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Alphorn – the sound of natural tones

Communication with humans and animals

The alphorn has long been a tool used by shepherds. It was used to call the cows from the pastures and into the barn at milking time. An engraving from 1754 shows a shepherd using the alphorn to motivate the cows to cover the last steep stretch on their big climb up into the Alps. A glass painting from the Emmental Valley dating back to 1595 shows the alphorn being blown, probably to pacify the cows during milking. The blowing of the alphorn in the evening was also a traditional theme in art. This sound served as an evening prayer and was mainly practised in the Reformed cantons, while in the German-speaking Catholic cantons in Central Switzerland, the call to prayer was preferred. The main function of the alphorn was, however, for communication with the herdsmen on the neighbouring Alps and with the people down in the valley below.

From a shadowy existence to the national symbol

After 1800, as the production of cheese increasingly shifted from the Alps to the dairies in the villages, the alphorn was used less and less and almost totally disappeared as an instrument used by Swiss shepherds. When it was hardly being heard at traditional festivals any more, the Bernese official, Niklaus von Mülinen, began to repair alphorns in the 1820s and distribute them to talented players in Grindelwald. It was only with the romanticism of the 19th century and

the revival of folklore and tourism that the alphorn experienced a renaissance and even became a national symbol.

Brass wind instrument made of wood

The key in which an alphorn can be played depends on its length. In Switzerland, the Fis/Ges (F sharp/G flat) alphorn is used, which is 3.5 metres long. Despite or indeed because of its simple design, the alphorn is a difficult instrument to play. This is because all other wind instruments have undergone technical advancements over time (finger holes, valves) while the alphorn has retained its original form. Musicians regard instruments made of wood as being brass instruments because the tones are produced by the same blowing techniques. The distinctive sound of the alphorn, however, combines the richness of a brass wind instrument with the softness of a woodwind instrument.

The distinctive alphorn Fa

In the past, the length of the tree determined the height of the basic pitch. Today, proven measures are used to achieve the desired tuning so as to enable ensemble playing with similarly-tuned alphorns or other musical instruments. Within the tempered tone system the octave interval is divided into 12 semitones. With the alphorn, this so-called chromatic scale can only be produced from the fourth octave on. Of particular note are three tones that do not occur in the tempered tone system. The 7th natural tone is a b that is a bit

too high, the 11th is situated between Fa and F sharp (the famous alphorn Fa), and the 13th sounds a bit higher than A flat.

Making an alphorn

Although there have been repeated changes in the usage and playing of the alphorn between the 16th and 20th centuries, the form of this instrument has not fundamentally altered. The alphorn is still a long, conical tube, bent at the end like a cow's horn. Until the 1930s, the alphorn was made from young, crooked pines growing in steep places. Since this alpine wood grows slowly, the growth rings are very close together. The trunks are cut up, hollowed out and then put back together. Nowadays, alphorn makers also use other types of wood such as ash wood or foreign materials. There are also horns made of carbon. The construction techniques have also changed, and usually the individual parts (hand tube, the central tube, tailpipe and bell) are bonded together and then carved into shape. Both methods – the hollowing out and the piece by piece assembly – require about the same amount of manual work. Over 70 hours are needed for the gouging until the walls are 4 to 7 millimetres wide. The hollowed assembled pieces are held together with rings. A small wooden floor support stabilises the alphorn then the alphorn is wrapped in wicker (rattan). Formerly, linen strips, metal rings, bone or wood and bark strips of cherry or birch were used. For about the last hundred years a mouthpiece has been added to enable the blowing and the tones to be better controlled.

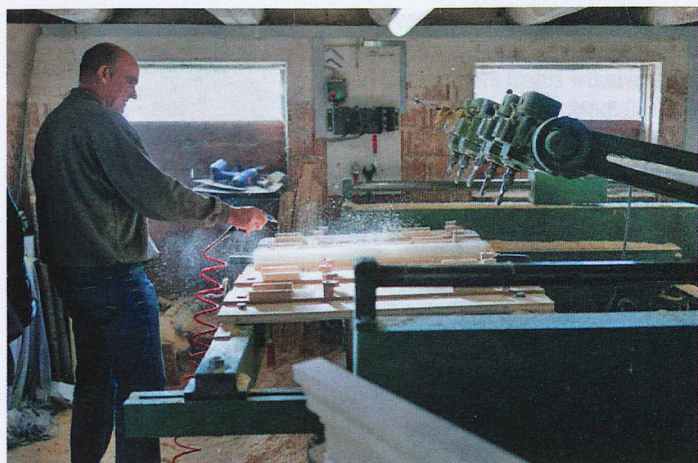
Alphorn as a musical instrument

The Swiss Yodelling Association, to which the alphorn players belong, now has some 1,800 Alphorn blowers in Switzerland and around the world as members – and this number is growing. The alphorn makes a grand appearance at the Swiss Yodelling Festival, in parades held by the Swiss Association for Traditional Costume, as well as at the annual International Alphorn Festival in Nendaz. In addition, the alphorn is encountered in classical music (such as "Sinfonia pastorella" for alphorn and strings in G major by Leopold Mozart and "Parthia" on peasant instruments by Georg Druschetzky), in jazz or in various experiments in modern music.

source: www.myswitzerland.com



The Alphorn Legend



The alphorn was a gift from the spirits – or so the legend says.

Long, long ago, a young herdsman named Res – short for Andreas was guarding the cows on the Bahlisalp above the Haslital. One fine summer's night the lad was woken from his sleep in the hayloft by three strangers in the dairy. A giant was busy doing something with the cauldron that was used for making cheese. A pale, fragile-looking herdsman with golden hair was bringing small wooden pails full of milk from the milking parlour. A huntsman, dressed in green, sat by the fire looking darkly at the embers. He took a small bottle from his pocket and poured blood-red rennet into the hot milk. While the giant busily stirred the mixture, the pale one took a strangely shaped wooden staff and played music outside the hut – but such music as Res had never heard before: long, drawn-out, melancholic notes from the deepest bass, to bright, clear notes of re-joicing. The cattle awoke and all around, the cow-bells started to sound in mellifluous accompaniment to the fading tones of the strange instrument.

Res didn't know whether it made him feel happy or sad in that still, starlit night.

Meanwhile, the huge herdsman had filled three bowls with the whey, and told Res to choose one of them and to drink it. Strange to say, the whey in the first bowl was as red as blood, in the second bowl it was as green as grass, and only in the third bowl was it as white as snow. The giant explained that the red whey would give him strength, courage and power but the huntsman advised him to drink the green whey, for then he would have finest alpine meadows for his own. However, the pale, fragile looking herdsman held out the white whey, and promised to give him the horn. Res remembered the magical sound the horn had made and chose the white one. It tasted like the best milk, and when he put down the bowl, the trio had disappeared. The fire flared up once more and went out but by the hearth lay the alphorn. Dawn was breaking and Res went outside and blew the horn. After playing a few notes he paused and heard how they returned in the echo-like spirit voices.

Down in the Haslital far below, the people marvelled at the majestic sound and asked each other whether the mountains had started to sing.

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