

Our columnist visits an Alpine Swiss village, where he learns the technology of alphorn-making and tries to play an alphorn himself - with truly disastrous results

AfterAll

by Vitali Vitaliev



MUSIC

How my attempt to play an alphorn ended in embarrassment

OUR AGILE YELLOW post bus was approaching Habkern, at the foot of the Augstmatthorn mountain in Switzerland's Bern canton. In line with an age-old tradition, at every turn of the winding mountain road, the bus driver blew a three-note post-horn playing a motif from Rossini's William Tell overture. As we got closer to the village, however, the wistful wailings of the post-horn were gradually muffled by much stronger and much more melodious sounds, as if some crystal-clear mountain springs of music were running through the skies. "These are our alphorn players practising for the forthcoming music festival," a fellow passenger explained.

Mesmerised by the sound, I wanted to know more about these amazing musical instruments. Luckily, Habkern is home to Switzerland's best-known alphorn factory, Bernatone Alphornbau. Well, 'factory' is a bit of an overstatement to describe a spacious workshop on the first floor of a vast wooden chalet next to the village hall (almost everything else in Habkern is next to the village hall too). It was Saturday, but because of the approaching festival, Heinz Tschiemer, Bernatone's owner, manager and only full-time worker (his wife sometimes comes down to help) was there to meet me.

The workshop smelled of varnish and freshly cut wood. In the centre stood a massive joiner's bench, the size of a railway platform, and on it rested a couple of unfinished alpine horns looking like giant tropical flowers, with long stalks, but as yet no buds. Several finished alphorns were hanging under the ceiling. This traditional joiner's shop atmosphere was somewhat disrupted by a modern Emcoturn E25 lathe, winking its LED monitor from the corner.



Vitali tries in vain to get some sound from an alphorn

"This is my masterpiece-making machine," Heinz smiled.

He went on to explain that alphorns are still made by hand, but can now be designed on a computer. "An average alphorn takes about 3600 frames," he said.

Normally, Heinz churns out one 3.5 metre-long alphorn each week. The wood he uses comes from local pines growing at an altitude of 1500 metres. These trees are often curved at the base by snow and therefore are handy for making the tailpipe - one of the alphorn's main parts (other parts include mouthpiece, hand tube, central tube and bell). The technology of alphorn-making

remains largely unchanged from 500 years ago: individual parts are bonded together and then carved into shape. Then comes gouging of the walls until they are 4 to 7mm thick. The hollowed pieces are joined together with rings, then wrapped in wicker and - bingo - the alphorn is ready to be played.

Unlike other brass or wind instruments, alphorns do not have valves or finger holes, so the individual tones they are capable of can only be generated by altering lip tension - which is much easier said than done, or blown. I did blow it (not the alphorn itself, but playing the alphorn) in a big way when Heinz invited me to test one of his creations. No matter how hard I was straining my lips, the only sounds that came out of the instrument's uncomplaining bell 3.4 metres away could be described as fairly timid, yet ear-grating, cracklings, comparable to the mysterious intercom announcements on some British trains.

Apart from being an Alpine shepherd's favourite means of communication for hundreds of years, an alphorn is of course a musical instrument in its own right, featured in works by Leopold Mozart and other composers - a fact that could explain (partially at least) my complete failure at playing it. My complicated relationship with music started at the tender age of seven when I, like many Soviet kids from 'good families', was coerced into learning piano playing. Not that I was innately averse to music - I hadn't, as they say in Russia, had a bear step on my ear - but my general attitude could be summarised by the words of Samuel Johnson, who thought that of all existing noises music was probably the least disagreeable. My teacher's name was Nadezhda Adolfovna, the patronymic indicating that her father was called Adolf. I had little doubt that she was a clandestine daughter of Adolf Hitler himself, for she had a nasty habit of hitting me on my fingertips with a ruler whenever I pressed a wrong key. No wonder

that after a couple of such one-to-one classes, I started running away and hiding in the park for the duration of the lesson - a ruse that was soon uncovered by my parents, who disrupted the torture. That was the end of my musical education.

My pathetic alphorn playing in Habkern must have been causing Heinz heartache, for he hurried to distract me by coming up to his Emcoturn and quickly turning up an alphorn mouthpiece, which he gave me as a gift (pictured). The advantage of the mouthpiece over an alphorn (in Heinz's eyes, or rather ears) was that no matter how hard I tried I could not extract any sound from it.

Heinz is one of the 20 or so remaining alphorn makers in Switzerland - a disappearing breed. Yet the popularity of this remarkable musical instrument keeps growing, and he manages to sell dozens of them locally and to foreign buyers, mostly from Japan. Unique as it is, the Swiss alphorn has a number of counterparts in other countries - from Australian didgeridoo to Polish ligawka, Romanian bucium, Argentine erke and Ukrainian trembita - all manufactured to the same principle, yet using different technologies. Knowing the After All readers' passion for things unorthodox and their deep interest in music - there is at least one amateur violin-maker among them - I have come up with a new readers' challenge.

Please write to me about unusual musical instruments you may have come across or maybe even played: what they are like and how, where and of what they are made. To give you a couple of examples: abeng - a Jamaican bugle made from cow horn; gaita - Spanish bagpipes; kit - a small pocket violin, made of wood, and so on. You may also want to send in a recording (as an MP3 attachment) which we could reproduce on *E&T's* new website.

I look forward to hearing from you (literally, this time). Together, let's make this After All page "alive with the sound of music!"

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