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Semantic Connotations of the French Horn in Richard Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*

By focussing on Richard Wagner's Ring des Nibelungen, this essay explores the semantic connotations attributed to the French horn in the nineteenth century at a time characterised by the advent of valves and associated concerns that the profile of the horn was being watered down. What is striking about the use of the horn (except when stopped) is its predominantly positive symbolism, which is closely connected with its origins and the original playing possibilities of the natural horn. Nature, happy hunting, heroism, youth, health and love are just a few key words that it connotes. The occasionally poetic, flowery descriptions found in nineteenth-century instrumentation treatises are also considered here, some of which were undoubtedly the basis for how Wagner and his contemporaries understood the horn, and how Wagner's music influenced other composers in its use.

“The Sound of Brass” was the motto for our Fifth International Romantic Brass Symposium in Biel in November 2018.¹ We learnt about the nuances of different sounds, caused not just by the player himself but also by parameters such as materials, instrument design and material processing techniques. However, there is another very important aspect of the spectrum of sound that I would like to focus on here: the semantic connotations attributed to an instrument.

In our day, such connotations sometimes do not seem very scholarly in nature and can often sound pompous, as in this example from the 1960s: “the horn calls in and out of nature, the trumpet gives the brief command from person to person; the trombones, however, proclaim ‘with a bronze mouth’ the Word of God.”² Apart from the fact that such solemn dictums refer to sound qualities that are obviously immeasurable, we cannot merely ignore them, as they were common throughout the nineteenth century. While these connotations are by no means universal, nor must every note an instrument plays be interpreted in one way or another, nevertheless a grain of truth about them might be found in a musical context – whether in melody, harmony, rhythm or timbre – and may even be felt by listeners who are otherwise unaware of them.

The poet Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart (1739–1791) called the horn a “heavenly instrument” because it “preeminently before all others, brings forth the [...] greatest effect [on] the animal world. [It] makes the stag lie down at the mossy spring and seem to drink in,

1 See Institut Interpretation 2018.

2 “[...] das Horn ruft in und aus der Natur, die Trompete erteilt den kurzen Befehl von Mensch zu Mensch; die Posaunen aber verkünden ‘mit erzenem Mund’ die göttliche Mitteilung.” (David 1963, p. 101). All English translations by the present author unless otherwise stated.

as it were, the sounds with antlers held high.”³ Such words can help us to understand why the musicologist Alfred Einstein described the horn as the “most romantic of all instruments”.⁴ Besides its importance in music, the horn was a popular motif in the poetry of the nineteenth century, from Wilhelm Müller with his well-known “Gedichte aus den hinterlassenen Papieren eines reisenden Waldhornisten”⁵ (the “posthumous poems of a travelling horn player”) to Joseph von Eichendorff’s poems such as “Sehnsucht” (“Yearning”) or “Im Walde” (“In the forest”).⁶ The writings of Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck were also influential in this regard.⁷ In this literary context, the horn has often been associated with love, desire, hunting, and the forest in general.⁸ But in the field of art music too, the sound of the horn was very popular in the Romantic era – one thinks, for example, of Carl Maria von Weber’s *Freischütz*, the symphonies of Brahms and Bruckner, and of course the oeuvre of Richard Wagner. Apart from the mere sound of the instrument, the orchestration employed by these and many other composers can at least in some cases also be construed as semantically connotated.⁹ It is primarily the horn that evokes the German forest and the hunt in *Freischütz*. In Brahms’s first symphony, an Alphorn melody is used to inspire feelings of solemnity, while Wagner’s goal was explicitly to “focus” the orchestra’s ‘ability to speak’ with specific orchestration, and thereby to accompany and comment on the events taking place on stage in an “organic capacity”.¹⁰

Of course, these connotations are mostly mere vague allusions and references. Nevertheless, when we peruse composition treatises by Wagner’s predecessors, contemporaries and successors alongside passages from his tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, we can discern a panorama of more concrete connotations for the sound of the horn.

