

# The colourful history of the Alphorn

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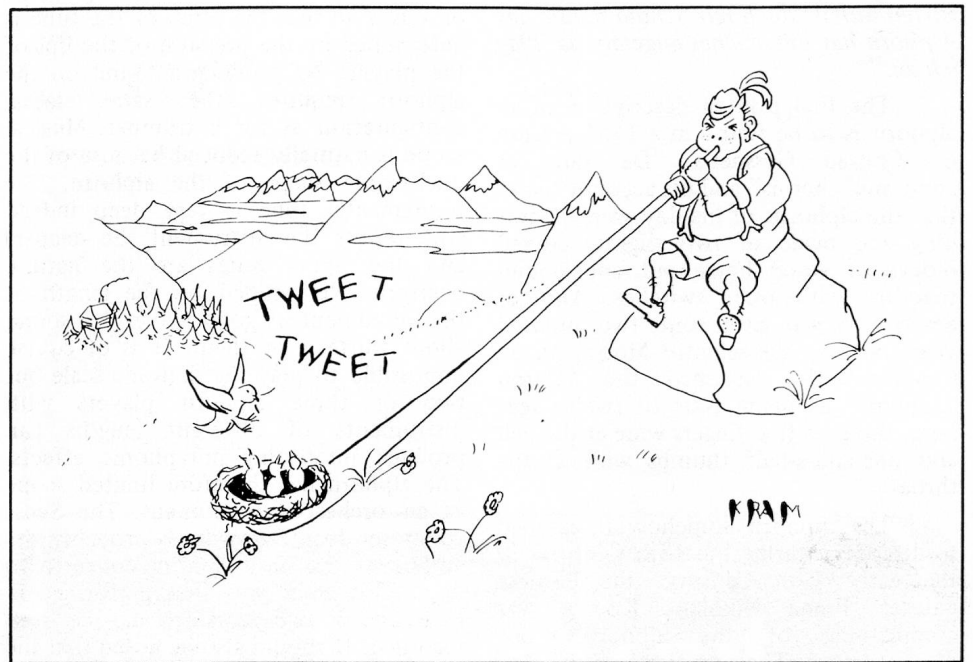
## THE COLOURFUL HISTORY OF THE ALPHORN

Members of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique heard an exposé on a most unusual, if Swiss, subject at the Embassy on Thursday, 2nd May. They heard Dr. Brigitte Geiser, a specialist from Berne on ancient musical instruments and the author of several works in the field, explain the Swiss Alphorn and remind her audience that it is not only an attraction for tourists, but an ancient musical instrument.

A fairly common misconception is to consider the Alphorn as a specifically Swiss instrument. It is true that it has been traditionally associated with Swiss folklore. It is seen on picture postcards, in the trade-marks of Swiss dairy products and is produced whenever possible at Swiss festivals at home and abroad. However, instruments of the same family also known as alphorns have been in use for centuries in Norway, Hungary, Romania and some countries of Asia.

The Alphorn is usually conceived of as a long conical object curved at the end. In fact, earlier versions of the alphorn, which have practically disappeared today were straight. There are also some examples of folded alphorns. The classic shape curved at the end, which is now built all over Switzerland by about twenty manufacturers, mainly farmers and carpenters operating in their spare time, used to be familiar only in Appenzell, in the Bernese Overland and in central Switzerland. There is at present only one full-time alphorn manufacturer. He is Julius Emmenegger of Lucerne.

The shape of the curved alphorn is given by nature. A young pine tree growing on a slope is naturally curved at the base by the pressure of the snow. The traditional method of making an alphorn is to slice the trunk in two halves which were then hollowed out by means of a chisel until the walls attained a thickness of 4 mm. This requires up to 70 hours work which explains the high cost of an alphorn (800 to 1,000 Swiss francs). The two halves are then joined. Rattan is used nowadays but earlier methods called for birch bark or string. The assemblage is secured with wooden rings and modern alphorns, which are a good sixteen feet



long, are provided with a screw bearing and socket which allows them to be separated in two halves and make transportation manageable.

The alphorn variety known as the "Buchel", which is folded in three like a trombone, must of course be assembled from as many pieces since wood cannot be folded like brass.

In the last century, alphorns were manufactured at home by mountain peasants using the most rudimentary tools. There are therefore as many alphorn varieties as there are manufacturers and it is usually a difficult undertaking to trace the origin of some instruments.

