

Nature and the Alphorn: An Analysis of the Iconographic Record

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The alphorn has considerable claim to be the musical instrument most closely related to nature, on a number of grounds: it evolved from the use by the herdsman of an animal horn in its natural form, it is fundamentally just a hollowed out tree, it can only sound the natural harmonics, and it originated for calling in the landscape.

Indeed, throughout its history, the various phases of its use have each had a close relationship with the natural environment. Initially the alphorn was purely a piece of equipment used for communication outdoors. Later, with the rise of tourism in the Alps, it came to be seen as an aural enhancement of the beauty of the mountains, a symbol of the alpine landscape for visitors. This perception is still much in evidence today: we hear the instrument played in places with a natural echo or with a backdrop of an idyllic alpine panorama. Other natural elements shape the story of the alphorn too: the time of day and the weather play their part. Each of these factors is reflected in the music of the instrument: how alphorn music is written down, the musical content of alphorn pieces, the way these are played and the reasons why alphorn motifs are incorporated into classical compositions as a representation of nature and the unspoilt natural world.

MATERIAL FROM WHICH AN ALPHORN IS MADE

The use of an alphorn by the herdsman to call his animals and communicate with other people in the mountains appears to originate from the blowing of a natural animal's horn. Typical images are found on Roman mosaics. One can be seen in Orbe in the Swiss canton of Vaud; a mosaic from Turkey (Figure 1) indicates that the use of the horn in animal husbandry was widespread in the Roman empire.



Figure 1. Roman mosaic from the Villa of Constantine, Antioch, Turkey, c.350 AD.

It is unclear at what stage longer horn-shaped instruments began to be made of other materials. A longer ‘horn’ made of another substance, e.g. wood or metal, retains the name ‘horn’ as it follows the curved and conical shape of an animal’s horn. A longer instrument can produce more notes, and thus may have evolved for more sophisticated musical use; the deeper sounds possible on a longer horn may also have been more appealing to larger animals such as cattle.

Whereas instruments thought to have been for ceremonial or military use, such as the lur or the carnyx, were made of metal, it can generally be observed that longer horn-shaped instruments used in the context of herding were made of wood or wound bark. The earliest depictions that show a herdsman’s horn clearly longer than an animal horn often show an instrument that is bound. This indicates its construction: a suitably shaped tree trunk or thick branch would be halved lengthways, hollowed out, and then bound back together, either all along its length, or with bindings spaced at intervals as required. It may be bound with any suitable material such as strips of bark, twigs, roots, grasses, reeds, or even metal.



Figure 2 (left). The *Utrecht Psalter*, illustration for Psalm 150, shows peasants blowing bound horns. The manuscript was probably created in Rhiems, France, around 816-834 AD.¹

Figure 3 (right). Carving on a tenth-century stone Celtic cross at Jurby, Isle of Man, that shows a figure blowing a bound horn.

¹: Utrecht University Library, ID: Script. eccl. 484, f.83r.

Many horns with binding appear in mediaeval manuscripts, played by monks.² Monasteries owned vast tracts of land in the Middle Ages and the management of stock was a substantial part of monastic income.



Figure 4. A monk blows a bound horn. Detail from an illuminated letter E at the beginning of the word 'Exultate', *Psalter with Canticles*, English, thirteenth century.³

The earliest surviving wooden horns in museums and private collections include some horns bound with hoops, some fully bound instruments and some that use a combination of the two techniques.



Figure 5. Collection of wooden herdsmen's horns assembled for a temporary exhibition at the museum of Ilanz, central Switzerland, in 2011. Some are bound with cane hoops, others with metal bands.

2: A number of such depictions can be viewed on the author's comprehensive online database of alphorn images 'Alphorn Historic Artwork Archive', <https://www.airtable.com/universe/expbzNdeLwX2sTBVY/alphorn-historic-artwork-archive>.

3: British Library, London, ID: Harley 5102, f.77v.



Figure 6 (left). Böbs Feuz plays the fully bound historic Unspunnen Horn that belongs to the Bernisch-Kantonal Jodelverband (Bernese Cantonal Yodeling Association).

