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The Alphorn in North America: “Blown Yodeling” Within A Transnational Community

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Chapter I

Meeting the North American Alphorn Community

The alphorn enjoys a rich oral history in its native Switzerland. As the instrument has migrated across the world, it has taken on a differential importance in the lives of its adherents. Amateur and professional musicians in North America have adopted the alphorn as a tool that builds community, enhances musical training, and carries on the Swiss tradition to a new generation. This community is much more diverse than its predecessor, in that most of the community members do not have a Swiss or Germanic ethnicity. Unlike its Swiss counterpart, the North American alphorn community relies on different common layers of identity possessed by its members for continuity and growth. Being an alphorn player is, in and of itself, not enough to overcome geographic, socioeconomic, and political differences. However, the members of this community share unique, yet common, traits and experiences that have helped to shape the practice as a whole. Through these multidimensional layers of identity, members are able to:

- identify other community members, both known and imagined, within their subset of the community;
- place themselves within the international alphorn community and identify the differences and commonalities between them; and
- maintain their personal sense of self-identity by realizing individualistic traits that they may or may not share with other community members.

Unlike Vignau's work with alphorn communities in different geographic locations,¹ or studies by Anderson² and Phillips³ dealing with nationalism, the players in this study are not geographically bound. However, these works provided a starting point for the interview questions presented in my project. This musical community stretches much further than North America and it is, in fact, an "infinitely stretchable net of kinship."⁴ Meaningful combinations of experiences and identities combine to create a robust relationship and kinship among alphorn players in an intentionally international community.

STRUCTURE OF RESEARCH

This thesis strives to interpret and analyze information gathered in interviews using practices based in musical migration, transnational identity, and organology. The respondents are both professional brass musicians and many different types of amateurs: those who may have been familiar with an instrument as a child, or those for whom the alphorn is their only musical acquaintance. The amateurs among them hold the alphorn in a different regard than the professional musicians. It tends to be a larger part of their social, and oftentimes musical, lives. The social aspect of music-making is the primary focus of this research. The community has formed as a result of the pursuit of stylistic and aesthetic standards, and not necessarily how they integrate them into their music-making. In this way, the migration of those standards (and not musicians themselves) from the Swiss tradition to the new North American practice will be

¹ Vignau, Charlotte. *Modernity, Complex Societies, and the Alphorn*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.

² Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2016.

³ Phillips, Tim. "Imagined Communities and Self-Identity: An Exploratory Quantitative Analysis." *Sociology* 36, no. 3 (2002): 597-617.

⁴ Anderson, pg. 6.

examined, as well as the ways that they have incorporated those aesthetic values into their schools.

The transnational identity of the *alphorn community*, not of the respondents, will also be discussed. The community itself stretches over national borders, while the individual musicians are not immigrants themselves. North American community members consider Swiss alphorn players and makers their friends. The importance of regular travel to Switzerland for this community cannot be overlooked, and the stagnant nature of being in one place, even stretching over the entire continent, is not a reality for this community. They regularly collaborate and find companionship with Swiss musicians, and have integrated Swiss customs into their musical identity and community.

As I was unable to participate in any in-person events, my interactions with my respondents are limited to interviews. To this end, I hope to receive unfiltered interpretations of my respondents' experiences and will base my research on their past performances, interactions, and other events. I am able to interact with the respondents without appearing like too much of an outsider, as I am a musician with a similar background to some of my respondents. I am a French horn player with a Western classical music performance background, like many of the respondents and community members. I have obtained an alphorn for my own practice, which has increased my understanding of the instrument itself and has given me something to casually discuss with the respondents. This way, they are able to provide me with more detailed, unprompted information about their own experiences regarding actually playing the instrument.

Due to the ongoing worldwide pandemic, “field” research will be carried out via Zoom and through other means of socially distanced communication. The respondents who are able to

use Zoom (Laura, Tony, and Jim) will have both the audio and video of their interviews recorded; the other two respondents (Gary and Bill) will be contacted via phone and only the audio portions of those interviews will be available.

DATA GATHERING

In order to identify potential respondents, I employed respondent-driven sampling.⁵ My first respondent was Laura Nelson, whom I worked with on a prior term project. She provided me with the names and contact information of other alphorn players, each of whom was willing to participate in my research. Over the course of my interviews, I received the names of other community members from respondents and would reach out to them accordingly. After my initial contacts beyond Laura, I did not reach out to other community members unless they had been mentioned by one or more of my respondents. By the end of the study, I was in contact with several sets of community members that were not familiar with one another; however, due to the small size of the community and limited number of events, most of the respondents had participated in the same experiences as the others. This provided me with several different perspectives on the same event or retreat.

My primary respondents are:

- a. Laura Nelson, Erie, PA
- b. Gary Bang, Staunton, VA
- c. Tony Brazelton, Salt Lake City, UT
- d. William (Bill) Hopson, Calgary, AB
- e. Jim Hopson, Vancouver, BC

⁵ Heckathorn Douglas. Snowball Versus Respondent-Driven Sampling. *Sociological Methodology*, 41(1), 355–366. 2011.

- f. Dr. Peggy DeMers, Houston, TX
- g. John and Christine Griffith, Lansing, MI
- h. Participants of the Midwest Alphorn Retreat: MI, IL, IN, and surrounding states
- i. Monica Hambrick, Fayetteville, WV

My research was structured around the following timeline:

1. Conduct a literature review on pre-existing studies on similar topics.
2. Reach out to respondents via email (first contact); set up Zoom interviews or arrange for another method.
3. Interview community members. Each respondent will be treated equally; each one is a “key” respondent at this time. The interviews are structured but somewhat conversational in tone.
4. Conduct a second round of interviews; observe a virtual group rehearsal.
5. Conduct a survey of the respondents to provide concrete qualitative data about specific questions related to self and group identity.
6. Compile “field” notes, interview transcriptions, and survey responses to present an analysis of my research.

Obviously, the largest impediment to doing field research at the present moment is the COVID-19 pandemic. This limited my ability to see music being performed live by my respondents, and to get a first-hand account of the festivals and performances that I am studying. This also has a huge impact on my research methodology, as I was unable to participate in any events, and had to rely solely on the interviews. As most of the major alphorn events are held throughout the summer and fall seasons, over a year of performances has been canceled due to the current state of events and I was not able to ask community members about their current

performance schedules, recent competition performances, or upcoming events. At this time, when they can resume is unknown by everyone.

Fortunately, an advantage of the pandemic is that many people had more time available, and they were willing to speak with me about my research subject. While I was not able to see any live performances, geography did not hinder me in regard to whom I interviewed over Zoom and other means. In person only, I would have been limited to interacting with participants of a certain school or region, but I was able to speak with respondents in both Canada and the United States that attend various events and perform in vastly different settings. Had the pandemic not been a hindrance, I would have spoken directly and in person to a more limited variety of musicians than I ended up interviewing.

STUDYING THE ALPHORN

The basis of my research was informed by literature surrounding the history of the alphorn, imagined communities and identity, cultural tourism, and organology. Each of these subjects has been well-researched in different contexts. Historical studies of the instrument are based solely in Switzerland. Research into imagined communities and identity are normally based in nationalism, and a person's identity as it pertains to citizenship. The articles that deal with cultural tourism also explore topics related to occupational folklife, especially within Switzerland. Organological materials relate to theory, the alphorn, and the social lives of musical instruments; this will be discussed in chapter four.

This project endeavors to address the current state of the alphorn community in North America and how it has developed over time. Presently, the alphorn lives in both a state of resurgence in the musical community and of anonymity to those unfamiliar with Swiss culture or

non-musicians. Most recognizable to the North American layperson as the instrument featured in Ricola cough drop commercials, the alphorn is a beloved Swiss national icon that has been adopted by music lovers and instrumentalists abroad as a way of connecting to a cultural or ethnic heritage, and a musical challenge for those acquainted with other wind instruments. The only other recent, major piece of ethnomusicological literature on the alphorn was published by Charlotte Vignau in 2013. Her work, *Modernity, Complex Societies, and the Alphorn*, contains the only modern study of the alphorn outside of Switzerland and the Alps. Her case studies of Bavaria, the Netherlands, and Japan differ greatly from my own but provide an excellent resource on how other scholars have explored this instrument outside of its homeland. Other studies, notably the work of Hugo Zemp, are all based in Switzerland and on European practices.

Cultural tourism is a defining factor in how this community was forged. Primarily played by brass musicians in North America, the alphorn is a recent immigrant to this continent. Most North American alphorn players interviewed as part of this study have learned from Swiss alphorn players at festivals in Switzerland, and recreated those festivals for American students in places like Utah and the Appalachian Mountains. Combined with material culture, the alphorn's place in both Swiss ethnic heritage and tourism is reflected in North American alphorn performance and community. Tourism is one of the driving factors in the alphorn culture in North America; it has had an effect on the identities and livelihoods of the musicians who serve as both cultural tourists and performers for tourists themselves. The work of Regina Bendix was primarily used to influence interview questions and conclusions regarding cultural tourism, especially her work *Culture and Value: Tourism, Heritage, and Property*.⁶

⁶ Bendix, Regina. *Culture and Value: Tourism, Heritage, and Property*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018.

Chapter II

“Auslanders:” Travels to Switzerland

To best understand the emergence of the alphorn community in North America, it is important to present the shared experiences and aesthetic and style standards shared by most of the members of this community. Most of the key respondents in this study travelled to Switzerland many times, and will continue to do so following the pandemic, with the sole purpose of learning the alphorn, participating in competitions, and collaborating with Swiss colleagues. By independently cultivating their personal alphorn practices, through study and co-participation outside of North America, they have each come to similar conclusions about the nature of the instrument and how it should be played. However, they have manifested that agreement in different ways over the course of their lives, which will be further discussed in Chapter Three. In this chapter, three of the respondents’ individual experiences in Switzerland will be examined in order to describe shared experiences of most community members; to define stylistic terms; and identify people and places important to the alphorn community.

There are some key differences between the *practices* and *aesthetic standards* of alphorn playing, according to the North American respondents. Beliefs concerning practices are critical components of alphorn teaching and performance for the players in this study. These techniques and ideas shape how the practice has evolved in North America into something closely related to its Swiss counterpart, and at times completely unique. Most of the respondents agree on three major points concerning alphorn practice, as interpreted through interviews:

1. Playing expressively, above all
2. Retaining “traditional” performance practices, including

- a. long echoes at the end of phrases
 - b. long pauses, or “luftpausen”
 - c. utilizing the “blue” notes of the instrument, such as the “alphorn-fa”; and
3. Breaking the rules as necessary, but respecting Swiss shepherd tradition and history

“Traditional” performance practices, as defined by the respondents, consist of several particular musical characteristics that are hallmarks of any accomplished, or at the very least, informed, alphorn performance. These practices are not considered to be unique to competition or performances at events; rather, they are recognized as the very basics of contemporary technique. Although rooted in the earliest iterations of alphorn practice, these performance practices have seen a resurgence in recent years. These practices have been embraced, for the most part, by the North American community, but have often been presented by the respondents as a point of contention (or conversation) with their Swiss colleagues. The stylistic terms and their operational definitions will be presented in exegesis in the portraits of the respondents.

The aesthetic standards focus on finer points closely related to practice, but are rooted directly in Swiss competition judgements. As presented in this study, the aesthetic standards are the specific categories of technique and style that are evaluated when competing in alphorn einzel (solo alphorn) competitions and vary from one festival to another, such as the Festival International de cor des Alpes de Nendaz (the largest alphorn festival and competition in Switzerland) or the various cantonal, or regional, festivals hosted by local Swiss yodel clubs. While each individual or solo competition has different criteria for evaluation, the categories of

evaluation share commonalities in both wording and substance across competitions. Once judged based on the set aesthetic standards, the players are given both general remarks from the adjudicators on their performance and a score, or *klasse*, which is a number from one to four, with Klasse 1 being the highest score and Klasse 4 the lowest. The aesthetic standards, as derived from score sheets, are as follows (as translated into English):⁷

1. From the Eidgenössische Jodlerfäscht - Aarau 2005
 - a. Tonal Expression
 - b. Blowing Technique
 - c. Interpretation
 - d. Musical Expression

2. From the Eidgenössische Jodlerfäscht - Frauenfeld 1999
 - a. Sound Coloration
 - b. Facility and Flexibility
 - c. Dynamic Variation
 - d. Articulation
 - e. Rhythm
 - f. Tempo
 - g. Presentation
 - h. Intonation
 - i. Pacing
 - j. Style
 - k. Musical Expression

3. From the Kantonalbernischen Jodlerfest - Belp 1997
 - a. Musical Impression
 - b. Sound Coloration
 - c. Resonance
 - d. Dynamic
 - e. Articulation
 - f. Phrasing
 - g. Degree of Difficulty

⁷ Jury reports from William Hopson, accessed via his website alphorn.ca

4. From the Westschweizerisches Jodlerfest - Rechthalten 2006 (in German)
 - a. Tonkultur (Tonal Expression)
 - b. Blasttechnik (Blowing Technique)
 - c. Interpretation
 - d. Musikalischer Ausdruck (Musical Expression)

Those respondents that have participated in competitions have each had different experiences in Switzerland in this performance context. These competitions are judged by Swiss adjudicators, and each criterion for excellence is open to interpretation by those judges. While the criteria remains the same, each adjudicator is able to interpret a performance as s/he sees fit. This has resulted in differing outcomes from one competition to another for some players. Their playing is sometimes interpreted as being at a certain aesthetic standard in one canton, whereas a judge in a neighboring canton may make different remarks for a similar performance or give a score that is higher or lower.

