

Everything That You Wanted To Know About the Alphorn

by Christian Schneider
History of the Alphorn

The blowing of tube instruments has been practised for a very long time. Already the people of the Stone Age blew into hollow bones (warning whistles).

We know cave-drawings of the Australian Didgeridoo still being blown the present days; they have an estimated age of 100'000 years. The Jew have known the "Schofar" already for 2000 years - the "Trumpets of Jericho"!

The Gauls must have known a similar horn too! Once they had impressed Julius Caesar with this horn: within a short time they were able to make known dates of war and short messages by a signal over a considerable territory! And in the second century a.D. at the Swiss Vaud a scene of a shepherd with an instrument like an Alphorn, named LITUUS has been discovered on a roman mosaic.

Long ago the special instrument with its peculiarity has already been estimated. In the year 1563, Prince Leonor of Orleans has taken an Alphornblower from Schwyz in his service. Because blowing on the nature trumpet was very difficult and much knowledge was required, the blowers in the 16th and 17th century have been highly respected people and have been closed together in a own guild.

We know from the history of Switzerland how in critical times the "bull from Uri" (a long curved grown horn of a bull) brawled to the battle and how in the Peasant's War (1653) the peasants from the mountains in the "Entlebuch" assembled under the sound of an Alphorn and prepared for war.

From the Middle Ages we know long straight wind-instruments which have got larger a wounded form (nature trumpets). Until the 15th century only nature instruments have been made. Our Alphorn therefore is a nature wind-instrument hold in good repair from ancient times that has not taken part in the development to a well tempered instrument.

Asking for age and origin research workers are in doubt about, if the "Cornua alpina" of the southern Teutons of the mountains of which the Roman Tacitus is reporting, already has been the Alphorn of the present time. Furthermore we have to consider that the wooden or cortical shepherd's horn is not at all found only in the occidental Alps. Similar types of this instrument can be found in many foreign countries.

THE HISTORY OF THE ALPHORN IN SWITZERLAND

In the 9th century the monk Balbulus from St. Gallen has made notes to sequences that are very similar to dances of Alpine cowherds.

1527 for the first time it has been written about Alphorns occurring in Switzerland. In an arithmetic book of the monastery of St. Urban the following notice had been made: "Two coins for a Valaisan with Alphorn". In these decades the Alphornblowing was misused for begging.

1619 a learned man of music described how begging blowers were lolling about in the cities and begging for food. These begging blowers were in most cases Alpine cowherds, who did not earn enough money for their livelihood in winter.

1653 the Alphorn blew the persons together for war, when the reserves were called out for the Peasants' War.

In the 18th century learned travellers began to write down melodies for the Alphorn. A famous person who did so was Johannes Brahms: On 12 September 1868 he had heard near the Stockhorn a melody being blown with an Alphorn; he made a note of that on a postcard which he sent to Clara Schumann. At a later point of time he integrated this melody into the Symphony No. 1 in c-moll.

Leopold Mozart has written the well-known Symphony Pastorella.

Also poems have been written. But for centuries the government had tried to suppress a self-reliant national culture. Prohibitions of songs, dances and festivals have not proved ineffectual. The Alphorn was blown only rarely. But now the national culture began to reconstruct: festivals were celebrated,

songs were sung, people enjoyed and danced. By that the Alphorn fell a bit into oblivion.

On 17 August 1805 at the meadow named "Unspunnen" near Interlaken a festival of shepherds took place with the motto "For the honour of the Alphorn" which had been coined onto medals in memory of the festival. For this festival a competition for blowers had been organised, but only two Alphornblowers took part there.

Things could not go on like that! Therefore the village mayor of Bern in those days gave to a music teacher from the Institutes of Fellenberg the following order: "Mr. Huber (that was his name), you are blowing the Alphorn, as I have heard. Now I would like to prevent that this wonderful national instrument will disappear from our mountains and valleys. I shall have made half a dozen new ones of them, if you would engage in going in the upland, looking there for six young people and teaching them in blowing the Alphorn, and I think, Grindelwald would be the best place for doing that."

No sooner said than done! In the years 1826/27 Mr. Huber realised during the summer his courses in Alphornblowing. This impulse gave a fresh impetus to the Alphornblowing; the original shepherds' instrument was growing to a Swiss national symbol that could not anymore be imagined as absent.

1805 the great shepherds' festival Unspunnen took place, that has been perpetuated by the coloured etching of J.G. Volkmer.

1826 the first course in Alphornblowing managed by F.F. Huber took place in Grindelwald. At the instance of the cantonal president of Mülinen six Alphorns were handed over to young people who were obliged to practise active blowing outside.