Figure 7 (right). A horn in the museum in Lauterbrunnen, Canton Bern, shows a bound shaft, with hoops wrapped around the bell.

NOTES THAT CAN BE PLAYED: THE NATURAL HARMONICS

When we consider the notes that can be played on a horn, nature calls the tune. Any horn, whether animal or constructed, without valves, finger holes or keys, can only produce notes from its harmonic series. The exact notes available are dictated by the length and shape of the tube: the longer the bore, the more notes can be played, but it needs to be accurately proportioned if its harmonics are to fall in a pleasing pattern. If the octaves are well tuned with each other, an 8ft tube will give the harmonics approximately as follows, although harmonic no. 7 is flatter than written here, and no. 11 falls halfway between the notes F and F sharp.

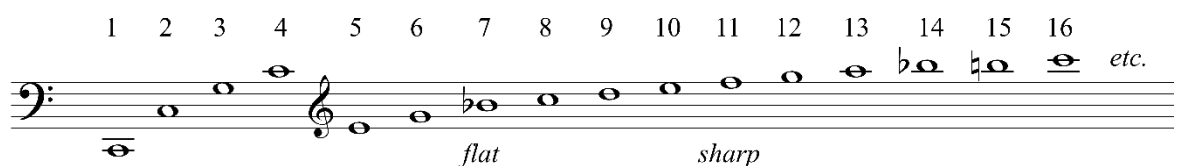


Figure 8. The harmonic series.⁴

On the longest animal horns, such as those of American Longhorn cattle, or a South African kudu, the first five or six notes from the series can be played, although the shape of a natural horn does not enable harmonics that are in tune with each other, as quoted above, to be produced. On a modern accurately-proportioned alphorn of 11 or 12ft in length, one can produce all of these harmonics, in the key dictated by the length of the

⁴ Note that American scholars prefer the terminology of overtones above a given fundamental bass sound. Thus harmonic no. 2 is referred to as overtone no. 1, etc.

instrument.

These notes cannot be adjusted to fit with equal or any other western classical tuning. On pre-valve orchestral horns or trumpets, some tempering is possible, and the most 'out-of-tune' harmonics (nos. 7 and 11) are avoided. European classical music tunings deviate so much from the natural notes, that the first instructions to play natural harmonics in the concert hall, towards the middle of the twentieth century, as a direct reference to the alphorn, caused considerable discomfort among those not aware of natural tuning. Benjamin Britten wrote his *Serenade for Tenor, French Horn and Strings*, in 1943, using natural harmonics in its Prologue and Epilogue. While initial reaction showed a lack of awareness of Britten's symbolism, gradually more informed comments began to appear. Renowned horn player Barry Tuckwell wrote in 1983 that 'these out-of-tune harmonics create a mysterious pastoral atmosphere similar to that evoked by the Swiss Alphorn' (Tuckwell 1983: 113). David Matthews, writing in 2003, regards Britten's use of the natural harmonics here as a general rustic reference when he describes them as '... like a Mahlerian *Naturlaut*, a "sound of nature" (Matthews 2003: 72), while Lloyd Moore in 2011 describes the impact of the sound of natural harmonics on the trained musical ear thus: 'The *Serenade* opens with a Prologue for solo horn played on the instrument's "natural" harmonics (causing some notes to sound deliberately out-of-tune), evoking an atmosphere of "natural," primeval innocence' (Gamble and Lynch 2011: 158). Although these natural harmonics are a property of any tube of a sufficient length, their association by Western classical composers with the world of the alphorn was established in this work.⁵

USES OF THE HERDSMAN'S HORN IN THE LANDSCAPE

Communication with animals

The sophisticated use of horn calls for animal husbandry was well-established by Roman times. Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BC), for example, tells of training young pigs to respond to the horn. In *De Rerum Rusticum*, three volumes that describe Roman farming methods, one section documents the handling of the sow and her new piglets with the training of the young to come to the call of the horn. Events such as the provision of food were associated with a horn call, so that the animals soon learned to recognise the sound:

During the first ten days after delivery ... the swineherd should train them to do everything to the sound of the horn. At first they are kept in the sty; and then, when the horn sounds, the door is opened so that they can come out into a place where barley is spread out in a line. ... The idea to have them gather at the sound of the horn is that they will not become lost when scattered in wooded country. (Terentius Varro 1934: 364)

Polybius was a Greek chronicler who lived around 203-120 BC. In his *Histories*, he describes how swineherds used horns to communicate with pigs on the plains of Tuscany. Families

⁵: Natural harmonics on the trumpet are specified for example in the second movement of Vaughan Williams Symphony No. 3, *A Pastoral Symphony*, in representation of a bugle on the WWI battlefields. This work predates Britten's *Serenade* by 22 years. Both works were written under the dark shadow of war; both use the "out-of-tune" sounds to reflect anguish over the destruction of the pastoral world.

of pigs were taught their own call so that the herdsmen, by blowing their call, could divide up the family groups to take them home at the end of a day, a task that would otherwise be impossible:

The swineherd does not follow close behind the animals but keeps some distance in front of them, sounding his horn every now and then, and the animals follow behind and run together at the sound. Indeed, the complete familiarity that the animals show with the particular horn call that they have learned seems at first astonishing and almost incredible. ... The droves of swine are exceedingly large, especially along the coast of Tuscany: one sow will bring up a thousand pigs, or sometimes even more. They are driven out from their sties in the morning to feed, in the order determined by their litters and ages. If several droves are taken to the same place ... they naturally get mixed up with each other as they are being driven out, as they feed, and as they are being brought home. Thus horn-blowing is used to separate them when they are mixed up together, without effort or difficulty. For as they feed, one swineherd goes in one direction sounding his horn, and another in another: and thus the animals sort themselves, and run towards their own horn call with such eagerness that it is impossible by any means to stop or hinder them. (Polybius 1927: 313)

By the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, then, the sounding of a horn had become an integral part of rural life.

The earliest images of herdsmen with their animals that show longer horns, date from the thirteenth century. Two such illustrations of cowherds with their cattle can be seen in *Der Sachsenspiegel*, a book of law from Saxony in central Germany, dating from 1220-1235.



Figure 9. A cowherd holds his horn. *Der Sachsenspiegel*.⁶

Religious iconography gives us many examples of long herding horns, especially in the depiction of the shepherds in the Christmas story. In a French Dominican Breviary of 1270-80, three shepherds come to worship the baby Jesus in the stable, carrying bagpipes and at least one long bound horn.

6: Four of the original seven manuscripts survive. This copy is in the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Leipzig, f.31r.

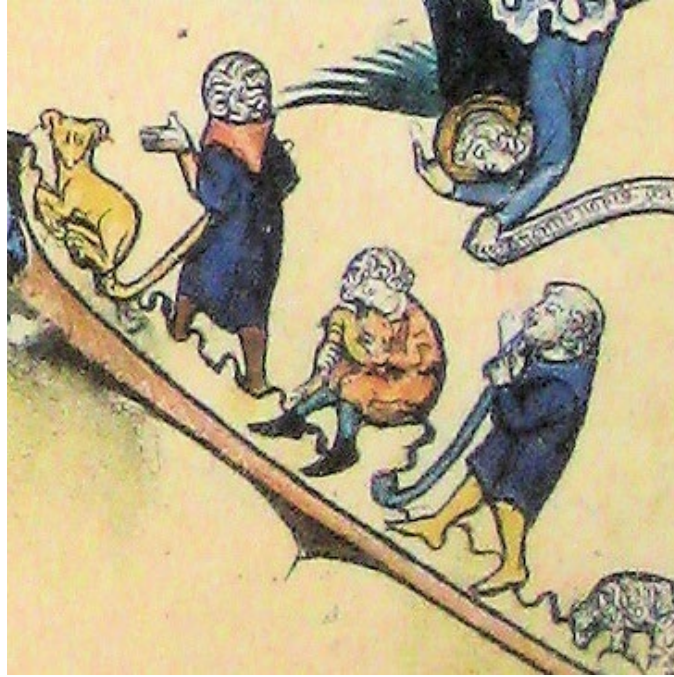


Figure 10. Shepherds approach the crib with their animals and instruments.
Dominican Breviary, French, 1270-80.⁷