Earliest records of the alphorns used in what is now Switzerland date from the 16th Century. The first mention of the Swiss alphorn appears as a 1527 entry in the account book of the St. Urban Monastery in Canton Lucerne which had given two pennies to a visiting herdsman with an alphorn. The alphorn originated in the higher valleys, where shepherds used them not only as an instrument producing sounds blending deeply with the wild environment in

which they lived, 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 cows while they were being milked!

This practice was described in a letter sent in 1563 by the Governor of Neuchatel to the Prince of Orleans, who had asked for a Swiss alphorn blower 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 him breakfast. In winter, shepherds from the higher valley were without work and some left the snow-clad pastures carrying their alphorn and trying their luck in the town, where they begged or performed as rambling musicians. Thus the alphorn was fairly widespread and could be heard in centres like Graz, Vienna and Paris. Swiss mercenaries occasionally chanced to hear its melancholy sounds while they were serving in a foreign land. According to one record, a Swiss soldier was executed in Strasbourg because the sound of an alphorn had released so much

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home-sickness within him that he had deserted. His words before climbing on the scaffold were: "Ihr Bruder allsumal, 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."

The first printed description of an alphorn is to be found in a 1555 edition of Conrad Gessner's "De rarioribus et admirandis herbis" and his account shows that the alphorns of his day were 11 feet long and made of two slightly curved blocks of wood hewn out and bound together with osier switches. Another description was given some two hundred years later by the scientist Moritz Anton Cappeler. He described the "Cornu Alpinum" as being four to twelve feet long, three to five fingers wide at the bell and one-and-a-half thumbs wide at the throat.

The alphorn somehow threatened to disappear during the 18th Century. In the early 19th Century, the Bernese painter Franz Nikolaus Koenig was complaining of the alphorn's fast disappearance. The organisers of the first herdsman festival at Undpunnen near Interlaken, an event staged to reunite Canton Berne following a period of political strife, had commemorative medals stamped with an alphorn player and the inscription: "In Honour of the Alphorn". and yet they found only two candidates for the alphorn-blowing competition: one Ulrich Frutiger from Ringgenberg, on the Lake of Brienz, and Ulrich Joss from Walkringen in the Emmenthal. They both won a prize — a medal and a black sheep — without 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 musician able to play on the alphorn to Grindelwald where he was commissioned to pick out some good singers and teach them the alphorn. These courses were held in 1826 and 1827 and were immortalised on canvas by the Swiss painter Vollmar. Alphorn courses regularly take place today in suitably isolated fields in summer. Over a thousand instrumentalists belong to an Alphorn-players' Association while the remainder, who choose to play as freely as their forefathers, are considered

disdainfully by the professionals as "savages".

The alphorn is a natural instrument of invariable shape devoid of fingerholes or valves so that the pitch of the tune is determined by the pressure of the lips of the player. To produce a sound on the alphorn requires the same labial configuration as for a trumpet. Musical scope is naturally reduced because of the unalterable shape of the alphorn. The fundamental tone is very deep indeed (the longer the instrument the deeper) and the upper notes are the natural overtones determined by the length of the instrument. A good player can sound about thirteen of them. It is of course impossible to play the diatonic scale but two or three alphorn players with instruments of different lengths can produce interesting polyphonic effects. The alphorn has therefore limited scope as an orchestral instrument. The Swiss composer Jean Daetwiler is probably the author of the only alphorn concerto to date. This work was first performed in Paris one or two years ago and has been recorded. It should also be noted that the valveless trumpet for which Bach wrote his trumpet concerto has the same musical characteristics as the alphorn. It is therefore possible to solo this particular work with an alphorn.

One of the alphorn's marked intrusions in the history of classical music was the outcome of a ramble by Brahms on the Rigi on 12th September, 1868. There he heard an alphorn melody which he wrote on a postcard sent to Clara Schumann for her birthday. Eighty years later, that same tune reappeared as the introduction of the fourth movement of Brahms's first symphony.

This rapid look at the past shows that the alphorn is more than a tourist attraction.

*A reader, Mr. Barrie Perrins, has sent us the following additional details on recent efforts at using the Alphorn as an orchestral instrument. His article originally appeared in the "British Bandsman".*

## The Alp Horn — A New Orchestral Instrument

*(Reduction of an article by chb in  
Schweizerische Blasmusikzeitung  
—Swiss National Band Journal—  
dated 13 December 1972)*

Until recently the Alp Horn was an instrument associated immediately with Swiss picture postcards: the herdsman sounding his wooden instrument with snow-covered mountains as background and animals (with bells and horns) as listeners. A popularly held view suggests that a Swiss, if he is not a banker, plays the Alp Horn...