Each performer in this study has travelled to Switzerland as a foreigner and learned a specific subset of musical language and skills that would have otherwise been unavailable to them in Canada and the United States, prior to the founding of alphorn schools in North America. While their adventures have at times been unique to the individual, the commonalities in their experiences have resulted in a strong sense of community identity and acceptance of standard practices and aesthetic values. In the following portraits of Bill, Laura, and Gary, shared musical experiences and the resulting recognition of overarching practice and aesthetic standards will be discussed as it pertains to their attendance at Swiss alphorn festivals and competitions.

WILLIAM HOPSON

The player that is perhaps the most acquainted with Switzerland, and the most recognizable North American alphorn player, is undoubtedly William Hopson. Born in America, Bill emigrated to Canada in 1972 and spent forty-three years as a horn player in the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra. He began playing the alphorn in 1982.

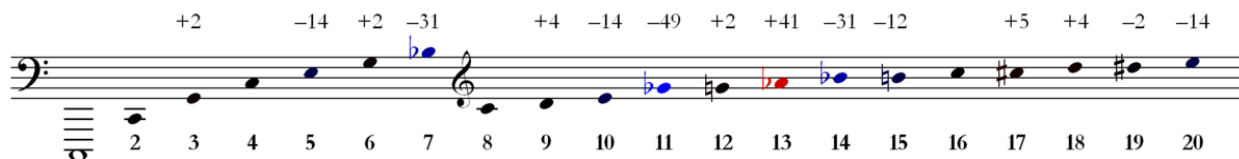


Bill in Frauenfeld, 1999

taught alphorn on the side.

By the mid-1990s, Bill had established a strong sense of, and identity with, the “traditional,” alpine-style of alphorn playing. He remarked that this style differs from that adopted by Swiss “city people”— pianists and organists who

The distinction between “alpine-style” and “city-style” is one of the first occurrences of the acceptance of a “traditional” style of playing. The “city-style” is a more conservative style and does not utilize the “blue” notes of the instrument, the flat 7th and sharp 11th partials that naturally occur on the instrument. Because they do not line up with the notes on a keyboard, they are often omitted from the “city” style of teaching and performing in Swiss alphorn circles. In the alpine-style, these notes are embraced as critical components of the alphorn sound and sonority. The 7th, 11th, and 13th partials, or harmonics, are characteristically “out-of-tune” with equal temperament or what can be played on the piano. The staff below outlines how out-of-tune, on average, these notes are when compared to equal temperament (A=440).



Partial numbers represent the only notes that can be achieved on an alphorn. Because the instrument lacks keys, or any means of manipulating the tuning other than what can be achieved by blowing into the instrument, the notes above (in the key of F) are the only ones available to play. They are the “slots,” similar to those found in the harmonic series of Western brass instruments, that naturally occur when the instrument is played without keys. The 7th, 11th, and 13th partials are often referred to as “blue” notes. The 11th partial, the most characteristic of the out-of-tune notes, is colloquially known as the “alphorn-fa.”

One of the most notable almost-occurrences of the alphorn-fa in European art music is in the last movement of Brahms’ first symphony.



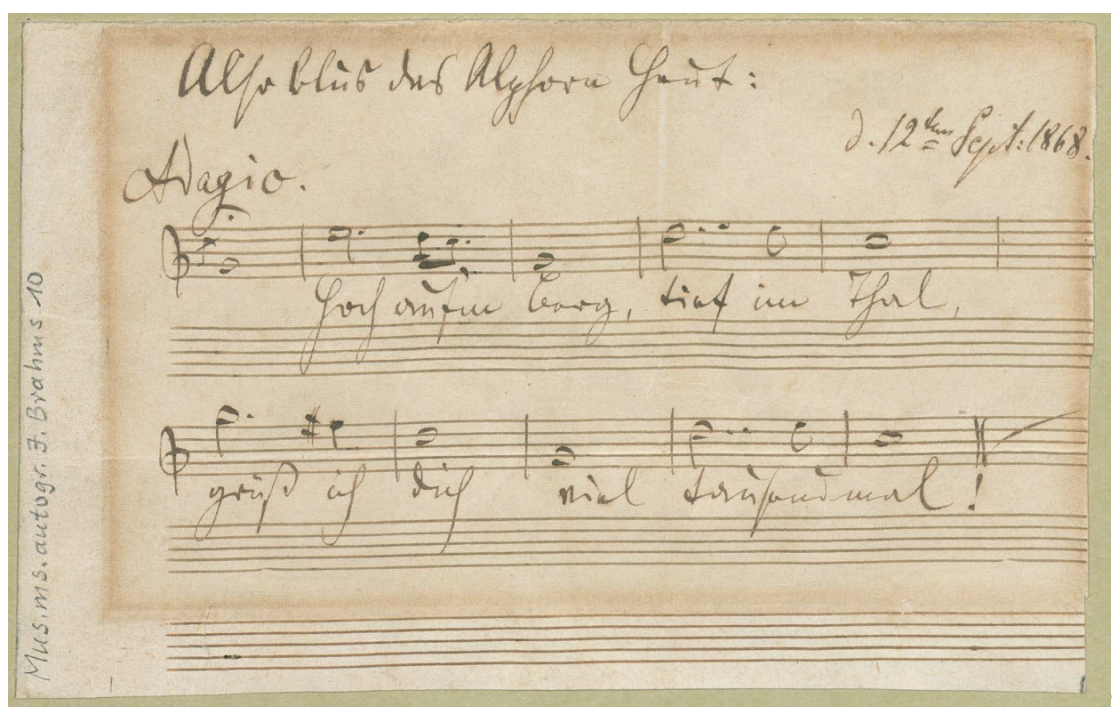
In this solo, played by the first horn (in C), Brahms puts the alphorn-fa in “tune” by writing an F# in the fifth measure of the solo. When played on the alphorn, this note would be firmly situated between F and F#, the characteristically “out-of-tune” alphorn-fa. Because the French horn is in the same key as some alphorns, and unfurled reaches roughly the same length, it has the same partials as the alphorn and plays these partials in the same “out-of-tune” manner as an alphorn.

⁸ Brahms, Johannes. *Symphony no. 1 in C minor, op. 68*. Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel. 1876.

Brahms heard this melody in Switzerland in 1868, played on an alphorn, and sent it to Clara Schumann on a postcard. The lyrics to the melody, in English, state:

High on the mountain,
Deep in the valley,
I greet you
A thousand times!

Below is the postcard that Brahms sent to Schumann, and a rendering of the melody and original German lyrics. In modern times, this melody is widely performed by alphorn players, but always with the characteristic alphorn-fa.



The style that Bill plays in, the “alpine” style, is what he calls the “old way” of playing the alphorn. There are glissandi and trills, and the “blue” notes are not omitted. Rather, just as stated above, these notes are embraced as being essential to the characteristic sound of the alphorn. Bill stated that he “hadn’t learned all of the things that you’re not supposed to do,” and

⁹ Brahms, Johannes. *Albumblatt für Clara Schumann*. 1868.

admits that he is “a rule-breaker by nature.” However, by “breaking” the rules, he has embraced the “traditional” style and has, in fact, helped to usher in a new era of very “traditional” performance. He often refers to pieces from the much-beloved *Alphornbüchli* by Alfred Gassmann as a source for pieces in the alpine, or traditional, style.¹⁰

Being a rule-breaker paid off for Hopson. On June 15th 1997, he received high marks from judges at a Jodelfest in the town of Belp, Canton Berne.

Remarks (translated by Peter Stapfer):

Musical Impression: A deeply moving performance of absolutely the highest quality.

Remarks: An extraordinary high level which cannot be compared to Swiss capabilities.

Sound Coloration: warm, round and brilliant

Resonance: majestic and full

Dynamic: enjoyable and impressive

Articulation: very mature, variable

Phrasing: wonderful, faultless

Degree of Difficulty: very difficult

Class: 1¹¹

Bill believes that the comment “beyond Swiss capabilities” is a reflection on his playing in the alpine-style versus the “city” style. One of the judges for this competition was Fritz Frautschi, who was so impressed with Bill’s performance that he invited Bill to his home in Gstaad. Bill and Fritz became close colleagues over the years and regularly collaborate in events in both Switzerland and North America.

¹⁰ This 19th-century book, later referred to as the “Gassmann book,” is characterized by Bill as a “must-have for any serious alphorn blower.”

Gassmann, Alfred Lorenz. *Alphornbuechli: Schule Des Alphornspiels*. Zurich: Hug Musikverlage, c. 1860.

¹¹ Klasse, or class, is a grading system with 1 being the highest score and 4 being the lowest score. It has been remarked that the score of 4 is rarely given out. (Interview with Bill Hopson, 10/21/20)

In 1999, as part of a five-week European tour, Bill returned again to Gstaad and the home of his friend Fritz for collegial alphorn playing and hiking through the Alps. He continued to Frauenfeld for the *Eidgenoessisches Jodlerfest* (Swiss Yodeling Festival) in July of 1999. At this point in time, he was the only North American alphorn player to compete in the alphorn competition at this festival, where he was again faced with differing opinions of style and technique. However, since his performance in 1997 in Belp, other alphorn players were moving away from the “city” style of playing and into the “alpine” style.

In 1997, Bill made the following reflection of the Belp and Frauenfeld festivals:

“The Alphorn is a shepherds' instrument, and to my mind that implies a value to individuality and a wide freedom of musical expression. A thoughtful study of A. L. Gassmann's scholarly collection of ancient alphorn melodies reveals that, in former times, such expressive latitude was not only tolerated, but encouraged. It is clear that, in the shepherd tradition, the "exotic" notes were used freely. However, I cannot avoid the feeling that many of the melodies in the Gassmann collection, if they were written today, would be rejected by some as "too modern". In Frauenfeld it was evident that increasing numbers of alphorn blowers share my views, especially among the younger players. The freedoms of the ancient shepherd tradition are being re-examined and adopted. The wonderful music of contemporary composer Hans-Juerg Sommer [sic] was chosen by 81 of the competitors in Frauenfeld; the most for any composer. A fresh wind is in our sails.”

In this segment of the entry, Bill again discusses “alpine” style of playing. He likens the “alpine” style to the shepherd tradition-- the very roots of the alphorn— and comments on several stylistic aspects of this tradition, including:

- the inclusion of “exotic,” or “blue” notes;
- “expressive latitude”, which would include pauses in playing, dynamic contrasts, echoes, and rubato, amongst other individual musical choices;

—An overall sense of musical freedom; unconstrained by perceived aesthetic standards; and

—the admittance of contemporary compositions to further break away from the playing norms of the time.

The “ancient” way of playing and the “modern” way of playing are compared as being one in the same. The Gassmann book, rooted in the “shepherd” tradition, looks into the past, but inspires the playing standards of the present as a deviation from the style of the Swiss “city people.”

Bill continues:

“I heartily agree that the strength of the Alphorn will always be sustained melodies of a pastorelle nature. However, I believe that any player who claims an advanced alphorn technique should master the use of:

- A full three octave range
- Large dynamic contrasts (from a whisper to rolling thunder)
- A variable application of vibrato
- Agility even to blazing speed
- Dramatic tempo shifting (rubato)
- Wide intervallic leaps, trills, glissandi and multiple echo effects
- A voice-like range of articulatory techniques

All of the rules of natural phrasing that apply to the music of Mozart can be equally applied to the music of the Alphorn.”

Although he states that “sustained melodies of a pastoral nature” should be the ultimate goal of performance, as a professional horn player, Bill has a unique insight into the technical aspects of alphorn practice. Each of these technical standards is part of the aesthetic and are similarly applicable to Western brass instrument performance. Four of the key respondents in this study have advanced degrees and extensive performance experience on a European orchestral brass instrument and would likely be familiar with the music of Mozart and these musical terms.