In the Alps, cows spend the winter in the barns and can graze the high pasture-land only during the summer months. From the mid-eighteenth century there is a visual record of the journeys to the high pastures, images that show the herdsman guiding the animals by blowing his alphorn. A Swiss prayer-book compiled by Abraham Kyburtz in 1754, *Theologia Naturalis*, contains an engraving with the caption: *Aufarth eines Kühers mit Weib und Kind, Haab und Vieh auf den Berg* (Ascent of a cowherd with wife and child, belongings and cattle up the mountain). The illustration accompanies a prayer for their safe-keeping (Kyburtz 1754, photo by the author).

⁷: Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag, Netherlands, ID: MS 76J18.



Figure 11. An engraving in a mid-eighteenth-century prayer book by Abraham Kyburtz, *Theologia Naturalis*, shows a herdsman leading his animals to the high pastures.

Communication with people outdoors

At least since Roman times, the horn described as a pastoral horn has also been used to attract the attention of people in the landscape. The poet Virgil (70-19 BC) wrote in his epic poem *Aeneid* of the taking of Italy by the Trojans, with the assistance of various goddesses and Furies. In Book 7, Virgil describes the blowing of a pastoral horn by a goddess to rally the people. The description includes a factor that is a recurring theme in the use of horns for calling: that the horn blower stands on a high vantage point. This may be an outcrop of rock, the roof of a building, a high tower or some other place from which the sound will be thrown to the maximum (Virgil 1918: 34):

[...] the goddess, on finding those to be harmed, from her vantage-point, in anger seeks out a high stable roof and from the highest point plays a fierce signal on a curved pastoral horn. She directs the infernal sound so that the fields tremble and the deep woods resound. It reverberated in the Trivia Lake for a long time; also in the white sulphurous river of Nar and the fountains of Velinus, and terrified mothers clasped their infants to their bosoms. The horn gave a terrible signal, and at the sound the farmers quickly and wildly ran away like darts and indeed the population of Troy poured out of the open camps to Ascanius for help.



Figure 12. An alphorn player blows the horn from a rooftop. Detail from an illustration by Gabriel Ludwig Lory in Johann Rudolf Wyss, ed. *Sammlung von Schweizer Kühreihen und Volksliedern*, fourth edition (Bern: Burgdorfer, 1826), front pages.

The horn depicted on a Celtic cross on the Isle of Man shown in Figure 3, earlier, is also thought to have had a rallying function: it is believed to be the Gjallar Horn, played by the Norse god Heimdall, who keeps watch for invaders and would blow the horn summon the gods in times of need.⁸

Documents describe that alphorns in Switzerland were sometimes used for a similar purpose. In 1212 a herdsman blew on his alphorn in the Baldschiedertal in the canton of Valais to warn of the approaching men of Unterwalden, thereby alerting his people to resist the enemy (Sommer 2010: 31). In 1653 during an uprising in the Entlebuch region, people were summoned to fight with a call on an alphorn (Geiser 1976: 10).

Herdsmen would use the alphorn in their daily routine to communicate with each other across the alpine meadows, and with the people in the valley below. It was a necessary part of the herding way of life that the villagers needed to know that the herdsman and his herd, alone in the high pastures, were safe. A melody was played every evening at sunset in order to let the people down in the valleys know that all was well (Bachmann-Geiser 1999: 33). It would also be played for the same reason after natural events where the life of the herdsman or his animals could be endangered, such as a thunderstorm (Ammann, Kammermann and Wey 2019: 112).

8: Scenes from many Norse sagas are found on Celtic stone carvings. This horn is described in a number of sources, for example in the Manx National Museum, <https://www.imuseum.im/search/collections/archive/mnh-museum-698967.html>, accessed 18 December 2022.