Coming from who knows where, the Alp Horn is a plebian variant of the hunting horn. This instrument might have continued its limited use in charming goats and the flight of the eagle had it not been for Jozsef Molnar.

Horn soloist of the Chamber Orchestra of Lausanne, professor at the Conservatories of Lausanne and Fribourg, M. Molnar was born in Hungary. Some years ago he discovered the Alp Horn during a period in central Switzerland. Curiosity made him obtain one of these strange instruments, four metres long, and he began to learn to play it hidden in the studios of Radio Lausanne which was more appropriate than the tenth floor of the property where he lives!

After he had adapted his embouchure to the peculiarities of the Alp Horn, a task not too complicated when one possesses a diploma of virtuosity and is a soloist and orchestral musician, M. Molnar started to explore the repertory of the instrument. Already his talents have been requested for various purposes and a first record, containing five works taken from the instrument's traditional repertory, has been made (VDE EP 1714). But M. Molnar required a work of greater capacity and he began seeking a composer who would not hesitate to throw himself into the adventure! In effect the instrument can only produce a series of natural harmonics and the pitch of notes cannot be corrected or modulated by use of the hand, as with the French Horn.

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The Christopher Columbus of the Alp Horn was the Valaisan composer, Jean Daetwyler, one of Switzerland's best known musicians, particularly in the band music sphere. To penetrate the authentic character of the instrument, Daetwyler began research at the Swiss National Library in Berne and he acquired a complete vision of the Alp Horn's literature and learned how it achieved its popularity in Switzerland. Movement by movement the first Concerto for Alp Horn and Orchestra was finally created in Lucerne by this composer. Early in 1972, under the baton of Jean Daetwyler, the concerto was played in Paris with the collaboration of the Lamoureux Concert Orchestra for the inauguration of the Swiss National Tourist Office. Again at Lucerne, this work received an enthusiastic reception when soloist, conductor and orchestra were recalled twelve times for applause!

The adventure had only begun. Another musician established in Lausanne, Etienne Isoz, has also written a concerto for the Alp Horn which has been recorded with the Lausanne Chamber Orchestra. Jean Daetwyler has also pursued his interest with more compositions for the Alp Horn, with flute and organ and one with a brass quartet. Enthusiasm grows and it is known that in several places other musicians have been tempted by the discovery of this instrument. For Jozsef Molnar the experience continues in the same way for authentic musical discovery and several concerts are already in view, sustaining

everywhere the same interest and enjoyment.

What do traditional musicians think of the Alp Horn? After some understandable irritation they are soon won over by the playing of M. Molnar.

This traditional, historical instrument which figures in the spinal imagery of Switzerland now has a second rôle. Musicians to whom this adventure appeals can obtain recordings made by M. Molnar; there are also radio programmes in which the instrument is featured.

*CODA: The Swiss National Band Journal is probably the only tri-lingual band publication of its kind, being printed in German, French and Italian; besides the German title already quoted it is called Revue des Musiques Suisses and Rivista Bandistica Svizzera.*

## Comment

### COMPULSORY SHOOTING RECONSIDERED

One of the most traditional scenes of Swiss life is to see men in Sunday clothes, their ordnance rifles slung on their shoulders, making for the communal firing range in order to carry out their compulsory shooting tests. These exercises have to be completed every year before a date in August. A *Livret de Tir* duly stamped by the military authority or an official of the firing association

certifies that the tests have been passed. The tests are really within reach of the most inefficient marksman, but can always be failed. For this reason, it is wise to give oneself a weekend or two to spare just in case of a mishap. Failure to complete the tests before the August deadline will entail a compulsory weekend, in uniform in some faraway barracks where the "culprits" will be made to undergo the trials under the watchful eye of a military instructor. This unfortunate outcome occasionally befalls on absent-minded people for whom seven months' notice is not sufficient, or for those who are too busy.

Despite these disadvantages to the quality of life, the burst of rifle fire on Saturday mornings is a familiar sound. The duty of carrying out a set programme has also helped to maintain marksmanship to be among the most popular sports of the Swiss and contributed to keep Switzerland among the leading nations in that field.

As in the case of all traditions, calls for change have been raised and this has led to a reassessment of the problem by an official commission chaired by a national councillor from Lucerne, Mr. H. R. Meyer. There are three arguments against traditional and compulsory weekend shooting exercises.

The first touches on the environment. It cannot be denied that the succession of resounding bangs shaking the windows of houses in the neighbourhood of firing ranges are an environmental nuisance. Most Communes

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