

The Alphorn



Originally a herding instrument, the alphorn is now primarily used as a musical instrument in the alps of Switzerland.

Many of you may have heard it in Silver City and Mineral King when Fred Zurcher played it at sundown or in the backcountry, where its notes echoed off opposing glacial rock walls. Fred often carried the instrument to rock tops, cabin porches, or the high country, aided by mules, horses, or a canvas case for its three disassembled pieces. In a featured video, Ernst Banninger conducts an alphorn choir, creating harmony without relying solely on echoes. The resulting sound is a rich and beautiful experience. Notice the cows in the background, drawn to the sounds, and recall the mules at the DeCarteret pack station in Mineral King, rushing to the corral edge and perking their ears toward it. What a sound, sight, and memory.

Happy Holidays to everyone!

Esther Zurcher

A Brief History of the Alphorn

The alphorn, a long wooden horn associated with the Swiss Alps, has a history deeply rooted in the region's pastoral traditions. Shepherds used it to communicate across valleys, call cows for milking, and signal to other herdsmen, with its sound carrying for kilometers. Although its exact origins are unclear, evidence suggests its use dates back to at least the 13th century, and Roman mosaics may depict an early form of the instrument. By the 19th century, the alphorn experienced a revival due to its musical qualities, becoming a symbol of Swiss tourism and inspiring composers like Beethoven and Mahler to incorporate its sound into their works.

Key Points About the Alphorn:

Primary Use:

Shepherds in the Alps used the alphorn for communication across long distances, to call cows for milking, and to signal other herdsmen.

Sound and Range:

The alphorn's deep, resonant sound can carry for several kilometers due to its length and design.

Historical Evidence:

While its origins are debated, Roman mosaics may depict an early form of the alphorn, and written records from the 16th century reference its use in Switzerland.

Musical Revival:

By the late 19th century, interest in the alphorn grew, leading to its integration into Swiss folk music and even classical compositions.