Figure 13. A herdsman plays at sunset to the villagers in the valley below. Engraving by Gabriel Lory (Wyss 1818: title page).

The alphorn was also used for outdoor prayer (Ammann, Kammermann and Wey 2019: III). John Murray, in his guidebook for tourists *A Hand-Book for Travellers in Switzerland, Savoy and Piedmont* published in 1838, describes the practice:

In some of the remoter pastoral districts of Switzerland, from which the ancient simplicity of manners is not altogether banished, the Alp-horn supplies, on the higher pastures, where no church is near, the place of the vesper-bell. The cow-herd, posted on the highest peak, as soon as the sun has set, pours forth the first 4 or 5 notes of the Psalm "Praise God the Lord;" the same notes are repeated from distant Alps, and all within hearing, uncovering their heads and bending their knees, repeat their evening orison, after which the cattle are penned in their stalls, and the shepherds betake themselves to rest. (Murray 1838: 36)

With the beginning of Alpine tourism from around the middle of the eighteenth century, the alphorn began to be played specifically for the visitors: this was to become a new source of income for mountain-dwellers. To hear the alphorn played at sunset or sunrise was recognised as such a magical experience for tourists that players would be positioned in picturesque places to play for the visitors at dawn and at dusk. The most famous location where this became a nightly routine was at the summit of the Rigi, which overlooks the lakes around Lucerne (Bachmann-Geiser 1999: 51). Many paintings show these events.



Fig. 14. An alphorn is played at sunrise for visitors on the Rigi. Detail, *Sonnenaufgang auf der Rigi*, Franz Niklaus König, c.1810. This large painting, 4ft wide, is on translucent paper, one of about 100 that König created to be displayed back-lit in a viewing cabinet that he constructed for the purpose. The cabinet is now in the Kunstmuseum, Bern.

An alphorn player would also regularly play for tourists in a place where he could obtain an atmospheric natural echo, for example where the sound can rebound off a steep mountainside. A favourite location for this was above the village of Grindelwald, where the notes reverberate off the face of the Wetterhorn.



Figure 15. A horn is played for tourists, positioned to achieve rich echoes from the north face of the Wetterhorn. *Passage du Scheidegg au Cant Bern*, David Alois Schmid, early / mid-nineteenth century.

There are many written reports of the magical and unforgettable effect of the sound of the alphorn played in these surroundings. A typical description is provided by Murray in his 1838 *Hand-Book*:

Upon the slope in front of the Wetterhorn is usually stationed one who blows the *alpine horn*, a rude tube of wood, 6 or 8 feet long. The traveller should on no account omit to stop and listen. A few seconds after the horn has ceased, the few and simple notes of the instrument are caught up and repeated by the echoes of the vast cliff of the Wetterhorn, and return to the ear refined and softened, yet perfectly distinct, as it were an aerial concert warbling among the crags. (Murray 1838: 80)

A more specialised use for the alphorn was to place players at pre-arranged locations to relay messages over considerable distances. One such network in the Bernese Oberland in use as late as 1855 is described by Heinrich Szadrowsky in the *Jahrbuch des Schweizer Alpenclubs*:

In the Bernese Oberland there are 12 to 14 stations for alphorn players: near Staubach; above the village of Wengen, near Mettenberg, up on Reichenbach; up on Alpbigel [otherwise known as Alpiglen], opposite the Eiger, on the road between Wengen and Scheidegg, outside Grindelwald; on the road to Grindelwald, on the bank of the Lütschine; between Rosenlauri and Scheidegg; up on the Faulhorn, at the foot of the summit; on the Heimwehfluh near Interlaken, etc. (Szadrowsky 1878/1868: 313, translated by the author)

When we consider the alphorn as a hobby instrument today, this relationship with the natural mountain landscape has remained an essential part of the alphorn experience. Alphorn courses feature playing in wonderful locations, often places where there is a natural echo, off a secluded lake surface, or high crags – sometimes both.



Figure 16. Diemtigtal Alphornseminar, 2019. Players enjoy the natural acoustics at Seebergsee. Photo: Daniel Pfenninger.