When performing Mozart as a horn player, there are several stylistic, albeit unwritten, “rules” that should be followed in order to meet the aesthetic standards of a high-quality performance.

Following is the first line of the solo part for Mozart’s Horn Concerto no. 4, K495 (horn in Eb):



There are no marked slurs, staccati, or other phrasing marks. However, to perform this section correctly, with the “rules of natural phrasing,” it should be played as written below:



The slurs and staccati indicated above reflect the “rules of natural phrasing” that apply when playing the works of Mozart as a horn player. These rules are only made clear when studying these works with an experienced instructor, and are not readily apparent or consistent across different editions of written scores.

As an alphorn player, these “rules” could be applied in the following way. Below is an excerpt from a transcription of a 1798 kuhreihen for alphorn by Gottlieb Jakob Kuhn:



If the rules of Mozart were applied to this excerpt, the kuhreihen might be played as such:



¹² Kuhn, Gottlieb Jakob aufgezeichnet. *Volkslieder*. Bern. 1806.

When combined with the “traditional” performance practices adopted by the players in this study, such as a pause after the D in the middle of the second bar and playing the written Fs as the “alphorn-fa,” this phrasing could easily fit with the stylistic and aesthetic standards of the alphorn community.

Bill goes on to comment on the difference between two of his competition performances:

“Two years ago I participated in two alphorn competitions in Switzerland. In one week my reception ranged from showers of accolades at the Berner Kantonal Festival...to an abject disqualification from the conservative jury at the festival in Sempach.

This latter judgement came despite the large and enthusiastic crowd attending my performance, and was intended as a rebuke to my "reformist" principals [sic]. I received the disqualification with curiosity and some amusement. This summer I was still getting requests for my 1997 competition piece, which was my own variations on "Moos Ruef" by Hans-Juerg Sommer [sic].

I performed in Frauenfeld this year with a better understanding of the factional debate, although this has in no way softened my approach. I speak of factional debate, but perhaps a better choice of words is fraternal discussion. The good news is that there were so many talented young alphorn blowers participating in the Frauenfeld gathering. Much credit for this goes to teachers with views that differ from mine. I honour their effort and their dedication to the art of blowing the alphorn. I value their friendship. We all serve the same master.

The music that I chose for my Frauenfeld performance was my newest alphorn composition, "Shepherd's Song from Delirium Valley". For my effort I received a "Klasse 1" ranking and some wonderful compliments in the Alphorn Jury Report. Getting that over with early, I could meet with my old friends and enjoy all of the wonderful festival activities.

There were 403 Alphorn blowers in Frauenfeld for the festival, and jodelers beyond count. I was attending the festival with my Swiss-Canadian friends in the Jodlerklub Heimattreu of Calgary. I was proud of their performance at the festival, which earned a high ranking among the many choirs present. The fact that we came from such a great distance was much appreciated by the other clubs. The

festival was a very intense and interesting experience, and we enjoyed every minute of it. The Swiss are very passionate about their culture.”¹³

This discussion of a “factional debate” between alphorn players refers to the stylistic incongruities between the “alpine” and “city” styles of playing. However, beyond the scope of this debate between the two styles of playing, there are two lines of thought that were consistently echoed throughout the course of this study: these players are first and foremost friends, and the Swiss are very passionate about their culture. Each of the players in this study has repeatedly referred to their fellow community members as friends, even those who are competitors, adjudicators, or instructors. The importance of being part of a community of players is paramount, despite a “factional debate”-- whether that debate centers on stylistic differences, political preferences, or musical opinions.

The second point-- that the Swiss are passionate about their culture-- holds true as well. While this has been a roadblock for some of the players, in terms of stylistic and aesthetic standards, it has usually proved fruitful for Bill. In terms of playing the alphorn in a Swiss style, it is almost unanimous that Bill has achieved this to a much higher level than even Swiss alphorn players. For her book, *Modernity, Complex Societies, and the Alphorn*, Dr. Charlotte Vignau interviewed Swiss alphorn players, who made the following comments on Bill’s performance:

Dr. Vignau: Who plays alphorn in the most Swiss style?

Hans-Jurg Sommer: For me it is the American-Canadian...

Emil Frei: Yes.

Hans-Jurg: William Hopson.

Emil: I think so, too.

Why?

¹³ *Report from The Swiss National Festival in Frauenfeld*
by William Hopson (July, 1999)
From his website, alphorn.ca

Emil: He corresponds to our view, he is very musically gifted, he is a virtuoso, he just has the feeling, he gets it across like no other. Well there are other leading authorities of alphorn-playing, the blow technically excellent, but there is really no other with this feeling. It is just the feeling, which this man has, and it really is Hopson, way ahead.

Hans-Jurg: It is not only that, it is, Hopson somehow discerned the nature of the alphorn melody. He plays the piece and takes time to wait, to listen how the tone fades away, quietly, with the surroundings, and afterward he adds again some more...alphorn-playing is blown yodeling, and Hopson realized that precisely...absolutely the most Swiss style.¹⁴

Although he was an outsider, not Swiss by citizenship or ethnic background, his performances would continue to be well-received by members of the alphorn community and the Swiss public. Following his festival performances in Frauenfeld and other cantons, Bill would return to Switzerland in the coming years for performances with the Calgary Philharmonic. A November 2000 tour featured him playing the Jean Daetwyler *Concerto for Alphorn and Orchestra* as an encore. Several Swiss newspapers commented on the selection, including the following review:

“...the orchestra held yet another special surprise: an alphorn player in Swiss costume, fresh from the Rocky Mountains. In an outstanding performance with full and gentle tones, he rendered a movement from Jean Daetwyler's Alphorn Concerto, together with Fribourg's Ranz de Vaches. Naturally, this Hommage á la Suisse sent the audience into raptures.”¹⁵

An audience member in Geneva wrote a letter following the performance there:

“...I went to see the Calgary Philharmonic play at Geneva's Victoria Hall. It was all really excellent, but the best was their "encore" where they had a big burly man with a beard and ponytail from Calgary who played the Alphorn. Fantastic. He was wearing a red Appenzeller jacket and carried his Alphorn over his shoulder. The best was when the violin section all had to tinkle small cow bells as

¹⁴ Vignau, Charlotte. *Modernity, Complex Societies, and the Alphorn*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.

¹⁵ St. Gallener Nachrichten, by Margrit Zaczkowska, November 14, 2000

occasional background noise. The audience came to within a hair of breaking up, but managed to pull themselves collectively together. Yes, anyway, I was most cheered by your orchestra - the conductor was first-rate, and there was a refreshing attitude that I really appreciated (I'm talking about those little cow bells). European orchestras can be so stuffy, old and complicated. There is a difference."¹⁶

Hopson's next major alphorn activity in Switzerland took place in 2002 when he returned to Switzerland to visit his friend Fritz at the alphorn school in Schönried, near Gstaad. In 2002, Bill was a visiting artist for the school; by 2004, he began teaching alphorn to Swiss and international alphorn students alongside Fritz and other instructors.

The Swiss Alphorn School is held in the summer and early fall over multiple formats. There are weekend and week long courses in July and September, and the price for a weekend course (in 2020) ranges from 450 CHF to 490 CHF (\$512-\$558). In 2020, one of the courses, the Hornberg weekend, is marked as being *Ausgezeichnet geeignet für Beginner bis mittleres Niveau* — best for beginners to intermediate levels— and one, the Schönried Alphorn Days, is marked *Keine Beginner*— no beginners. All must arrange for their own accommodation.



Schönried Alphorn School

¹⁶ From a letter forwarded to the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, excerpted from alphorn.ca

LAURA NELSON

Laura at the Nendaz Cor des Alpes Festival in 2017

The Gstaad—Schönried area proves to be a hub of alphorn activity. In 2002, Laura Nelson of Erie, PA made her first trip to Switzerland after two alphorn performances in April and July with her local orchestra. A pianist and horn player, Laura first thought about playing the alphorn at the age of fifteen, and made a promise to herself that she would get one for herself when she grew up. She remarked that when she was in her early thirties she purchased an alphorn because “life will not wait for you to get an alphorn.”¹⁷ In keeping with her promise to herself, she now owns five alphorns. In an effort to better inform her alphorn style, she attended the Schönried Alphorn Days, where she met Bill and Fritz for the first time at the three-day seminar.

¹⁷ Interview with Laura Nelson, April 14th, 2020

Since first going to Switzerland, Laura has returned and placed in competitions in Nendaz and in other festivals several times, including a second-place showing at the Berner Cantonal Festival. She has also served as an instructor for the Swiss Alphorn School in Schonried. When asked about her thoughts on style, she made the following remarks:

Maureen

“...So I know that we've talked about this a little bit before, but in what ways is the style of alphorn playing different from “traditional” brass playing?”

Laura

“It's softer. It's much more free in interpretation, if you're going to play in like a Swiss style from Romandy, which is like, where they speak French, it's different, or whether they speak German. But, it's very free and very expressive. And if you just play what's on what's written down, oftentimes, what's written down is just like hardly anything, it's just, you know, it's almost accepted knowledge that, you know, to play the beginning, very broad and expansive, and really super loud. There are other sort of typical sections that you might find, and you just, it's almost understood that you know what they are, and you know how to approach them because there's almost nothing written in the music, tempo or descriptive wise...you can really get you can play what's there perfectly, but, well, it won't come across. It won't come across unless you do your research. And it's hard to do that unless you go to Switzerland.”

Alphorn music is primarily and traditionally transmitted aurally, but there is some music that has been transcribed and is available in written formats. However, prior to the inception of alphorn schools in North America, it would have been essential for these players to embark on a trip to Switzerland to learn most of the technical skills, or “do their research,” regarding stylistic aspects of alphorn performance. Laura comments on many of the same musical aspects of alphorn practice, as does Bill—expressiveness, freedom, and imperfection. Imperfection musically, in this instance, is the importance of interpretation versus playing exactly what is written as it is written. These ideals are similar to the unwritten rules of Mozart, in that certain stylistic aspects of playing are only obtained through aural instruction.

In a different vein of questioning, Laura comments on the differences between practices and aesthetic standards in different Swiss cantons:

Maureen

“Is there a different culture in Switzerland regarding alphorn, versus how the alphorn players in North America perceive how the instrument should be played?”

Laura

“Ah, yeah, I'm gonna say... when I was in the German-speaking area [of Switzerland], and I did a competition there, they seemed interested in carbon copies of classic pieces, with no interjection of anything new or expressive. They were just interested in perfection, which is boring. And in the French speaking part, they're interested in getting a point across musically, having fun, the after party, drinking ‘wein...’ I mean, they're like that in the German speaking part too.”

The cantonal differences in aesthetic standards, like Bill's experiences in Frauenfeld and Sempach, are expressed by Laura in terms of the linguistic differences between cantons. These differences could be an interesting subject of further research as they apply to both Swiss and international competitors in cantonal competitions. The differences in aesthetic standards between cantonal competitions, as highlighted earlier, seem slight as they are written. However, more conclusive evidence, gathered through interviews and research directly related to this line of questioning, is needed to ascertain whether or not the musical aspects of playing differ between cantons and how much of that is based on the French and German language variations in those regions. Language variation throughout the different cantons in Switzerland are primarily related to their individual ethnic and cultural heritages and conclusive evidence of differences in aesthetic standards could prove useful in better defining different schools of thought within Switzerland itself related to alphorn performance.

On performing in Switzerland as an American, Laura made the following remarks:

“I think they're much more open in the French-speaking region, to an American coming in and playing. Of course, they're calling [Nendaz] the international festival of the alphorn. In the German-speaking area, you have to be a member of the yodeling and alphorn club. And my friend Fritz [Frautschi] was always a judge. So when his town in Gstaad hosted it, he's like, 'You gotta come over; I got you in.' And so I was really lucky to even be there. And I didn't join; they didn't know who I was. But he said, 'I told him you played like a Swiss.'”¹⁸

This final statement-- that Laura would be accepted because she plays “like a Swiss,” mirrors the praise given to Bill by Hans-Jurg Sommer and Emil Frei. The concept that, as non-Swiss people, American and Canadian players should strive to play as Swiss as possible in order to be accepted by the alphorn community in Switzerland is not difficult to comprehend. The alphorn practice is so intertwined with their history and culture that it is not unimaginable that their aesthetic standards would also be tied to certain aspects of technique and musicality directly linked to what would be considered “Swiss” attributes. But, more importantly, this is an instance in which a player was given an opportunity to perform completely outside the realm of normal opportunities for North American players. The Swiss Yodel Clubs oversee some cantonal competitions, and you do have to be a Swiss member of those clubs in order to gain admission. However, Laura was vouched for by Fritz with the simple comment that she plays like a Swiss-- high praise in the alphorn community.