1827 the second course in Alphornblowing managed by F.F. Huber took place in Grindelwald. Again free instruments were handed over. The Alphorn was blown in 2 or 3 parts on divers hills.

1869 Festival of Swiss cowherds at Siebnen. Noted down are 15 - 20 blowers. Report by Hch. Sczadrowsky.

1876 Fair of alpine cowherds in Wäggitthal. Six persons participated in the competition of blowers.

1881 First competition of blowers in Muotathal. Report by Ernst Heim.

1885 Second competition of blowers in Muotathal. Report by Ernst Heim.
Final picture: Seven Alphorns blowing together.

1910 Foundation of the Swiss Federal society of yodelers.

1921 First Alphorn-day at Trueb, managed by J. R. Krenger of Interlaken. 12 participants. Owing to a donation of several thousand francs ten instruments could be handed over to young blowers.

1924 Alphorn-day at Interlaken. Handing over of 13 Alphorns to young blowers.

1938 The musician A.L. Gassmann enlivens the scene of the Alphorn lastingly with his working and his booklet "And blow the Alphorn once again for me".

Various Alphorn Types

Fundamentally the pitch of an Alphorn is defined by its length.

Fis-Alphorn: 3.40 m (is standard pitch in switzerland)

F- Alphorn: 3.60 m

E- Alphorn: 3.90 m

As-Alphorn: 3.00 m

B- Büchel: 2.70 m

C- Büchel: 2.20 m

The Fis/Ges-Alphorn

The alphorn in Fis-Ges pitch is the established one in switzerland. The reason why, may be because of the fine sound of the Fis-horn. It's clear and resonant, but also typically soft. Sure, it's length plays a role as well. 3.40 meters is yust handy enough. In its three part construction it matches well into a car's boot. Fis-Alphorns are well suited for concerts in churches, together

with the organ. There exists also a handfull of music notes for alphorn with organ. Music notes for brassbands and Fis-alphorn you will find as well. The Fis-alphorn sometimes is used in a very attractive way in classic orchestras.

Philosophy about the Alphorn

It's just because of its overwhelming simplicity that the Alphorn is a very pretentious instrument.

The Alphorn can be compared with the originality of a simple pencil. We all remember how hard it was to learn writing with the pencil. Over a long time in our precious early days we had learned the handling with the pencil. It has been a long way from the first character "A" to a good written letter of application. But a simple pencil and a piece of paper are enough for a good writer to mediate his feelings, tell about his experience or show his knowledge. And just all these you may also express by blowing your Alphorn.

Even with a simple wooden instrument as the pencil is we are able to express feelings, enjoyment, temperament as well as silence and piece and bring over to other people.

If we compare the Alphorn with other music instruments it seems totally to be out-of-date. Even a piano is a much more extraordinary instrument, a product of scientific research and also of long investigation of people of more than one generation. It needs years of education to become a perfect player of this instrument.

The Alphorn is a simple instrument. You even do not need "finger-acrobatics" for blow-holes. Nevertheless it is one of the instruments that make the most claims on its user. The conical pipe is only an amplifier; it needs the blower, the surroundings, the power, the balance to produce the typical sustaining sound of the Alphorn. The Alphorn-blower does his exercise not only for having done it but also for meditation, he likes to be in harmony and balance. He learns from being in harmony with the nature at a woodland or maybe in the mountains.

But he also has to be willing to learn further through his whole life from this instrument. The nature tones on the wooden conical pipe are very difficult to get by blowing so that it needs much training, if possible every day, to be able to be master of it. Equivalent to these efforts the Alphorn presents such an absolutely solitary brilliancy of sound and fantastic possibilities of dynamic creativeness. Beyond that it is also necessary to have knowledge of all other elements of creativeness in music as there are articulation, phrasing, tempo

and its variations. Alphorn-blowers are masters in producing sound. Blowing the Alphorn is meditation, a style of life.

Blowing the Alphorn may also be a kind of therapy or simply a compensation to hard business. Who knows well blowing this instrument cannot have lost balance.

Maybe it sounds a bit surprising but although we live in a sometimes very hectic time the Alphorn may bring to a growing number of people about a real help for having a higher quality of life.

How Tones are Produced in the Alphorn

What's going on when blowing the Alphorn? The out-breathed air is blowed by pressure of diaphragm through the instrument. By vibration of the lips the passing breath is brought to oscillation. The air inside the Alphorn is being agitated by that. According to a physical law the air in the Alphorn is vibrating in waves, which have a definite length. This wave-length is always a undivided numbered part of the length of the Alphorn. Slowly vibrating the lips is producing long waves and a bass tone is resulting. When quickly vibrating, high tones are arising. Blowing into the Alphorn without vibration of the lips a sound is being formed with an undefinable pitch. The conical horn is serving in any case as acoustic amplifier.