Alternatively, gatherings of a hundred players or more are held each summer in a location with a magnificent mountain backdrop, where the natural landscape provides an extra element of delight to the experience both for the players and for the tourists who come to enjoy these occasions.



Figure 17. Alphorntreffen on Männlichen, August 2016, with the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau in the background.

Alphorn players and listeners also enjoy the effect of playing at sunset and at sunrise. Players greet the first appearance of the sun each year on Swiss National Day, 1st August, on the summit of Titlis: a popular event that regularly attracts around 200 spectators.



Figure 18. Seven alphorn players celebrate the sunrise on the summit of Titlis at 06:17 on Swiss National Day, 1st August, 2019.

REPRESENTATION OF NATURE IN MUSIC COMPOSED FOR THE ALPHORN

It is not surprising that most works composed for alphorn are intended to reflect nature. This is conveyed either in a title, or in the atmosphere created in the music, or both.

Many titles involve evening time or sunset, like *Abendruhe* (Evening Peace), *Abendrot* (Evening Glow) or *Abendlied* (Evening Song); others reflect the ancient herding tradition: *Kühreihen* (Music for the Procession of Cows) or *Bi de Rinder* (By the Cattle). Dozens of alphorn melodies carry the name of a place – it is said that in some of these the melody follows the shape of the skyline as seen from that place.

Alphorn music typically includes written instructions that the music should reflect freedom from strict pulse, to be a natural flow of sound. There are many echo passages and pauses to allow for resonance in the natural landscape to settle before the music continues. Giovanni Battista Viotti wrote vivid descriptions of hearing alphorn music in the mountains, and the difficulty of trying to capture the effect in musical notation. He explains in a letter of 1792 that the music must not be structured or be given any pulse, if it is to be authentic and retain its natural character:

I transcribed the notes without pulse, in other words without bars. The melody needs to be without structure in order to be its authentic self; the least pulse distorts its effect: it is more accurate to leave the sounds hanging in the air, as you cannot determine the time it takes for them to resound from one mountain to another. This is the feeling and the thought that brings authenticity, not pulse and rhythmic phrases. This *Rans des Vaches* put into bars becomes unnatural and loses its simplicity; therefore, to play it as I heard it, your imagination must take you to where it was born, and those in England must direct all their mental powers to being in Switzerland. This is how in some ravishing moments I have played it on my violin, so that people can hear it well. (Viotti, quoted and translated in Jones 2014: 200)

The reawakening of the alphorn as a hobby instrument began in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Gradually since then a new repertoire of alphorn melodies has been created. A seminal collection of alphorn music was assembled by Alfred Leonz Gassmann in *s'Alphornbüechli*, published by Hug, Zürich, in 1938. Typical of the style is *Am Brienzersee* (Beside Lake Brienz), for example, which demonstrates breath-length phrases that end with a paused note, freedom from strict pulse or rhythm, repeating motifs, contrasting slower and faster sections and motifs repeated to represent an echo. All within a piece of just 20 bars in length, the written instructions also reiterate the stylistic requirements with such comments as *Kräftig und bestimmt* (strong and clear), *steigernd* (crescendo), *etwas bewegter* (somewhat moving forward), *echo, rit.*, and *ten.*, many pauses, commas, copious dynamic markings and the comment below the music '*Während der I. und III. Teil in majestätischer Größe erstehen, soll der II. Teil leicht beschwingt erklingen*' (While the first and third sections should rise in great majesty, the second part should have a light, swinging sound).

53. Am Brienzerjee

Nach H. Hofmann'schen Motiven von
A. L. Gassmann



Während der I. und III. Teil in majestätischer Größe erstehen, soll der II. Teil leicht beschwingt erklingen.

Figure 19. Gassmann, *s'Alphornbüechli: Am Brienzersee*.

