- <sup>2</sup>G. Rhau *Bicinia Gallica, Latina, Germanica et Quaedam Fugae* Wittenberg, Germany, 1545, BL K2c3
- <sup>3</sup>Copper engraving in *Schweizer-Kulturreihen und Volksliedern*, Bern, 1818, BL 87d34, title page
- <sup>4</sup>Reproduced in Bachmann-Geiser *Das Alphorn vom Lock- zum Rockinstrument* Paul Haupt, Bern, 1988 p.53
- <sup>5</sup>Details and diary quotation from R. Larry Todd *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music*, OUP US, 2003 p.99
- <sup>6</sup>gutenberg.spiegel.de Mendelssohn letters. No other source given.
- <sup>7</sup>*Mendelssohn-Studien* 5, 1982, p.123
- <sup>8</sup>A. M. Grétry *William Tell*, Paris, 1791, BL G278j, p.1
- <sup>9</sup>G. Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Macmillan & Co, London, 1889, Vol.1 p.56
- <sup>10</sup>Rossini *William Tell*, score of 1830, BL Hii817, pp.19 & 20
- <sup>11</sup>Duncan, *Home Sweet Home*, University of Rochester Bulletin Vol.4 No.2, Winter 1949
- <sup>12</sup>Haydn *The Creation*, Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, 1820, BL H1051b, and following extract
- <sup>13</sup>Haydn *The Seasons*, Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, 1802, BL h1051f, p.142
- <sup>14</sup>Meyerbeer *Dinorah*, piano reduction, Boosey & Hawkes, London, 1861, BL f115c, p.1
- <sup>15</sup>Wagner *Tristan* Act 3 score of 1860, BL h636c, p.306
- <sup>16</sup>Braunstein *Richard Wagner und die Alpen*, quoted in *The Musical Quarterly*, 1928, Vol. 4, p.411
- <sup>17</sup>Linder *Richard Wagner über Tristan und Isolde*, Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, 1912, p.255
- <sup>18</sup>R Strauss *Daphne*, Oertel, Berlin, 1938
- <sup>19</sup>Reproduced in Bachmann-Geiser *op. cit.*, p.113

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