

The Bells

Mahler calls for bells in the final movement of the symphony, i. e., “3 steel rods with deep, unpitched tones.” However, that is not exactly what Mahler really wanted. He really wanted Church Bells. He had performed the three orchestral movements earlier that year in a Spring concert organized by Richard Strauss, giving rise to the often quoted false story that Strauss premièred the *Second Symphony* (Strauss did actually conduct the rest of the concert).

Now it was nearing the time of the première of the full symphony, and Mahler, as he described to Natalie Bauer-Lechner, walked the streets of Berlin in the snow trying to find suitable bells, or to find a forge where some bells could be cast. He was unsuccessful, so he wrote in the score the orchestration mentioned above. Orchestras usually substitute orchestra chimes, or tubular bells, for the bells Mahler wanted, and they get lost in the Crescendo of the great finale. Sometimes sheets of metal are hung up and banged with a mallet—again very unsatisfactory.

For the performance of the Mahler Second in May 1998 in Colorado Springs, conductor Yaakov Bergmann found some suitable bells, much closer to those Mahler wanted. They are a set of railway

engine bells that were hung at the front of steam locomotives. They belong to Mr. Dave Supperstein, Colorado Springs. Dave’s father collected these bells when steam engines were being scrapped in the 1950s, and they were assembled onto a trailer. Those of us who heard these bells in the performance can say that they leave no doubt that they are *real* bells.

Mr. Supperstein is graciously lending MahlerFest these superb bells for our performance. If the weather permits and we succeed in getting them to Boulder, and into Macky Auditorium in one of the side stage areas, you will hear these glorious bells pealing out the great joy expressed in the music of the finale to the Second Symphony.

Real bells are used rarely in concert, and as for recordings, our friend and Mahler expert, Jerry Fox, tells us that they are used in only two, those being the first electrical recording of this work (1935) by Eugene Ormandy and the Minneapolis Symphony (now remastered and available in good sound on a CD) and the Gilbert Kaplan recording with the London Symphony (Kaplan had the bells of the Yale Carillon [where Mahler had lead the New York Philharmonic in a concert circa 1910] recorded and dubbed into his London recording.)

—Stan Rutenberg

The Alpenhorn

There is no evidence that Mahler ever intended for an Alpenhorn (this is the German word—the English form is alphorn) to be used in one of his symphonies. And yet, its use in the fifth movement of the *Second Symphony* to sound the first call from heaven does seem appropriate.

Mahler no doubt heard alphorns many times during his hikes in the Alps of Austria and Bavaria, where shepherds play this instrument to signal each other, to signal home, or just to play melodies while tending to their chores. The instrument is also used at festivals in Switzerland, Austria and Bavaria.

The music that Mahler wrote for the first call from heaven, calls for an “offstage horn in F”; it could be played on an alphorn. So, why not? According to some authorities we consulted, this has been done rarely, but I have learned that it was done once by the San Francisco Symphony. One of MahlerFest’s goals is to do that which has not been done, or rarely done, before.

Our hornist, Ed Collins, recently purchased a fine alphorn and he proposed to Robert Olson that it be used in the MahlerFest XII *Second Symphony*.

Ed played an alphorn tune at a recent concert of the Longmont Symphony to audience acclaim, so Olson decided to use this instrument in MahlerFest XII.

Another rationale, as if we need one, is that the song *Zu Straßburg auf der Schanz*’ mentions the alphorn as the reason why the soldier decides to go AWOL to visit his homeland, the original poem from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* being about a Swiss soldier who hears an alphorn, which makes him so homesick that he deserts his troop.

General History

There are very scant references to this noble instrument in the literature. *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* says that the instrument is used in mountainous territory for signaling, as well as for playing melodies at festivals. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* confirms these uses and further states that the alphorn was mentioned by Roman historian Tacitus in the first century of this era. Similar instruments, the *Britannica* says, are found in Scandinavia (the Lur), Lithuania, the Carpathians and the Pyrenees. I noticed in a recent *National Geographic* that a very similar

instrument of the same size but made of copper is used in Buddhist ceremonies in Nepal and Tibet.

Christian Schneider, a Swiss alphornist, has on his web page (www.alphorner.ch/gesch_e.htm) some fascinating additional information, extracted and edited for this article .