¹⁸ From an interview with Laura Nelson, September 9th, 2020

GARY BANG

In a return to Schönried for the North American respondents, Gary Bang of Staunton, Virginia made his final trip to Switzerland to attend the Swiss Alphorn School in 2004. He met Fritz for the first time at this seminar, and Bill was also in attendance. Gary, a retired dentist, began traveling to Switzerland in the mid-1990s to visit family. He would take seven to ten days off each year and travel to Switzerland with his wife. In the late eighties, his father had taken a tour of Switzerland, Austria and Germany and returned with an album for him that included an alphorn recording; it piqued his interest in the instrument. Although he has now categorized this recording as poor-quality, the sound of the instrument stuck with him. In 1995, Gary was in Geneva and called a “900-number”— what he equates to an 800-number in the United States—and the tourist department connected him with a small alphorn group in a village in the French-speaking part of the Alps outside of Lausanne and Montreux.

He and his wife arrived in the deserted resort town and met a man named Jean Reichenbach who introduced them to the participants of the alphorn seminar. The five or so alphorn players, Gary and his wife, and “fifteen or so Belgian tourists” had a picnic in the valley with “wine and raclette” and experienced a long concert by the seminar participants, which he later discovered was all arranged for the benefit of the “two people from the United States who wanted to go hear some alphorns.” At the end of the picnic, he tried to get a sound out of the alphorn, and he was able to make a sound. (He played the baritone horn in high school, about fifty years prior to his first alphorn experience.) He ended up purchasing an alphorn during that visit.¹⁹

¹⁹ Interview with Gary Bang, September 12th, 2020

In 1997, he returned to Switzerland to attend a seminar with Jozsef Molnar, a prominent, traditional Swiss alphorn player whom Gary holds in the highest regard. He enjoys playing music that fits with the “Swiss tradition”— “classic” alphorn music. His early experiences playing and learning in Switzerland made him comfortable performing with Swiss alphorn players, and playing “alphorn music that was meant for alphorn.” On playing in Switzerland, he remarked that “mostly it was just about doing the best you could— playing the parts... it was about just playing the horn, and trying to have all the

right clothes.”



Swiss alphorn player Hans Jürg Sommer

In 2001, Gary attended his second alphorn seminar in Switzerland. This was at the original alphorn retreat, in Fiesch, run by Hans Jürg Sommer and Hans Gerber. He stated that there were ten instructors and only forty participants accepted.

Gary recounted the following exchange with Hans Jürg before the festival:

“I said, Gee! I would really like to come to one of these, and he said Okay, we have a lot of people who apply for it, but we only take forty people and we have to be careful of *auslanders*...two or three weeks later [they said it would be fine.]”²⁰

Gary and his friend, fellow alphorn player Marvin McCoy, were the first two Americans to participate in the Fiesch seminar. Gary remarked that the local Fiesch newspapers “made a big deal out of” the two Americans in the seminar; this alphorn event, first held around 1980, was

²⁰ Interview with Gary Bang, October 19th, 2020

one of the first alphorn “get togethers” of its kind in Switzerland. Now that there are “so many other things going on,” as Gary states, it has since been discontinued.

In the decade that elapsed between his first visit to Geneva and his last visit to Schönried, he estimates that he’s spent more than three weeks just playing the alphorn in Switzerland over the course of his life. He now prefers to play closer to home, and enjoys “tootin’ for tootin’s sake.”

CONCLUSION

Switzerland, both as a location and as an ideal, serves a purpose for each of these players. For Bill, playing in an “alpine-style” makes him unequivocally Swiss in the alphorn community, despite being Canadian. In reviews, it is often remarked that “the man from Calgary” plays in a style more Swiss than a Swiss player— differentiated by the “city-style” and “alpine-style” adopted by both Swiss and foreign players. By adopting a more “traditional” way of playing the instrument, Bill was able to carve a path for himself that holds both professional success and personal fulfillment. He did not set out to play the instrument in a certain way, or adhere to a certain set of rigid standards; rather, the aesthetics that he felt most aligned with are a reflection of his personal identity as a musician and person. Instead of conforming his techniques to fit the aesthetic standards set by judges in Sempach, he continued to play in a way that felt most natural to him— embracing his nature of rule-breaking. He has an immense respect for the traditional Swiss aspects of the alphorn— playing the “blue” notes, long phrases, and embracing echoes. Coupled with the oral knowledge behind the instrument, he passes these ideals onto his students.

Laura also comments on the importance of travel to Switzerland for the North American alphorn player. Many times throughout our discussions she stressed the stylistic differences

between the German and French speaking parts of Switzerland regarding alphorn playing. She also comments on the stylistic differences between horn and the alphorn practices, and how many players try and fail to play the alphorn in a purely horn-style. While Bill is able to craft his playing in a way that reflects his horn playing, some players take a different approach to the alphorn and do not insert the Swiss alpine-style into their alphorn practice. Laura goes one step further and differentiates the German and French practices and attitudes within Switzerland, both in how judges view American alphorn competitors and in the way the alphorn should be played. Many of the musical practices and aesthetic aspects of alphorn playing expressed by Bill and Laura (and many, if not all, of the other players in this study) overlap.

Both Laura and Gary comment on the feeling of being viewed as an outsider in a foreign land. This is not to say that they necessarily *felt* as if they were outsiders, but were characterized as such by other members of the community. Because they are not Swiss, or part of that specific sect or cohort of alphorn players, they were at times categorized as “other.” Travel to Switzerland is an integral part of the American alphorn experience, whether it is for a seminar, competition, or travel. Gary comes from a different musical background than Bill and Laura. He was not trained in European art music; rather, his musical background lapsed after high school and only reemerged when he picked up the alphorn years later. However, the alphorn community did not initially hesitate to admit him for lack of a musical background, but for purely nationalistic reasons. In Gary’s story, there is an interesting contrast between sharing culture with an outsider — going to great lengths to have Gary and his wife *hear* the alphorn being played— and actually allowing an outsider to become part of that community.

Chapter III

Establishing North American Alphorn Schools

The establishment of alphorn seminars in North America followed years of travel to Switzerland by the respondents in this study. Each of the seminars stems from the shared experiences of the players, both independently of each other and through regular co-participation up until the point of their conception. Yet the various seminars they created reflect different attitudes towards alphorn practices, pedagogical philosophies, and community spirit. Each retreat and their participants have philosophies of identity that are unique to the individual and to the group, as well as overarching principles shared by most alphorn players from North America. Some players regularly collaborate in different settings with players from all or some of the other retreats; others tend to identify closely with only one cohort of players either by association or by choice. In some cases, these players share regional geographic proximity, but in general they must travel to interact with one another. This chapter examines each of the three major alphorn schools in North America, their pedagogies, and the background of the teachers and attendees of each retreat.

UTAH

In 2008, the North American Alphorn Retreat was founded by Tony Brazelton. Tony began playing the alphorn in 1992 following the establishment of the German instrumental group Salzburger Echo, of which he is also a founding member. He has a masters degree in trumpet performance from the University of Nevada at Reno. The first retreat, which hosted eight participants, was described by Tony as “a place for incredible players to relax.”²¹

²¹ Interview with Tony Brazelton, September 12th, 2020

The Retreat, which has hosted over two hundred alphorn players since its inception, has become the preeminent alphorn seminar in North America. In its first year, the instructors included Tony, Bill Hopson, Fritz Frautschi, and Brian Priebe, a notable alphorn player from the Washington, DC area. In past years, other Swiss alphorn players have served as instructors at the festival, including alphorn maker Gerald Pot. The attendance of Swiss teachers at a North American seminar is unique to this retreat. The retreat is structured similarly to Fritz's Schönried Alphorn weekend; it is held over the course of four days, with events primarily occurring over the course of two full days as follows:

Wednesday

11:00 Registration and lunch
 12:30 - 16:30 Group lessons/ rehearsal & breaks.
 (Private or small ensemble lessons as arranged)
 18:00 Dinner

Thursday

9:30 - 11:30 Group lessons/rehearsal & break.
 (Private or small ensemble lessons as arranged)
 14:30 - 16:30 Group lessons /rehearsal.
 18:00 Dinner

Friday

9:30 - 11:30 Group lessons/ rehearsal.
 14:30 - 16:30 Group lessons/ rehearsal
 18:00 Dinner

Saturday

(Group Rehearsal)
 Performance: Alphorn Playing at the top of Hidden Peak²²

By 2011, the Retreat began hosting competitions (the grand prize— a Gerald Pot alphorn), the first of its kind in North America. The judges of the very first competition were Fritz, Tony, and Bill. The competition aspect of the North American Alphorn Retreat is unique to this seminar and not a component of any of the other retreats researched as part of this study, or

²² Projected sample schedule for 2020, had pandemic not occurred.

as investigated in Vignau's work in the Netherlands, Allgäu region, or Japan. Competitions are not held outside of Switzerland,²³ although some international players (like Brian, Tony, Laura, Bill, and others) have competed in them. These players value their participation in Swiss competitions; each of them have ranked highly in the Nendaz Festival either as a soloist or as part of a duo. At other points, they have not done so well when being judged by Swiss adjudicators, often remarking that it is hard to be judged by Swiss players as an American due to the lack of publication of Swiss aesthetic standards.

Two of the regular instructors at the Retreat are Jim Hopson and Robert Brazelton. Both Bill and Tony have passed on their alphorn practice to their sons, Jim and Robert, respectively. Both of these players have the unique experience of gaining intergenerational transmission of alphorn practice and performance from a culture started outside of Switzerland, and could perhaps be the first two players with this experience. Jim was interviewed as part of this study. He is a professional trombone player living in Vancouver, British Columbia, and regularly performs on the alphorn with his father, Bill, and with various groups. Both fathers have expressed sincere admiration for their sons. When asked with whom does he prefer to play alphorn, Bill responded:

Bill

“Well, there's an easy answer to that question... there is a player in the world that I prefer to play with more than anyone, and that's my son, Jim. And he's been hearing me ever since he was, frankly, ever since he was in the womb... he was probably hearing me even before he was born, he was hearing me play, and he knows me, he knows what I'm going to do.”²⁴

²³ Interview with Tony Brazelton, October 16th, 2020

²⁴ Interview with Bill Hopson, October 21st, 2020

Throughout the course of the study, Jim gave detailed responses when asked about technical proficiency. His career and experience as a trombone player and teacher have informed his alphorn playing just as much as growing up with an alphorn-playing father. He frequently references brass methods, either specific ones like the Caruso method or more generalized terms and ideas involving brass playing, and he draws upon a breadth of experience outside the “traditional” alphorn style of playing. In fact, unlike many of the players, he can reference jazz and other world music that help inform his alphorn playing. He began playing the alphorn “seriously” at the age of sixteen and unlike his father, who had a career as an orchestral horn player, Jim developed a commercial music career as a trombone player *alongside* a career as an alphorn player.²⁵ In 2018, Bill and Jim released an album together, entitled *Generations: Hoch uf em Bär, tief im Thal*. The title is a reference to the alphorn call popularized by Brahms’ Symphony no. 1 in c minor, op. 68.



Bill (foreground) and Jim

²⁵ Interviews with Jim Hopson, September 12th and October 21st, 2020

WEST VIRGINIA

In 2017, Laura Nelson, along with fellow alphorn player Monica Hambrick, founded the Appalachian Alphorn Adventure. This seminar, held outside Fayetteville, is rooted in outdoor activity and the performance of new works for the instrument. It marks a distinct departure from the North American Alphorn Retreat; however, both Laura and Monica have served as instructors for the North American Alphorn Retreat.

In 2015, Laura and Tony collaborated with Salzburger Echo on the album *Prairie Song*. This group, which sparked Tony's interest and subsequent alphorn career in 1992, has produced many albums featuring "traditional" and new music for the instrument since its inception. The album has garnered mixed reviews from the alphorn players in this study— many find the music to be "a breath of fresh air," describing music like it as "genre-bending earworms," whereas others characterize it as "bastardized music." However, Salzburger Echo describes the album as "an exciting new take on the alphorn...inspired by the music and the landscapes that make America unique."²⁶ In interviews, Laura has often commented on the natural world as inspiration for her compositions.

After the tour for the album was complete, Laura took a step back from the alphorn as "work." She most enjoys bringing her alphorn along on a hike, which she does not characterize as work. In September, we had the following exchange:

Maureen
So what kind of people attend performances, [anywhere, anytime]?

