

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1984)
Heft: 1819

Artikel: Fascinating history of the alphorn
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-690673>

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Fascinating history of the alphorn



THE earliest records of the alphorn used in what is now Switzerland date from the 16th century.

It is interesting to note that instruments of the same family also known as alphorns have been used for centuries in Norway, Hungary, Romania and some countries of Asia.

But there is no doubt that Switzerland is the real home of the instrument. The first mention of the Swiss alphorn appears as a 1527 entry in the account book of the St Urban Monastery in the Canton of Lucerne, which had given two pennies to a visiting herdsman with an alphorn.

The alphorn originated in the higher valleys where shepherds used it not only as an instrument producing sounds blending well with the wild environment, but also as an instrument of communication and warning.

It also served a most astonishing purpose, attested by old prints and iconological records, which was that of soothing the cows while they were being milked!

This practice was described in a letter sent in 1563 by the governor of Neuchâtel to the Prince of Orleans who had asked for a Swiss alphorn player to serve as

musician at his court.

The governor explained that he had found a musician with a "cornet de Schwyz" which was used to help his cows make his breakfast!

In winter, shepherds from the higher mountains were without work, and some left the snow-clad pastures carrying their alphorns and trying their luck in the town where they begged or performed as travelling musicians. Thus the alphorn became fairly widespread and could be heard in centres like Graz, Vienna and Paris.

Swiss mercenaries occasionally chanced to hear its melancholy sounds while serving in a foreign land. According to one record, a Swiss soldier was executed in Strasbourg because the sound of an alphorn had roused so much homesickness that he had deserted.

His words before climbing on the scaffold were: "Ihr Brüder allzumal, heut seht ihr mich zum letzten mal. Der Hirten Bub ist doch nur Schuld daran, das Alphorn hat mir solches angetan, das klag ich an". (*Brethren all, today you see me for the last time. The cowherd boy is at fault, but it is the alphorn that has done this to me, and I accuse its call*).

It is now known, too, that already the old confederates, specially those in Unterwalden, knew the alphorn and used it in times of war to call the men to the colours.

The first printed description of an alphorn is to be found in a 1555 edition of Conrad Gessner's "De rarior et admirandis herbis".

This Zurich naturalist's account described that on Mount Pilatus, he met a shepherd with a "litum alpinum", a horn with which the cattle was called, and that it consisted of two slightly curved blocks of wood, hewn out and bound together with osier switches, the whole instrument about 11 feet long.

Another description was given some 200 years later by the scientist Moritz Anton Cappeler who described the "Cornu Alpinum" as being 4 to 12 feet long, three to five fingers wide at the bell and one-and-a-half thumbs wide at the throat.

The alphorn threatened to disappear during the 18th century. In the early 19th century, the Bernese painter Franz Nikolaus Koenig, complained of the alphorn's fast disappearance.

For the first herdsmen's festival at Unspunnen near Interlaken in

1805, organised to reunite the Canton of Berne following a period of strife, commemorative medals were struck with the inscription "In Honour of the Alphorn".

Yet only only two players turned up for the competition, one Ulrich Frutiger from Ringgenberg on the Lake of Brienz, and Ulrich Joss from Walkringen in the Emmental.

They both won a prize, a medal and a black sheep without even having to compete!

But the alphorn was saved from extinction by the Bernese governor Niklaus von Muelinen. He had the idea to send a young alphorn player to Grindelwald where he was commissioned to pick out some good singers and to teach them the alphorn.

These courses were held in 1826 and 1827 and were immortalised on canvas by the artist Vollmar.

Alphorn courses still take place regularly every summer, and over a thousand belong to the Alphorn Players' Association while the remainder, who choose to play as freely as their forefathers, are considered as "savages" by the professionals.

Mariann Meier