The blowing of tube instruments has been practiced for a very long time, e g., the people of the Stone Age blew into hollow bones; cave drawings exist of the Australian didgeridoo, with an estimated antiquity of fifty- to a hundred thousand years and which are still being blown at present; and the Hebrews blew the ram's horn, or *Schofar*, some four thousand years ago at the battle of Jericho [Note: scholars and archeologists have not actually found evidence of this famous battle]. The Gauls knew a similar horn—within a short time of encountering Julius Caesar, they were able to make known dates of war and short messages by a signal over a considerable territory.

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.

From the Middle Ages we know of long straight wind instruments which later evolved into

a curled form (natural trumpets). Until the 15th century only natural instruments had been made. The alphorn therefore is a natural wind instrument from ancient times that has not taken part in the development into a well tempered instrument. However, research workers are in doubt about if the “*Cornua alpina*” of the southern Teutons of the mountains, of which the Roman Tacitus reports, is the alphorn of the present time. Furthermore we have to consider that the wooden or cortical shepherd's horn is found not only in the occidental Alps. Similar types of this instrument can be found in many foreign countries.

Some Swiss History

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

In 1527, for the first time, there are writings 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 times, alphorn blowing was misused for begging.

In 1563, Prince Leonor of Orleans took an Alphorn-blower from Schwyz (a Canton of Switzerland) in his service.

In 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.

In 1653, at the start of the Peasant's War, the peasants from the mountains in the *Entlebuch* assembled under the sound of an Alphorn and prepared for war.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, learned travelers began to write down melodies for the alphorn. Leopold Mozart wrote the well known *Symphony Pastorella*. Another famous person who was influenced by the alphorn was Johannes Brahms; on September 12th, 1868 he had heard a melody being blown with an alphorn near the Stockhorn (Bernese Oberland); he made a note of it on a postcard which he sent to Clara Schumann. At a later point in time he integrated this melody into the *Symphony No. 1 in C-minor*.

Richard Wagner asked Wilhelm Heckel to make an instrument in a low register combining the qualities of the oboe and the alphorn. In 1904, Heckel perfected the double reed, conical bore instrument called the heckelphone, used for first time by Richard Strauss in *Salome* and in *Electra*.

Mr. Schneider gives a lengthy list on his home page of alphorn events in Switzerland, from 1805 to the 1930s.

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Other Alphorn Facts

William Hobson, Rocky Mountain Alphorns, Canada, writes to me that

“The best guess is that the alphorn originated in Roman times. The first archeological evidence of the alphorn is a tile mosaic of a Roman era bath in central Switzerland, that features a man playing an instrument that is assumed to be an early alphorn. This is dated 160 C.E. The best guess right now is that the alphorn was a native Helvetian counterpart of the early Roman brass Buccinam made with the local material, wood.

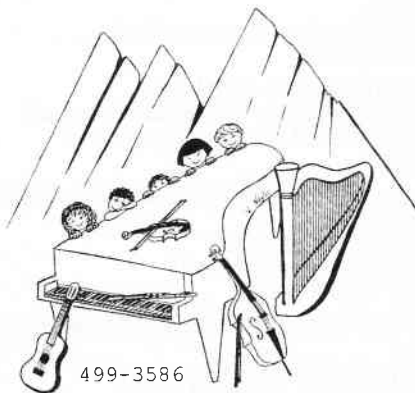
“The alphorn was always a shepherd’s instrument, used as a pastime (calling across the valleys to each other) as well as a signal of any threat to the livestock by wolves or bears, which would turn out the village.

“The signaling function evolved in recent history. Each valley has its traditional signals and calls. In medieval times the alphorn was associated with beggars and buskers in the cities, but in the countryside it was always associated with shepherds and cowherds. It was used to calm the cattle for milking, and the cattle would be conditioned to let down their milk at the sound of the alphorn.”

Mr. Hobson reports that one of the most reputable makers of alphorns is now retired, but that his firm remains the best source of fully professional horns, as opposed to the mass-produced horns produced for the tourist trade in Switzerland and Germany. His alphorns are carved out of prime Sitka Spruce from Vancouver Island, with lathe-turned bell rings of bird’s-eye or curly maple from eastern Canada. For most of its length the horn is wound with rattan peel for added strength.

Now we have the opportunity to hear this historic and grand instrument, a 12-foot alphorn in F, in Macky Auditorium.

—Stan Ruttenberg



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