²⁶ From their website, salzburgerecho.com/albums

Laura

“It's whoever happens to be, like, walking through the woods that day, which is always remarkably interesting. It's really interesting, the happenstance of the cool people you meet when you're out in nature, and I love that most of all, just the really interesting meetings that I've had.”²⁷

In designing the Appalachian Alphorn Adventure, Laura and Monica kept hiking as an integral part of the seminar. The course is structured as follows:

Wednesday

6pm Check-in available at Opossum Creek Retreat, dinner on your own

Thursday

9am Meet and greet, Breakfast

10am Rehearsal

12pm Lunch

1:30pm Alphorn hike

4pm Free time; private lessons available

7pm Dinner

Friday

9am Breakfast

10am Rehearsal

12pm Lunch

1:30pm Alphorn hike

4pm Free time; private lessons available

7pm Dinner

8:30pm Masterclass with Laura

Saturday

9am Breakfast

10am Rehearsal

12pm Lunch

1:30pm Alphorn hike

3pm Free time; private lessons available

7pm Cook out

Sunday

8:30am Breakfast

9:30am Rehearsal

11am Lunch on your own

2pm Group performance²⁸

²⁷ Interview with Laura Nelson, September 9th 2020

²⁸ Projected sample schedule for 2020, had pandemic not occurred.

The activities planned as part of this seminar reflect a difference in approach to alphorn teaching and camaraderie when compared to the North American Alphorn Retreat. The group engages in physical activities—accompanied by able-bodied guides for those who may need assistance—and the alphorn is incorporated into those activities rather than having a performance inserted into the natural environment. When asked how the retreat is most different from the Utah seminar, Laura made the following key points:

Other retreats often incorporate:

- too much playing
- not much for spouses to do
- no planned hikes with alphorn

In order to solve some of these differences of opinion, this seminar has made the following pedagogical adjustments:

“Most importantly we focus on enjoying the music. We don’t have endless rehearsals with few breaks, standing in place for hours. We hike out into the New River Gorge (our retreat is more active than others) and frequently divide into two groups. One group can relax and listen while the other one plays. I also have composed pieces specifically for this, sort of antiphonal alphorn. We don’t stress “getting things perfect” for the final concert. Yes, we have the concert for the community, but they’re going to love it no matter how it turns out... Monica arranges yoga stretch outs in the morning, and lazy afternoon breaks where we can either relax, or go for solo hikes in the Gorge. We also have a masterclass one evening (nowhere else has this). After dinner everybody pours a glass of wine and sits around while I work one on one on a solo somebody wants help with. It’s always fun, supportive and even if people don’t play they get a lot out of it... Our group always develops a deep camaraderie, on par with or deeper than the other retreats. Our dinners are catered and brought in and we save the leftovers for lunches the next day so everyone gets into the kitchen to help out. It always works out incredibly well and is not a pain in the butt at all. Somehow everything winds up neat and tidy... I think what separates us from other retreats is our immersion into the group. We play all the time. We are with everyone as much as

possible. This doesn't happen other places, where teachers don't play all the time or hang with everyone... Yes, it's exhausting to be a teacher but I really get to know everyone and it makes me a better teacher. I get a sense of what they need from hearing them play...but I also get a sense of what they came for or what they're looking for. Maybe not a musical issue at all."²⁹



Players at the Appalachian Alphorn Retreat, 2017

²⁹ Email from Laura Nelson, November 2nd, 2020

THE MIDWEST

The most geographically cohesive cohort of alphorn players has established themselves in the American Midwest region. These players are primarily located in Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and the surrounding states, but come from as far as New York, Virginia, Texas, and Quebec to participate in the summer alphorn seminar, the Midwest Alphorn Retreat. This cohort of players has developed independently of Swiss tradition and the rest of North America, and has a distinct sense of group camaraderie and style.

The retreat was founded in 2009 by organizer John Griffith and alphorn teacher Peggy DeMers. John has been described by group members as an “alphorn evangelist,” and Dr. DeMers is a French horn professor at Sam Houston State University who completed her dissertation on concert works for the alphorn. She often presents at International Horn Symposia (IHS) and workshops on alphorn.

Unlike the other alphorn instructors in this study, Dr. DeMers has never attended an alphorn seminar in Switzerland. She had attended the IHS conference in Munich in 1987, and went on to visit Switzerland for the first time as part of her dissertation research that summer, when she visited twelve alphorn makers. She also met alphorn player Jozsef Molnar at Schüpbach’s workshop, and later played for him at his home. Her dissertation was published in 1993, and her next trip to Switzerland was in 1994. She travelled there as a tourist (albeit with her alphorn in tow) following performances at the Spoleto Festival in Italy. She recounts that she enjoyed taking the train to Switzerland and going to a different city every year. Playing the alphorn gave her the chance to connect with the locals.³⁰ Her first time competing in Switzerland

³⁰ Interview with Peggy DeMers, October 23rd, 2020

was not until well after the establishment of the Midwest Alphorn Retreat. In 2017, she competed in Nendaz as part of a duet with Vicki Wheeler. She did not return to Switzerland in 2018 or 2019. Vicki is also an instructor for the Midwest retreat; after attending the North American Alphorn Retreat in its first year in 2009, she began attending the Midwest seminar in 2010 and did not return to Utah. Peggy has never attended any of the other retreats in North America.

The schedule for the 2019 Midwest Alphorn Retreat was:

Wednesday

1:00 Orientation, Ice breaker, Meet and greet
 3:00 Alphorn Basics, Large ensemble and small groups
 5:00 Happy Hour
 6:00 Dinner
 7:30-8:30 Lecture #1
 9:00 Large ensemble

Thursday

9:00-10:30 Alphorn basics, stretching, breathing, buzzing and ear training
 11:00 Individual lessons/small group practice
 12:00-2:00 Lunch and private sessions
 2:00- 4:00 Large Ensemble practice
 4:00 Happy Hour
 20th [century] and beyond: Alphorn lecture by Peggy
 5:00 Practice and private sessions
 6:00 Dinner
 7:30 Large ensemble and Reading session
 9:00 Lecture #2

Friday

9:00-10:30 Part 2: warm up techniques, routines and basics
 11:00 Ensemble practice/individual private sessions
 12-2:00 Lunch and private sessions
 2:00 Large ensemble rehearsal
 4:00 Cedar Springs Brewery performance and Dinner
 7:00 Group discussion of Alphorn maintenance and repair
 9:00 Lecture #3

Saturday

9:00 Part 3: of warm up techniques, routines and basics
 11:00 Large Ensemble rehearsal
 12:00 Lunch
 3:00-4:00 Beacon Hill Concert

7:00 Celebration and Pizza Party! Q and A

Sunday

10:00 Brunch – Goodbye’s

12:00 Check out time³¹

In 2020, the Retreat was scheduled to visit Switzerland as a group. They booked travel through an agency and were to attend the Nendaz Festival as spectators (not participants) and visit some tourist attractions, as well as the workshops of alphorn makers Stocker and Schüpbach. This has been tentatively rescheduled for 2021. Following the cancellation of their trip, the group organized two virtual retreats: in August, as the Midwest Virtual Alphorn Retreat, and in October, as the Oktoberfest Virtual Retreat. The virtual retreats were held via Zoom and Peggy was the instructor. The October retreat was observed as part of this study. This is the only retreat in North America that held activities for participants during the pandemic.

The participants based in Michigan also performed in Lansing at the Michigan State Capitol building “as a reaction to the demonstration of gun owners armed with assault rifles a few weeks earlier.”³² They did not agree with the gun-wielders that assembled at the capitol building the week prior who were protesting the COVID-19 related state lockdowns. While in conversation with the participants of the October virtual retreat, they described the alphorn as an “instrument of peace,” and the performance as a “counter-protest in the name of peace.”³³ The performers are pictured on the next page at the Michigan Capitol building with shower caps serving as bell covers on their alphorns to prevent the spread of aerosols.

³¹ Courtesy of Christine Griffith.

³² Email from John Griffith, November 2nd, 2020

³³ Conversation with participants, October 21st, 2020

They were proudly featured on local news stations and had lunch at the Lansing Brewery following their performance, a place that they highly recommend. The group shares a common interest in social drinking— one of their favorite performances included playing at the Soulard Oktoberfest, home of Anheuser-Busch, where one participant commented that they loved seeing the clydesdales and another commented that they were “limited to ten refills” of their steins. At their first retreat, where they stayed at a Catholic retreat center, they made sure to confirm that alcohol was permitted on the premises, as they “enjoy a little drink or two in the evening.” Fortunately, the Mother Superior is a craft brewer and dabbles in wine as well. Indeed, this is the only retreat in North America with scheduled happy hours, and even in the virtual retreats, glasses were raised during rousing choruses of Ein Prosit.



Members of the Midwest alphorn cohort performing at the Michigan State Capitol, October 2020

CONCLUSION

The differences between these three seminars are striking. They all stem from a common ancestor—the Swiss alphorn tradition—but have been translated into a North American practice in distinct ways. The pedagogical differences among the retreats stem from both the structure of the retreats themselves and the goals of the participants who attend them. The participants are able to both identify themselves as part of a distinct, smaller community created by the structure of the retreats and place themselves into the larger community that exists through the shared common experiences of all the players in North America.

The structured events create tightly-knit communities of various forms. While each of the players in this study is familiar with one another to some degree, there are levels of separation that depend on how regularly they interact with one another and in what contexts. Regarding the North American Alphorn Retreat and the players who regularly collaborate in that context, we see the following overlap:

—Bill, a teacher in Schönried and later at the Retreat, first meets Fritz in Switzerland at the competition in Canton Bern and most regularly performs and instructs with Fritz in Switzerland, and they both later go on to teach in Utah

—Tony, the founder of the retreat, first met Bill and Fritz in Switzerland at Schönried and most regularly performs and instructs with them in Utah

—Laura, who would later teach at the retreat, also met Bill and Fritz in Schönried, and first met Tony as a participant of the retreat in Utah, although they would most regularly perform together in North America beyond the confines of the seminar weekend

—Gary first met Fritz in Schönried and encountered Bill for the second time there, but most regularly performs with players in North America; he met Tony at a gig with Brian Priebe in Washington, D.C. but later encountered him again at the retreat in Utah

The roots of the North American Alphorn Retreat as a branch of the Swiss Alphorn School in Schönried, where many of the players have met, taught, or at least participated, are unmistakable. Both retreats are held in resort towns: Schönried is outside of Gstaad and Snowbird is outside of Salt Lake City. Both follow similar schedules and playing requirements. The participants are expected to play alpine-style Swiss music and, for the most part, Swiss instruments. Tony is the North American representative for many Swiss alphorn makers, and the players take pride in their Swiss-made alphorns. This will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

The inclusion of a competition is unique to this retreat. Each of the instructors has competed in the Nendaz Alphorn Festival competition— the largest alphorn competition in Switzerland— and in other competitions in Switzerland, either as an individual and/or as part of a duet. For example, Bill and Jim and Tony and Brian have competed as duet partners in recent years, and most of the instructors have competed individually resulting in top-ten placements. The concept of reaching an aesthetic ideal is of great importance to this cohort of players— whether or not that translates to Retreat participants through the instructors.

Competitiveness brings an interesting dynamic to a community. The lack of direct observation hampers understanding as to how this dynamic plays out in terms of participant camaraderie. Over the course of this study, some information regarding judgment of this

competition was gathered, but not enough to bring conclusive evidence of community opinion and the mindset of the Retreat participants regarding competition.³⁴

Many of the instructors have been lauded for playing in an “authentic” Swiss style. Strict adherence to a Swiss style of playing, the specifics of which are debated between the players in North America and in Switzerland, is a common goal of these participants. They have often discussed the specific stylistic aspects of their playing and that of others that they strive for in order to sound as Swiss as possible. They have discussed the differences in Switzerland between “German-speaking” and “French-speaking” regions in terms of differences in the sonic aspects of their music, and even of differences between those of various cantons. However, it is most important to note that they are overall well-educated in the Swiss approach, techniques, and folklore, and hold that in the highest regard. They strive to pass on this information to their students in order to continue the Swiss tradition of alphorn playing.

However, within any community, there can be disagreements on how to best pass on musical knowledge. Not all of these players come from a Swiss or Germanic ethnic background. Yet they have all, in some way, most apparently adopted the cultural background surrounding alphorn practices, aesthetics, and folklore— in Utah, through playing style and seminar practices, in West Virginia, through the incorporation of the outdoors, and in the Midwest, through a lively group atmosphere. The North American Alphorn Retreat serves an important purpose in this regard. By bringing a Swiss music genre (and Swiss instructors) to North America, players from North America have easier access to the long-standing tradition of the Swiss alphorn schools,

³⁴ Further investigation through fieldwork, including participant observation, are needed to garner more conclusive evidence.

and those who have attended the seminars in Switzerland can develop the relationships they built on the European continent in a place where they regularly perform or study with American and Canadian colleagues.

