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Alphorn school blows students away

The sound of the alphorn is luring more and more aspiring musicians of all skill levels up into the mountains – and lungs like bellows aren't a requirement.

Fritz Frautschi founded the Swiss Alphorn School in the Bernese Alps 16 years ago. The alphorn was traditionally used by alpine herdsmen to communicate across the valleys, and Frautschi honours its tradition by teaching outdoors. The Hornberg is a half-hour hike from the Horneggli cable car station, the nearest form of public transport. But the remote setting deters no one. One week after the intensive weekend workshop, Frautschi's weeklong summer course will follow, also being held in a rustic location. Both workshops are booked out.



Swiss Alphorn School

The most difficult part of learning the alphorn is mastering how to blow it. Many alphorn students complain of lip pain. Furthermore, the alphorn is difficult to play because all notes are breath controlled – there are no keys that correspond to certain pitches. Knowing a brass instrument like the cornet, tuba or trombone gives a new alphorn player an advantage.

The alphorn's use varied between the 16th and 20th centuries. It used to be a tool for herdsmen to communicate across neighbouring alps and to call their cows back to the farm for milking. It was also played on summer nights in the Alps as a form of prayer in Protestant regions.

By the start of the 1800s the alphorn had more or less disappeared from herdsmen's use, as individual dairies were increasingly being replaced by big co-operatives. In 1805, the first Aelpferfest on the Unspunnen meadow near Interlaken aimed at boosting a revival in alpine music but it failed, with just two candidates stepping up for the alphorn competition. At the 1808 Aelpferfest there was only one player.

Meanwhile, the instrument was gradually becoming known as a symbol of Switzerland and was attracting tourists. The Bernese Niklaus von Mülinen is attributed with ensuring the tradition did not die out completely. He made alphorns in the 1820s and lent them to singers in Grindelwald, who were taught to use them in courses.

In 1827 the musicologist Joseph Fétis pronounced the alphorn the Swiss national instrument. It was formally brought back into Swiss social life with the founding of the Federal Yodelling Association in 1910, which has organised alphorn blowing courses since 1921 and published traditional tunes and new compositions. At today's alphorn blowing competitions, players range from soloists to quartets and choirs.

After 1968 classical composers established contact with traditional instruments, and in 1972 the first concerto for alphorn and symphony orchestra was composed by Jean Daetwyler. Jam sessions with jazz artists followed. At the beginning of the 1970s, the Federal Yodelling Association accepted the polyphonic playing of a piece entitled Alphorn-Fa and welcomed female candidates at competitions. Professional musicians also started to do more experimental improvisations with the alphorn. It made a crossover to pop in 1977 when Eurovision entry Pepe Lienhard used an alphorn as part of his song 'Swiss Lady'. *swissinfo*

Army gets back its bullets but not all

The Swiss Army should have recuperated most of the ammunition it allows soldiers to keep at home very soon, Defence Minister Ueli Maurer has assured parliamentarians.

More than 240,000 boxes of bullets had been returned by the end of August last year, Maurer said. That is out of a maximum total of 257,000 boxes, according to estimates. The army should have the rest "in the weeks to come," he said.

The army does not expect to recuperate about 7,500 boxes, which were sent to recruitment schools and to those serving a long-term military career. Some 5,200 soldiers have not yet returned their ammunitions but digital records and cross referencing should clarify who has what, Maurer said.

Parliament demanded in 2007 that most of the ammunition sent home with soldiers be returned by the end of 2009.

Switzerland has a militia-style army whereby citizen soldiers can be mustered from all corners of the country in relatively little time should they be needed.

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