Alongside hundreds of melodies written in this alphorn style, other compositions for the alphorn demonstrate a relationship with the natural environment in different ways, for example:

Hans-Jürg Sommer's *Moos-Ruef* (Call over the Moorland), written in 1981, is a particularly haunting duet based on the minor tonality. It begins with an atmospheric, mysterious solo, followed by a conversational discourse. A mischievous Dance of the Spirits suggests shapes appearing and disappearing in the mist before the first section returns, somehow sounding more reassuring as it comes to a gentle close.

Firnfern I (Distant Horizon I), composed by Balthasar Streiff in 1997, is another gentle, atmospheric duet, as the title suggests. The melody is shared between two alphorns, one tuned in F and the other in G flat. Often the F alphorn player is given a phrase and then the G flat player responds with the echo a semitone higher. The effect is extraordinarily evocative.

In contrast, Jean Daetwyler's *Dialogue avec la nature*, for alphorn, piccolo and orchestra, is a descriptive work, a series of reflections of Switzerland's natural landscape, although not with the images with which the alphorn is usually associated. While other composers celebrate the beauty of the alpine landscape with the beautiful sounds of the alphorn call, Daetwyler chooses here to do the opposite. The first movement depicts the insignificance of man in the world of nature and the isolation of the herdsman alone in the mountains, with a forbidding backdrop of emptiness, of snowfields and glaciers. Herdsman's calls are interspersed with shimmering, unsettling music that creates pictures of intimidating open spaces and jagged, dangerous icefalls. In the second movement the alphorn player is less a soloist, more a participant in a surreal, spooky dance, as if spirits and skeletons are cavorting and celebrating the transience of man. The third movement sets up an ominous atmosphere, with forlorn bird calls on flute, piccolo and oboe. Traditional alphorn calls eventually grow into a solemn rendition of the celebrated *Ranz des Vaches*. The fourth movement is a grotesque and driving Dance of Death with a central

funeral procession. The use of the alphorn as the voice of the Swiss landscape in this work has no connection with communication of the beauty of an idyllic holiday destination.

Alarum for a Warmer World was written by my husband, Martin Jones, for performance at the opening of the first World Conference on Climate Change in Exeter, UK, in 2005. There were a number of reasons for the choice of the alphorn for this *Alarum* (*quasi*-Shakespeare). It ‘sounds the alarm’: a wake-up call to scientists who had gathered from across the globe, and a warning of the potential dangers to come if we do not address what we might be doing to our planet. The alphorn was also an appropriate choice of instrument because of its simplicity, its strength and its position as a symbol of the landscape, particularly that of Switzerland, a country so visibly affected by climate change with the dramatic retreat of its glaciers and permafrost layer. The music opens with an arresting call, followed by its echo. It proceeds with many motivic statements, perhaps questioning, perhaps answers or comments, in a multi-sectioned Shakespearian declamatory monologue. The call to action returns as a final reprise: a plan to protect our planet must be established before the close of the conference.

An Englyn for Frances by Welsh composer Gareth Peredur Churchill was also written in 2005. An *englyn* is a form of Welsh poetry. Based on the minor tonality, it is a piece that depicts the gentle, misty Welsh landscape. The sound of the natural harmonics, the rich tone and freedom from rhythm give the work a primeval, timeless atmosphere. This alphorn work is a reflection of a landscape, but one very different from that of Switzerland. It is extraordinary that a Welsh composer chose the voice of the alphorn to represent his own natural world and that he has been able to convey an equally haunting impression with this instrument, although it is a world so different from the landscape of the Alps.

Tree of Light was the result of a commission from the London 2012 Olympic Committee for a composition by Orlando Gough to be performed on three occasions at ceremonies to welcome the Olympic torch on its journey around the UK in the weeks before it arrived at the Olympic Stadium in London to light the cauldron for the opening ceremony. *Tree of Light* is a multi-media work scored for multiple choirs and a small amplified band. It describes our interaction with the environment, mistakes made and lessons learned. The work consists of 14 musical numbers that follow the life-story of a tree in the forest: it tells of the forest’s growth and of the habitat it provides for animal life, its use for timber, its depletion, plunder and burning, its regrowth and finally its conservation. The alphorn is the voice of the tree: the spokesman for the forest. Its first solo bears the title ‘The Singing Heart of the Tree’; it has two further substantial solos during the 45-minute production. It is rare to find the alphorn used not because it is Swiss, but because it is a tree. Gough’s music for the instrument is primeval and powerful, majestic and proud.