Each of the respondents in this study has a unique relationship to the natural world, and each of them relates alphorn practice in some way to the outdoors. The instrument is meant to be played outdoors. In developing the Appalachian Alphorn Adventure, Laura mentions several key points that bring it farther from Swiss tradition and the North American Alphorn School, yet keep it rooted in the core of alphorn tradition purely through its connection to the naturalistic element of the practice shared by all alphorn players. However, while hiking might appear to be the core aspect that sets this retreat that sets it apart from the Utah seminar, the systemic changes in pedagogy bring it further towards a distinctly North American school of practice.

This seminar does not focus on “getting everything right”— rather, the group of participants is trusted with their own success. From musical techniques like intonation (trusting that tuning intervals will fall into place,³⁵ even in a relaxed environment) to housekeeping. Some of the participants elect to help with cleaning up after dinner and packing away leftovers for lunch, which they say makes the retreat “cozier” in nature.³⁶ The group is self-governed enough to uphold their own ideals regarding not only musical style and technique, but also community standards. The participants have a choice regarding accommodation; they can opt to stay in a private cabin, private room, or in shared accommodation— bunk beds. They gather for meals as a group, including the instructors. Monica and Laura join the participants for all activities, even

³⁵ From an interview with Laura Nelson, October 19th, 2020

³⁶ From an interview with Monica Hambrick, December 16th, 2020

outside of structured instructional events, and non-participants, like spouses, can join in most activities due to the program schedule. This was an intentional choice on the part of the instructors. Self-governance, coupled with total immersion of instructors, seems to heighten the overall sense of group interdependence and could strengthen the sense of camaraderie for participants.

The music played by the participants in this retreat is also a contributing factor to its North American identity. By performing music composed specifically for a certain cohort of players to be played in a certain space at a specific point in time, this seminar is able to distance itself from Swiss tradition. By not playing “the same old chestnuts,” or the same Swiss melodies, the participants are exposed to new music each year that they are able to bring with them back to their own communities to disseminate. It is still an aural tradition. However, without first learning the Swiss tradition, some players may not feel equipped to play in all arenas or with all players— not every player enjoys performing new music, and not every player can agree on style. Even Laura has commented that it is hard to learn the alphorn style unless you “go to Switzerland,” and all but one respondent has stated in interviews that they most regularly perform in settings where they are playing Swiss music.

And yet— the cohort of players that most regularly collaborates with one another has the least affiliation with Switzerland. The Midwest cohort of players was born out of the Ein Prosit German Band in Kalamazoo, Michigan and the resulting sub-group Alphorngruppe “Alpentraum,” of which many of this cohort are members. Instead of being strictly Swiss, the group's cultural identity is rooted in more of a German and Bavarian flavor. Peggy, their primary instructor and an honorary member of the Alphorngruppe, is an academic researcher on the

alphorn; she lectures and performs widely throughout the United States, but, unlike the instructors of the other two major retreats, she has never studied with Swiss alphorn instructors in Switzerland. She brings a unique perspective to teaching style as a horn professor and academic that is not apparent in the other retreats.

Unlike the instructors and participants previously mentioned, the Midwest cohort of players met and began playing alphorn in North America. While many of the Utah cohort met while abroad, and later came together as a group in North America, these players first joined forces in the Midwest region and then travelled *as a group* to Switzerland, not to attend alphorn seminars, but as cultural tourists. They had a structured schedule of cultural events and places that they visited. Although they brought their alphorns, but they were not there to learn how to play the alphorn from Swiss instructors or to perform with Swiss colleagues. Instead, they interacted with the local people and landscapes as a community which has in turn strengthened their community identity. They do have a patchwork of individual experiences that contribute to the strength of the imagined community as a whole. More importantly, as a cohort they have forged and developed shared memories and a singular group identity that they continually reinforce through regular collaboration.

Chapter IV

“We All Serve the Same Master:” The Alphorn Trade



“Little Sam the Alphorn Man”-- Cat and alphorn belonging to Tracy Sonneborn

The relationship of alphorn to player, and vice versa, was a regular topic in every interview over the course of this study. Many points regarding the purchase, trade, and love of the physical instrument were discussed, even when those points seemingly did not directly correspond to a question posed to the respondent. However, over the course of the past several months, I have come to realize the importance that these transactions have for the alphorn community. In this chapter, I will introduce organological aspects of the alphorn, the practices surrounding trade and purchase, and explain how the alphorn serves its community in extra-musical ways.

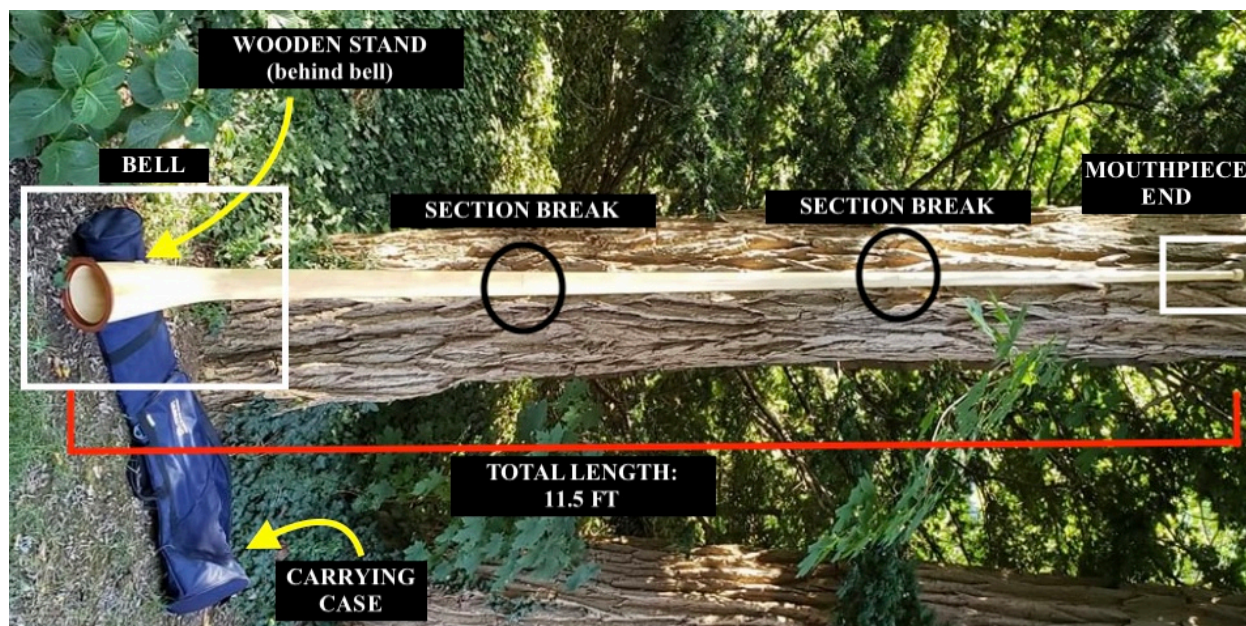
MORPHOLOGY

The alphorn is a conically-bored wooden instrument roughly twelve feet in length³⁷ (or, “traditionally,” the “length of two men”).³⁸ It is played by vibrating the lips and blowing (as with

³⁷ For reference, my alphorn is 11.5 feet; it is made up of three parts with the part closest to the player measuring 45 inches, the middle section totalling 46 inches, and the bell section measuring 47 inches. The outer bell diameter is 8 inches and the inner bell diameter is 6 inches.

³⁸ Interview with Bill Hopson, September 9th, 2020

a brass instrument). The alphorn is held in front of the player, held by one or two hands. It does not have keys or finger holes. Commonly used woods are maple, spruce, and pine, as these are some of the “traditional” woods used in Switzerland, but other woods can be used depending on the maker. Notably, German maker Hubert Hense makes alphorns out of olive wood. It is commonly produced in three parts to aid in transportation. Apart from the instrument itself, it is necessary to have a mouthpiece, bag or case (or a stand, if displaying at home), and lanolin or other grease for the parts to slide together easily. Because it is made of wood, the instrument can be affected by very high or low temperatures. There is a wooden stand at the bell end of the instrument to help balance the instrument.



Using the Hornbostel and Sachs method, the alphorn is 423.121.22 (aerophone, non-free, natural trumpet, end-blown, curved tube, with mouthpiece). Other instruments with the same classification are the vuvuzela, lur, and natural horn.³⁹ In Montagu and Burton’s proposed

³⁹ Von Hornbostel, Erich M., and Curt Sachs. "Classification of Musical Instruments: Translated from the Original German by Anthony Baines and Klaus P. Wachsmann." *The Galpin Society Journal* 14 (1961): 3-29.

Linnaean-style morphology, the alphorn would be categorized as a wind instrument, conical, double lip reed, other material, end blown, without finger holes, split wood, covered alphorn (straight and narrow). In this classification system, individual instruments could be further categorized by the wood used, ethnic/regional origin, and maker. For example, my alphorn would be classified as wind instrument, conical, double lip reed, other material, end blown, without finger holes, split wood, covered alphorn, spruce, Austrian, Heimatklang.⁴⁰ The second classification system is more useful when categorizing specific alphorns, as the wood used and the individual makers prove to be important facets of the instrument's history and use. The makers and design of the instrument hold importance to the alphorn community members and cannot be overlooked.

WINDS (Cont.):

<u>Family</u>	<u>Tribe</u>	<u>Genus</u>	<u>Species</u>	<u>sub-Species</u>	<u>Variety</u>	
conical double lip reed, other material, end blown without finger holes	bored wood	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> midwinterhoorn²⁵ covered alphorn²⁴ straight & narrow -do- straight & wide -do- folded & narrow -do- folded & wide uncovered alphorn stepped cone²⁶ coiled bark²⁷ </div>	material	geographic & ethnic location	use & maker	
						split wood ²³
	animal horns					<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> oliphant shofar natural horns²⁸ stepped horns²⁹ </div>

Montagu and Burton's classification system

⁴⁰ Montagu, Jeremy, and John Burton. "A Proposed New Classification System for Musical Instruments." *Ethnomusicology* 15, no. 1 (1971): 49-70.

THE “IOU”

Three of the respondents (Gary Bang, Bill Hopson, and Tony Brazelton) outlined a common phenomenon that occurred when purchasing their alphorns from a Swiss colleague. Gary, on his first visit to Switzerland in 1995, was loaned money from a Swiss stranger to purchase his first alphorn due to ATM withdrawal limits (which he reimbursed upon his to the United States). When purchasing his first Schupbach alphorn, Bill was not required to pay a deposit for the instrument, and described the transaction as being “very casual.” Tony recounted a visit to a Swiss alphorn maker, who “gave” him an alphorn after previously declining to sell him one.

The causal nature of alphorn sales, especially the willingness of Swiss alphorn makers and players to get the instruments into the hands of non-Swiss players, does not necessarily reflect the Swiss competition and performance cultures described by the respondents. However, a lackadaisical approach to exchanging money for an instrument appears to be commonplace. Four of the respondents described incidents where they did not think that they would be able to purchase an alphorn on a given day, but were sent home with one nonetheless. This attitude also translates to borrowed instruments-- one of the respondents owns a large number of alphorns in a personal collection and loans them out to other players for as long as needed. This practice especially implies that the monetary value of the instrument seems insignificant when compared to the value of another person’s interest and education on the alphorn.

THE SWISS MAKERS

In many instrumental circles, singularly talented players of an instrument take the spotlight in conversation. As a horn player, I have often been involved in conversations about

Dennis Brain, Radek Baborak, and Sarah Willis, to name a few. However, while the same names appeared throughout my conversations with the respondents (Lisa Stoll, Arkady Shilkloper, Jozsef Molnar, and Bill Hopson), the stars of the show appear to be the Swiss alphorn makers, not the players. All of the respondents spoke at length about the beauty of a particular maker's instruments, and their interactions with them over the years. Gerald Pot and Josef Stocker, in particular, seem to be the eminent makers in the opinion of the respondents. While the respondents each own different instruments made by other makers, these two constantly came up in interviews-- players either own alphorns crafted by them, aspire to own them, or just generally consider them to be the best examples of the instrument-building trade. Other Swiss alphorns owned by the respondents are made by Tobias Bärtschi and Schüpbach; only two of the respondents mentioned owning German-made alphorns, made by Andreas Bader and Hubert Hense.