Note:

To produce a tone not only the instrument but also the person is required.

The person is blowing and producing pressure and vibration - the generator.

The instrument is facilitating a long and vibrating air column - the resonator.

Fundamental Rules for the active Alphornplayer

1. Position behind the Alphorn for playing: standing upright, stretching, breathing through, find a self-confident and free personal attitude.

2. No pressure of the upper lips to the mouthpiece. The muscles of the lips should be able to regulate the straining of the upper lips without being squeezed by the mouthpiece.

3. You should avoid blowing up the cheeks. Air bolsters permanently are stretching skin and muscles.

4.No "nodding". For a flexible and slight play all tones of the nature tone scale should be blown with the same position of the head (flexibility). Variations should be made only with the lower jaw, the tongue, the muscles around the mouth and with the pressure of the midriff.

5.It is necessary to use the midriff for playing. At first the lung can better be filled with the help of this organ and second the high register can be played much better by using the midriff as pressure bellows for the lung. Therewith the dynamics of the tone may be regulated much finer and the breath in the lung can be used better.

6.Using of the musical ear and the soul at playing Alphorn. It is pity being master of this instrument only in technical respect. If we use our musical ear and our soul we are able to express our feelings therewith.

7.Regular working! The Alphornplaying depends much on the training of the muscles of the lips and the midriff. That is as it were first-class sport! Who is not regularly exercising (three to seven times a week), will not be able to get control over the regulating of these muscles.

8.Exercising outdoors as much as possible! First of all the concentration and also the positive engagement to the playing goes automatically easier outdoors. One should make good use of that! Also it is much more enjoying and learning goes much easier. Playing at a forest fringe during a sunset may not at all be bad and gives great pleasure and gratitude.

9.The apprenticeship for Alphornplayers runs to approximately two years. One should be able to concentrate oneself fully on that for this time.

10.You hardly can find something more beautiful than playing Alphorn!

Interpretation - Forming Elements

Tone Culture Sound Colour Designates the sort of sound Response
Designates the fullness of the sound

Technique of Blowing Hit Certainty Designates the exact tone attack Agility
The certainty in all tone pitches Intonation The exact tone pitch Ensemble
Playing Precise timing in ensemble playing

Composer's Forming Elements Rhythm Different length of the tones Time
Measurement Correct emphasis of the time measurement (meter count)

Interpreter's Forming Elements Dynamics The forming of the loudness (loud, faint) Partitioning of phrases How to arrange the musical phrases Pronunciation Way of sound attack Tempo Has to be adapted to the character of the melodie part Agogik Small fluctuation in tempo (artistic feeling)

General Elements Choice of Piece of Music Degree of difficulty in blowing technique

Time Duration of a complete interpretation

Musikalität Inspiration of the musical sensation (listener)?

Aussage Deepness of the impression of a performance

Daily Training of an Alphornblower

1. Warm-up Begin of every training with at least 15 minutes of blowing in not over g', at first calmly, taking attention to good breathing, raising of the flexibility.
2. Tone exercises with much legato-playing (slur tones up and down) until e".
3. Working in an Alphorn school-book or analytical working with a piece of music.
4. Training in the high register or playing exercises (only every second day).
5. Blowing out with long and low tones.
6. Massage of the lips by hand or under warm water and perhaps greasing.

How can I get a good embouchure

The best thing is a regular working. Essential thereby is a significant structure of the training. A book could be written only about these facts! I would say: the more chaotic and moody the more bad, the more calm and structured the better the training.

Further one respect has to be considered: A good working may be at least as much enjoying as an important event. Maybe that the daily training will become a real requirement. It is important that we enjoy; it should not only be for attaining one's object but also become the very essential point.

Therefore: We should arrange our training as well as possible and not hurry until we find time to spend for it; it should be planned regularly and provided with high priority. We should be looking for a good and assured locality. It is a great advantage if there is at least one room (cellar) where nobody may be disturbed. We should really have the opportunity to make experiments with our instrument. The sound is perhaps not always well there, but it may be encouraging to have an undisturbed acoustic liberty.

Exercising outdoors is much enjoying. The wideness of the acoustic often leads to a different playing. Physical and psychical we feel much better in the open air and this effect obtains to a playing that is immediately more satisfying. It may not be an advantage to have a great audience at really practising exercises, because the tone exercises become often then performance exercises.