THE ALPHORN CALL AS A REPRESENTATION OF NATURE IN ORCHESTRAL MUSIC

Dozens of mainstream classical composers have incorporated alphorn calls in their works (Bachmann Geiser 1999:110; Jones 2020). Every example is a reference to the

heritage of the alphorn, either to the herdsman, the mountains or the historic uses of the instrument. The context is typically music that refers to the natural mountain landscape, a pastoral scene, the return of peace after a thunderstorm, sunrise or sunset, or eveningtide. Composers may incorporate a known alphorn call, or write something in an alphorn style. Often such motifs are written for the French horn, while another preferred instrument is the *cor anglais*. An alphorn-like melody is generally set either unaccompanied or against a peaceful backdrop, it often includes echo effects, pauses and a suspension of regular pulse. In the contexts in which the motifs are used, the references to the alphorn as the representative of the natural landscape are unmistakable.

At times a cheerful alphorn call is used to set a rustic scene. Felix Mendelssohn included bright alphorn calls in his early compositions: he visited the summit of the Rigi, above Lucerne, a number of times and wrote in his letters of the cheerful alphorn and the magnificent views. Buoyant alphorn calls open Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 4. On the other hand, the absence of a call at the end of the third movement in Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* is used to signify loneliness and abandonment.

Typical are references to sunrise, for example Carl Nielsen's magical overlapping horn calls that form the opening of his Overture *Helios*, as the sun ascends over the Aegean sea. The setting sun is depicted in Richard Strauss's *Eine Alpensinfonie* by a glorious descending horn melody.

A number of composers use an alphorn motif to signal that all is well again after a thunderstorm. This we can hear at the beginning of the final movement of Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony, it is used to the same effect in Liszt's *Les Préludes*, and by Richard Strauss in *Ein Heldenleben*. Johannes Brahms jotted down the call of a herdsman that he heard in Lauterbrunnen in 1868, which he later used as a theme of calmness after much turbulence in his Symphony No. 1.

Nature played a more specific role in the creation of a melody for Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. In 1859 the composer made a trip to the summit of the Rigi, where he stayed overnight in order to be able watch the sunrise the next morning. He wrote to his wife:

At four in the morning we were woken by the guide with an alphorn –
I jumped up, and saw that it was raining, so went back to bed to try to sleep
again; but the droll call went round and round in my head and out of it came
a very cheerful melody that the herdsman now blows to call Isolde's ship,
making a surprisingly merry and naïve effect. (Lindner 1912: 101)

Through these few examples we can see that the sound of the alphorn is a significant voice of nature in the concert hall. It shares the role with music for the hunting horn or the post horn, and that of the rustic bagpipe and panpipe, and music that imitates bird calls; it takes its place among depictions of such natural phenomena as thunderstorms, sunrises and sunsets, babbling brooks and turbulent seas. This is the instrument that comes from natural substances, an animal horn or a tree, that became a tool for the herdsman in the natural environment, that can only play notes from the natural harmonic series. The

appeal of its unsophisticated and powerful sound proved bewitching to visitors to the Alps, including a significant number of composers who were to fall under the spell of its special sound. From the sixteenth century to the present day, composers have made use of the alphorn call to enrich their own musical language and give chosen passages greater impact in the narratives that they wish to convey.

The desire by composers to reproduce these sounds in the concert hall, to incorporate them into works as a means to convey the natural environment, and their unmistakable effectiveness, is a remarkable phenomenon. An alphorn call in a concert work has become the ultimate symbol of the pastoral environment for composers for whom its unmistakable presence conveys an immediate message, even to a predominantly urban public who may well never have heard the sound of an alphorn in its original setting. That these references are still understood by audiences today is an extraordinary testament to the power of this music. The alphorn's role as the voice of nature is unique in the musical world.

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