At the beginning of my research on the alphorn, I purchased a second hand instrument from a Long Island-based alphorn player. As a graduate student and beginner alphorn player, it fits my needs, and in my opinion has a nice, albeit quiet, sound. However, it was often characterized by the respondents as being low quality (with one respondent remarking in hushed tones that it was "cheap"). My instrument, made by Heimatklang, is made by an Austrian company. These instruments are often purchased in bulk to use as rental instruments at retreats where people are unable to travel with their personal alphorns, or do not already own one. I was urged by two of the respondents to purchase a Swiss-made alphorn, which varies in price from beginning at \$3000 USD and higher. Josef Stocker's price list (last updated in 2010) is below:

G flat alphorn length 340 cm CHF⁴¹ 2850.--

F-alphorn length 360 cm CHF 2850.--

Additional part for G flat alphorns, for keynote F CHF 350.--⁴²

These prices do not include mouthpieces, a case, shipping, or tax, each of which will raise the price of the instrument considerably. G flat, or more commonly F sharp, is the “traditional” key for Swiss alphorns. All but two of the respondents indicated that they play alphorns keyed in F natural. To purchase an alphorn that is capable of playing in both F and F sharp, you must purchase an F sharp alphorn as well as the “additional part,” which will lengthen the F sharp alphorn to the key of F. The instruments are made in three parts. Two of the respondents noted the long wait list to purchase a Stocker instrument. My used alphorn cost \$1550, which included the instrument (in F, three pieces), three mouthpieces, and a case.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN ALPHORNS

Each of the respondents currently owns or at one time owned an alphorn made by Rocky Mountain Alphorns. These instruments were crafted by Bill Hopson; he has since stopped making alphorns while continuing to teach and perform. Initially I believed that these alphorns were popular in North America due, at least partially, to the ease of purchasing one instead of buying a Swiss-made instrument. However, I asked one of the respondents why s/he purchased a Rocky Mountain alphorn and was told that they are just very high quality instruments and worth the somewhat higher price tag. (“His work is excellent.”) When in production, the price of a Rocky Mountain Alphorns instrument was \$5250 USD, or \$5000 CAD. If purchasing in the

⁴¹ As of November 2020, the exchange rate from Swiss francs (CHF) to USD is 1 CHF to 1.12 USD.

⁴² From his website, www.alphorn.com

United States, tax would be added to the price. This price included the option of an alphorn in F or F sharp, and included a mouthpiece and case.

The bell of an alphorn is often decorated, either painted or carved. While the Swiss-made alphorns are usually decorated with a Swiss cross, wildflowers, or a similarly Swiss design, the purchasers of a Rocky Mountain Alphorns instrument had the ability to customize their decoration. Bill worked with artist Doug Pauls to create these custom pieces of artwork for those who opted for this addition. The price for the addition of exotic wood trim ranged from \$180 to \$375 USD or CAD, and the price for custom artwork ranged from \$240 to \$330 USD or CAD.

Tracy Sonneborn, one of the players in the Midwest cohort, owns two decorated instruments from Rocky Mountain Alphorns. His cat is pictured at the beginning of this chapter peering into one of these alphorns. As pictured, the top of the alphorn features a carving, defined by Bill as: "...the historical image of a medallion presented to the best Alphorn player at the first alpine shepherds' festival held in Unspunnen (Switzerland) in 1805. This shortened version of the Alphorn is known in Switzerland as an Unspunnenhorn. The inscription, "ZUR EHRE DES ALPHORNS", translates as "In Praise of the Alphorn"."⁴³ The bottom of this alphorn is painted with an image of two red-throated hummingbirds surrounding a weigela branch. This alphorn was made in 2002.

⁴³ From Bill's website, alphorn.ca



Pictured: Sam taking a closer look into the alphorn bell; the hummingbirds on the bottom

Tracy's other Rocky Mountain Alphorns instrument features the likeness of four of his cats. The kittens were born the week between Tracy's mother and father's passing. Two of the cats are still living; Tracy mentions that "though they are not exactly kittens, they do have all their teeth."⁴⁴ This alphorn was made in 2004.



The 2004 alphorn, pictured alongside one of the cats whose likeness is on the instrument

⁴⁴ Email from Tracy, November 2nd 2020

Other members of the Midwest cohort also own personalized instruments from Rocky Mountain Alphorns. John Griffith's instrument, named "Coco," features "Cocobola" wood trim and a carving of the Canadian Rocky Mountains on the bell. His alphorn was made in 2007. Frank Jess' alphorn, named "Rosie," is made with a red rose carved and painted on the bell. Other Rocky Mountain Alphorns featuring special designs are pictured on the next pages. Some of the purchasers opt to have "traditional" Swiss imagery adorn their instrument; similarly, Stocker's alphorns come decorated with the Swiss cross and "alpine flowers." However, Bill writes that "...the artwork applied to Rocky Mountain Alphorns, as a matter of general principle [sic], features North American scenes and North American flora and fauna." Each of the images are from Bill's website; the descriptions are in his own words.

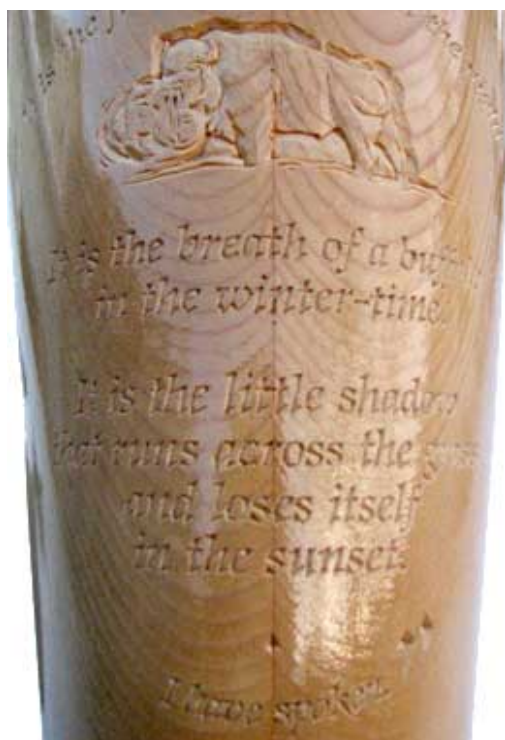


The back of the bell (pictured) is carved with the quote from Crowfoot. Bill writes:

“On this Alphorn the wood trim elements (bell ring, collar, foot and mouthpiece receiver knob) are made from Spalted Maple. This Maple is from Eastern Canada. Spalted Maple typically has the ‘classic black-line’ spalting that is produced by a fungus that grows in the wood soon after the tree is felled. The wood must be dried at just the right time for the spalting to be preserved in the wood, but before the fungus destroys the integrity of the wood. Spalted wood is highly prized by woodworkers. This is a fine example of wood spalting.

This Alphorn is in my personal collection and is my instrument of choice for performances in Western North America.”

Pictured left:



“This Alphorn features artwork very personal to Doug Pauls, who is involved in the Native American culture in Alberta, Canada. The subject of the artwork is Crowfoot, Chief of the Siksika Nation of the Blackfoot Tribe of Native Americans, whose land is near Calgary, Alberta, Canada. As a young warrior Crowfoot fought in as many as 19 battles and sustained many injuries. Despite this, in his later years he sought peace among his native people in a time of much inter-tribal warfare.

When the Canadian Pacific Railway sought to build their mainline through Blackfoot territory, negotiations with the white people convinced Crowfoot that it should be allowed. Although life in accommodation with the white people was not easy, this difficult decision proved to be the best for his people. At this time there were terrible wars in the United States between the white people and the Sioux Tribes led by Chief Sitting Bull. Chief Crowfoot's wisdom is one of the reason why wars like this were avoided in Canada.

The inscription below the image of Crowfoot is as follows:
Crowfoot
Siksika Blackfoot Chief
1830-1890

The artwork on the bottom of this Alphorn inscribes some of the words of Crowfoot and gives us an insight into his wisdom and his respect for nature. The words inscribed on the Alphorn are:

‘A little while and Crowfoot will be gone from among you, whither we cannot tell. From nowhere we come, and into nowhere we go.

What is life?

It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of the buffalo in the winter-time. It is the shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

I have spoken.”

Pictured right:

“The artwork on the right is Doug's vision of the great Tatanka Iyotaka (circa 1831 - 1890), a Chief and Medicine Man of the Hunkpapa Sioux known more commonly as Sitting Bull. Sitting Bull was possibly born in Canada, but spent most of his life on the United States side of the border leading his people through very difficult times as the powerful white culture drove the Sioux tribes from their traditional lands and eventually forced the Sioux to live on inadequate reservations. Sitting Bull was a heroic defender of his people, and a man of great dignity, intelligence and strength. He was the last Sioux Chief to lay down his rifle in resistance to the armed subjugation of his race.”



Pictured left:

“A favorite passion of this customer is fly fishing (which is true of William Hopson as well). This is a classic Rocky Mountain fly fishing scene. The leaping trout is a Cut-throat Trout, which has risen to a dry fly. A desperate fight will ensue, but afterwards the fish will be released. Cut-throat Trout are native to the alpine lakes.

In the background is Mount Assiniboine, which makes the lake either Sunburst Lake or Lake Magog, both of which are noted for spectacular fishing.”



Pictured above:

“This Alphorn is extensively carved and painted. It features a Mountain Goat on a rock and alpine wildflowers (visited by a ruby-throated hummingbird), with the imposing background of Castle Mountain in Banff National Park.

A ground squirrel peeks out from among the flowers and an eagle soars above the scene.

This is the first Alphorn that Doug carved and painted for Rocky Mountain Alphorns - sometime around 1990.”

Pictured right:

“...a customer who lived in Oregon at the time of the Mount St. Helens volcanic eruption wanted to commemorate that event.”

⊕



TRADE BETWEEN COMMUNITY MEMBERS

There are two components to this section: buying second-hand alphorns, and borrowing alphorns. Each of the respondents, in some way, has participated in one of these practices.

Although most of the community members choose their own new alphorn, that is not always the case, especially when they are beginners on the instrument. Just as I purchased a second-hand alphorn, many of the community members opt to purchase an alphorn from a North American colleague. Likewise, when players are beginners, or are otherwise unable to purchase an alphorn of their own, they might encounter a kind friend in the community who is willing to lend them an instrument from their collection.⁴⁵

Throughout the course of my interviews, I was able to piece together the journey of two alphorns that passed through many hands. The first, a Schupbach, was described to me in many ways, ranging from “old-fashioned” and “clunky” to a “nice horn.” This particular instrument is in three pieces, and can be keyed in F or F sharp, depending on which pieces are used (i.e. when assembled, it will be in two pieces). This alphorn originally belonged to Marvin McCoy of Minneapolis, MN. It was then sold to Gary Bang, who was close friends with Marvin. Gary brought the instrument to the first Midwest Alphorn Retreat in 2009, where it was sold to Tracy. Tracy is still in possession of the Schupbach, and writes that “it has been in many arms and touched many lips over the years, but it has always come back to me for TLC.” On the same trip, Gary sold another alphorn. This second instrument, a Rocky Mountain alphorn, was purchased by Gary directly from Bill. He sold it to Jan Solberg, a member of the Midwest cohort.

⁴⁵ Dissimilarly from these two scenarios, Tony Brazelton is an importer of Swiss- and German-made alphorns. He receives the new alphorns directly from the makers and sells them. While an important component of the North American alphorn economy, this will not be discussed in this chapter.

Other components of the instrument, especially mouthpieces, are also sold and traded among community members. At the Appalachian Alphorn Retreat, Gary Bang and Laura Nelson met for the first time. On one of their hikes, Gary discovered that Laura had lost her mouthpiece, and he sold her one of his mouthpieces made by Fritz Frautschi. He later sold a Hopson mouthpiece to fellow Appalachian Alphorn Retreat instructor Monica Hambrick, and roughly fifteen mouthpieces from various makers to a Michigan-based member of the Midwest cohort.

On the other hand, borrowed instruments are exchanged regularly between community members. Most notably are the alphorns in Tracy's collection: although he did not start the Midwest Alphorn Retreat, he appears to be the person who encouraged so many people in that region to start playing the instrument. He described John Griffith, the organizer of the Retreat, as the "alphorn evangelist," but Tracy is the one who regularly lent his alphorns to beginners to encourage them to play. The Schupbach mentioned earlier has been lent to other players, and the 2004 kitten-adorned alphorn is currently in the hands of one of his friends, a drummer, who is just learning how to play. Even though that particular alphorn holds significant sentimental value for Tracy, he has let another person borrow it.

Monica Hambrick owns an alphorn that she previously borrowed from her horn teacher, Virginia Thompson. When Monica was a graduate student at West Virginia University, she would often spend her weekends hiking (and not practicing). To blend the two practices (horn and hiking) together, Thompson lent Monica her alphorn. After Thompson passed away, Monica purchased the alphorn from Thompson's husband and still performs on it to this day. The alphorn was made by Bill Hopson. After Monica purchased the alphorn, she visited Bill's website to learn more about the instrument and discovered the North American Alphorn Retreat listed on his

website. Wanting to learn more about the alphorn, Monica attended the retreat and met Bill, Laura, and Tony Brazelton, and later went on to be an instructor at the Retreat. She regularly collaborates with Tony and Laura.

THE PERSONALITY OF THE ALPHORN

All but one of my key respondents is trained on a European orchestral instrument. They perform in settings such as symphony halls, jazz clubs, and solo recitals. Each of them plays a brass instrument: Laura and Bill are horn players, Tony is a trumpet player, and Jim Hopson is a trombone player. The skills that they have acquired from these instruments easily transfer to their alphorn playing, as the basic techniques of brass playing (lip vibration, the harmonic series) carries over from one instrument to the other.

Some of these respondents have mentioned the comparison between the two types of instrument, whether from a purely technical stance, a cultural perspective, or on the instrument themselves. Laura was especially detailed in explaining how the two instruments make her feel, i.e. the personality of the individual instruments and how they affect her on an emotional level. If the alphorn is thought of as an individual with a personality and almost a mind of its own, it could stand to be the most important community member.

When describing herself as a horn player, Laura characterized herself as being a “rule follower.” She stated that the horn is a “tool,” and that “philosophically, it feels like work.” When describing herself as an alphorn player, she described herself as being a “rule breaker” and “artistic,” and that the alphorn is used for “creating art.” Additionally, she stated in interviews that educated musicians (for example, conservatory-trained musicians and professors of brass instruments) don’t always “get it.” Getting “it,” or the essence of the alphorn, is more important

than technical perfection on the instrument. The alphorn sound, and how it allows Laura to express her innermost self, is the most important way that the alphorn serves her.

The alphorn has been described in extra-musical ways by each of the respondents. While some of the terms apply to the sound of the instrument, other terms seem to characterize the “essence of the alphorn.” Respondents have characterized the alphorn in the following ways:

- not brass
- has a “wooden heart”
- “my musical voice”
- national icon (Swiss)
- has a “vast, ancient, spiritual quality”
- both raw and refined
- party instrument
- resonant
- the instrument of peace
- “blows people away”
- inspiring

Comparatively, the respondents have collectively described the alphorn *sound*, in terms of the personality of that sound, as follows:

- broad
- expansive
- free
- sensitive to risk
- imperfect
- easy going
- high risk, high reward
- courageous
- tranquil
- naturalistic
- “traditional” with “something new”
- expressive
- fun
- what happens “between the notes” has importance

The terms used to describe the sound of the alphorn in some ways reflect how the respondents view themselves as musicians and a certain level of oneness with this instrument. When asked about their experiences as a brass player, the respondents answered in terms of professional engagements and secondary school training. However, when talking about the alphorn, the respondents gave much more detailed answers about their affinity for the sound and personality of the instrument. Whether or not these same terms apply to their experiences as brass musicians is unclear as they did not characterize the sound of those instruments in the ways outlined above; however, many of the personal and professional standards of musicianship they outlined were reflected in both aspects of their musical lives.

CONCLUSION

Bill's reflection of the "debate" between the two styles of alphorn playing-- that adopted by Swiss "city people" and the alpine-style that has been embraced in recent years included this statement:

"I honour their effort and their dedication to the art of blowing the alphorn. I value their friendship. We all serve the same master."

When speaking about his friends in the community, he does not automatically sort the players into two groups. He states that they "all serve the same master"-- the master being the alphorn itself.

The alphorn placed in this context serves not as an object, but as a living member of this community. If we are to consider the alphorn as an acting member, with contributions of her own, the instrument would serve as the binding force between the two stylistic groups, the three schools in North America, and ultimately the net under which all alphorn players, internationally, fall into. The true common ground between each player is the alphorn. It knows no language barriers, nationality, or musical training.

The alphorn serves its constituents in a variety of ways. For some this is musical, with one respondent saying that the alphorn is his/her "musical voice." For others, having an alphorn has enabled them to find community. Another respondent remarked that playing the alphorn is their "main social outlet." The alphorn is not limited to these two groups; yet another respondent enjoys "tootin' for tootin's sake" in their driveway. The sound of the instrument, when not characterized by stylistic or aesthetic standards, speaks to the personal nature of the connection between musician and alphorn. Many times, the respondents have characterized themselves in

similar ways, either as a musician or in their non-musical lives. The alphorn's personality seems to be an extension of the person playing it.

Each of the respondents has characterized his/her personal instrument in different ways, and all of their stories surrounding trade and purchase add to love for the alphorn. The respondents have acquired their alphorns in different ways: they have borrowed one before purchasing their own, they have purchased one from a maker, or they have purchased one from a fellow community member. While there are countless combinations of these scenarios, each of the respondents owns their own alphorn, and each alphorn has gone through a different journey before reaching the hands of its owner. Some of the alphorns hold special significance for their owners, whether this is through personalization or a connection to a previous owner, or just the mere fact that they own the instrument. Their alphorn is an extension of who they are as a person and musician, and enables them to easily collaborate with other community members. The physical instrument can be an extension of themselves: whether it has bell art that depicts an important event or hobby or it was acquired on a trip to Switzerland, these instruments have sentimental value.

Chapter V

An Instrument of Kinship

The alphorn community stretches to almost every corner of North America, often bound by a single commonality: a love of the alphorn. The instrument itself can serve as a tool for peace, musical expression, and social interaction. Alphorn players congregate for these purposes, and the instrument is paramount in the success of these pursuits. In order to analyze the data collected over the course of this study, and to provide conclusions about the community as a whole, development of style, group identity, and individual identity will be discussed in this chapter. These concepts go hand-in-hand with one another, as evidenced by interviews with the respondents and the answers to a comprehensive survey answered anonymously at the end of the study. Individual identities, specifically the aspects of their identities as musicians, commonly overlap, but each of the respondents brings their individual traits to the community. The development of a group identity follows not only important events in the alphorn careers of the respondents, but also displays how they have each interacted over the course of the past thirty years. Their regular collaboration, but eventual divergence of practice and ideals, has shaped the community into separate schools of thought. The development of these individual and group practices has strengthened bonds between community members, created new avenues for learning and performing, and solidified the North American tradition as independent from its Swiss progenitor.

At the end of the study, a survey was sent out to all respondents, which they answered anonymously. The questions asked the respondents to reiterate their personal musical identities, how they describe the group identity, and how they define success within the alphorn

community. The answers to these questions further solidified the development of the three schools of thought discussed in the previous chapter.

When asked about the community as a whole, one respondent answered:

“Perhaps I transfer my open mindedness on others, but, as even more people in America start to play it, I foresee great variations in how people approach it. You'll always have the serious ones, looking to replicate Swiss style and procedures. You'll have those that only want to have fun and aren't so strict with the traditions. Hopefully, you'll have those who reject everything and find entirely new ways of expressing themselves with the alphorn. I think we'll all get along, especially at happy hour.”

These three categories—those who replicate the Swiss tradition, those who just want to have fun, and those who find new paths to expression—mirror the three established schools in North America. The rich alpine tradition, primarily brought to North America by Bill Hopson, has established itself as the North American Alphorn School. Here, people go to learn the Swiss tradition and to perform Swiss works. The fun-loving amateur musicians have established themselves under the Midwest Alphorn Retreat, and the ones who are creating an entirely new path for the alphorn have situated themselves at the Appalachian Alphorn Retreat. Appalachia is a uniquely American locale, and the works performed at this retreat are vastly different from those performed as part of the other two retreats. However, each of these seminars is still in its early stages, and they remain three branches of the same tree.

The three schools of thought appeared in the respondent's answers to some of the survey questions. When asked how would they define "success" within the alphorn community, and if that definition of success is important to them the respondents answered:

Anonymous Respondent #1

“Success has to involve creating or contributing to musical experiences for our audience, students, and colleagues. This would include live performances,

composition, recordings (audio and video), educational workshops, festivals, and/or instrument building.”

Anonymous Respondent #2

“Gatherings [of community members], requests to play, fascinated audiences, curiosity”

Anonymous Respondent #3

“For me success is using the alphorn to open myself up creatively, to get me out of my self-imposed box and grow as a person. If I get a few [dollars] on the side, that is a bonus.”

In this selection of answers, their individual definitions of success vary from pleasing audiences, to gathering as a group, and to individual growth and curiosity. There is a difference between those who value commercial success (i.e. well-received performances or recordings) and personal attachment to the instrument (i.e. creative fulfillment). Instead of focusing on success as a purely external factor, as in highly ranked competition results, some of the respondents instead place success as an internal factor, for example, personal growth.

These same respondents were asked if success, as they defined it, was important to them as an alphorn player. They answered in the following ways:

Anonymous Respondent #1

Most definitely. My livelihood and identity as a musician are predicated on my ability to contribute in many of the ways listed above.

Anonymous Respondent #2

Yes but not the main objective. Playing with others is important.

Anonymous Respondent #3

Very important. But it's an ongoing process, one needing adjusting and refocusing from time to time. Journey vs destination.

Success, in the eyes of these respondents, now falls into three distinct categories.

Livelihood, community, and personal growth are the goals of many musicians, but they usually

go hand in hand. External validation through the opinion of others is still a marker of success within this community. Personal growth, or the individual “journey” of music-making, is more important to other respondents, and group communion serves as the most important community success factor to others. This community is largely made up of amateur musicians and those who play the alphorn “on the side;” almost none of the respondents stated that the alphorn was their primary professional instrument. Hence, an involved community of amateur musicians would be most important to those for whom the alphorn is their only, or primary, musical outlet.

The alphorn community was referenced repeatedly in interviews and in the survey. When asked why the community was important to them, respondents answered:

Anonymous Respondent #1

“Geographically, I’m fairly isolated from the rest of the alphorn community... As far as I know, I’m the only active professional alphorn player in [location redacted]. The few active amateur players around here are also very spread out - [location] is a big place! Therefore, most of my playing career has been as a soloist, or as the sole alphorn player in a band. Alphorn retreats are usually my best opportunity to connect with the community, play in an alphorn group, and to hear my large-scale alphorn ensemble compositions live. The alphorn community is an important source of inspiration and support for me.”

Anonymous Respondent #2

“Yes, it's a big part of my recreational life and social circle.”

Anonymous Respondent #3

“...The alphorn is important because it is like the "secret handshake" with strangers, with travel, with opportunities. Doors open.”

The respondents characterize community importance in different ways, again identifying external and internal factors. Performance of compositions and opportunity, or the “doors” opening, both serve as external factors, whereas recreational playing, social interaction, and inspiration support community members internally. The ways in which the alphorn community

serves its members socially, musically, and professionally each contribute to the development of the North American style of practice and community, differentiating it from the Swiss or otherwise international network of players. A distinctly North American network of players, and the further delineation into individual cohorts of alphorn players, stands apart as the most important facet of the musical and social lives of these community members.

The development of an agreeable stylistic standard amongst these community members formed following Bill Hopson's initial trips to Switzerland and his subsequent competition performances. His stylistic choices shaped not only the North American sound ideal but the entire international alphorn community. Indeed, two-thirds of the anonymous survey responses identified Hopson as the overall most successful alphorn player. His contributions to the community have not gone unnoticed by the community, and his lifelong success in competitions, as a teacher, and as an instrument maker cannot be overshadowed by his contributions to the revival of a cohesive alphorn sound and style.

Hopson was not alone in his interpretation of style, but his activities greatly influenced the future of the instrumental community and its perceptions of the ideal alphorn sound. These aesthetic standards ultimately bond the community together, even when the members are not familiar with one another. Having common ground, in the form of these standards, is especially important given the absence of an overseeing board (like the Swiss Yodeling Association).

Hopson writes:

“I was there at the right time to further the cause of musical emancipation for the alphorn and to add a bit of technique, polish and expressive range. Others made their contribution. As our generation fades, the Alphorn as a musical movement has never been better - a younger generation of fine players is full of new ideas, building out of the great alpine tradition.”

The binding factor in this community is not the music being performed. The community has organized itself around the *instrument*, and not the music composed for the alphorn. No matter what music is being performed, the community members are each bound by a love of the instrument. Indeed, the international alphorn movement has never been stronger as evidenced by this study. Each of the respondents remarked on the importance of recruiting new players to join their ranks, and they have been successful in doing so over the past decade following the formation of North American alphorn retreats. Their common experiences and international community ties have strengthened their bonds over the years, and continue to help break down inherent geographic and interpersonal barriers between the communities. The North American alphorn community has begun its emancipation from its Swiss roots, and a trip to Switzerland is no longer a necessity for the determined amateur or seasoned professional. For these respondents, success and social ties can all be found on their own continent.

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