- 3 “Dieß himmlische Instrument [bring]t vorzugsweise vor allen andern, die größte Wirkung auf die Thierwelt hervor. [...] daß sich der Hirsch an [sic] Moosquell lagert, und mit hoch aufgerichtetem Geweih die Töne gleichsam zu verschlingen scheint.” (Schubart 1806, pp. 311 and 313f.; English after DuBois 1983, pp. 366 and 368).
- 4 “Das Horn ist ja das romantische Instrument kat’exocho und an seiner Verwendung allein in der Instrumentation könnte man die Entwicklung des Romantischen in der Musik studieren.” (Einstein 1950, pp. 85f.).
- 5 Müller 1821. A second volume of poems (among them the cycle “Winterreise”) was published in 1824 (Müller 1824).
- 6 Im Walde: “Es zog eine Hochzeit den Berg entlang, / Ich hörte die Vögel schlagen, / Da blitzten viel’ Reiter, das Waldhorn klang, / Das war ein lustiges Jagen! [...]” Sehnsucht: “Es schienen so golden die Sterne, / Am Fenster ich einsam stand / Und hörte aus weiter Ferne / Ein Posthorn im stillen Land. / Das Herz mir im Leibe entbrennte, / Da hab’ ich mir heimlich gedacht: / Ach, wer da mitreisen könnte / In der prächtigen Sommernacht! [...]” (Cited after Eichendorff 1841, pp. 6 and 31f.).
- 7 See, among others, Herder 1830, pp. 128f.; Wackenroder 1799, pp. 178 and 245. I am indebted to Arne Stollberg for this reference.
- 8 See Bodendorff 2002, p. 242.
- 9 Voss 1970a, p. 169.
- 10 “Um das außerordentlich ermöglichende Sprachorgan des Orchesters zu der Höhe zu steigern, daß es jeden Augenblick das in der dramatischen Situation liegende Unausprechliche dem Gefühle deutlich kundgeben könne, hat der von der dichterischen Absicht erfüllte Musiker [...] seine Erfindungsgabe ganz nach der von ihm empfundenen Notwendigkeit eines treffendsten, bestimmtesten Ausdruckes zum Auffinden des mannigfaltigsten Sprachvermögens des Orchesters zu schärfen [...] – so daß gerade die *allerreichste* Orchestersprache mit dem künstlerischen Zwecke sich kundgeben soll, gewissermaßen gar nicht beachtet, *gar nicht gehört* zu werden, nämlich nicht in ihrer *mechanischen*, sondern nur in ihrer *organischen* Wirksamkeit, in der sie eins ist mit dem Drama.” (Wagner 1994, pp. 386f.; English after Wagner 1995, pp. 370f.). A good overview of his orchestration is provided by Schirmer 2012. Further information may be found in Janz 2006. And last but not least, Humburg (2004) and Schäfer (1982) give examples of the connotations of the instrumentation in the *Ring* (some of which shift as the work progresses).

The “purposeful use of the horn”

The Romantic era brought both prominence to the sound of the horn in symphonies and operas, and the innovation of the valve instrument. The invention of valves by Blümel and Stölzel in 1814 made it possible to play the instrument chromatically without the changes in timbre caused by hand-stopping. Many performers and composers had reservations about these innovations.¹¹ And while some horn players enthusiastically exploited the new possibilities and praised the development of the valve horn as a great advance, others regretted the loss of the colour of the hand-stopped horn. Critics also expressed concern about a loss of semantic meaning for the horn because the valves enabled the musicians to play everything: “the purposeful use of the horn was abandoned in favour of its permanent involvement in the musical argument. As a result, many feared the sound of the horn would lose its independence.”¹²

Despite these fears, horn writing almost up to the end of the nineteenth century owed a lot to the harmonic series that is the basis of the original horn sound (and in some cases, horn writing continues to rely on it to the present day).

The reasons for this reluctance to use the new instrument might have lain in part in sheer habit, issues of performance practice, or expectations for the timbre. Another reason is to be found in the reservations that were expressed in numerous instrumentation treatises regarding the intonation and sound of the valve horn.¹³ As an example of this, and also of a contemporary reply to such criticism, we can consult Richard Wagner's preliminary remarks to his opera *Tristan und Isolde*:

The introduction of the valves has indisputably gained so much for this instrument that it is difficult to disregard this improvement, although the horn has thereby suffered an undeniable loss in the beauty of its tone and especially its ability to achieve a smooth legato. Given this great loss, the present composer, who is committed to preserving the true nature of the horn, would have had to abstain from using the valve horns, had he not experienced excellent artists, treating [the horn] with the utmost care, who were able to remove the abovementioned disadvantages almost imperceptibly so that there was hardly any difference in terms of tone and legato. In anticipation

- 11 After starting with just natural horns in his early operas, Wagner used two natural horns and two valve horns side by side in *Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*. With his later operas he became a kind of favourite enemy of the natural horn enthusiasts: “A member of the Hallé Orchestra between 1871 and 1874, he [Antoine Pacquis] ‘tried in vain’ to play Wagner's horn parts on the hand horn, and according to Borsdorf, eventually, ‘threw the music on the floor and danced on it. Hallé tried to calm him down, but he merely exclaimed, ‘I do not care. Zat is not the way to write for the instrument’, and executed another war dance.” (Cited as in Humphries 2000, p. 23. Humphries gives a letter from 1945 as evidence).
- 12 “Viele Kritiker stießen sich daran, daß man die Hörner (mehr noch als Trompeten und Posaunen, deren Einsatz auch weiterhin bestimmten musikimmanenten Restriktionen unterworfen blieb) nun tatsächlich ‘alles blasen ließ’. Gemeint war damit nicht allein, daß man Passagen und Phrasen, die früher selbst auf einem Horn mit seinen Stopföfen unausführbar gewesen waren, nunmehr auch auf Blechblasinstrumenten spielen lassen konnte, sondern vor allem, daß der gezielte Einsatz des Horns aufgegeben wurde zugunsten einer ständigen Beteiligung am Klanggeschehen. Dadurch mußte nach Ansicht vieler die Eigenständigkeit des Hornsatzes verloren gehen, das Instrument drohte seine Bedeutung einzubüßen.” (See Holmes et al. 1996, cols. 386f.).
- 13 See e.g. Emil Postel, who complained about the loss of the characteristic sounds of horns, trumpets and trombones, and argued in favour of writing for the natural instruments: “Dem durch die Ventile erlangten Vortheile tritt aber auch ein wesentlicher Nachtheil gegenüber, indem durch die Ventile der ursprüngliche charakteristische Horn-, Trompeten- und Posaunenton verloren geht, und alle Instrumente einen mehr gleichartigen Klang erhalten. Daher bedienen sich die Componisten mit Recht noch immer der Natur-Instrumente, und versagen sich lieber manchen Ton, als daß sie den eigenthümlichen Horn-, Trompeten- und Posaunenklang aufgeben sollten” (Postel 1856, p. 226).

of what we hope will be the inevitable further improvement of the valve horn, horn players are herewith strongly advised to study the parts assigned to them in this score very carefully.¹⁴

The nature of the (valve-less) horn – thus the poet Schubart – produces “gentle, sweet, echoing, tenderly lamenting sounds that completely fill the gaps of the string instruments [...]. The horn, if thought of as a human being, is a good, honourable man who recommends himself to almost every society not as a genius, but as a sensitive soul. [...] Charm and, if one may say so, a cordial familiarity are the keynotes of this magnificent instrument.”¹⁵

Now we shall consider the music that Wagner wrote for the ‘true nature’ of the horn in his *Ring of the Nibelung*.¹⁶

Primordial instrument – pure nature

The wind instruments were of the utmost importance to Richard Wagner in his compositions. In *Oper und Drama*, for example, he wrote: “The oldest, truest, most beautiful organ of music, the organ to which alone our music owes its being, is the *human voice*. The most naturally [sic] was it counterfeited by the *wind-instrument*, and this again by the stringed instrument.”¹⁷ Their proximity to the human voice, and indeed their ‘descent’ from it, are thus important characteristics of wind instruments, and give them – especially the horn – the distinction of being as close to what we might term primordial or natural instruments. This idea seems to be expressed most clearly at the very beginning of Wagner’s tetralogy, in the prelude to *Rheingold*.

Over an ‘eternal’ E $\flat$ in the double basses and its fifth, B $\flat$, in the bassoons, the eight horns start a canon with an ascending motif consisting exclusively of the natural harmonics Nos. 2–10 (with the exception of the seventh and ninth), thereby ‘naturally’ developing a triad.¹⁸ Initially

14 “Durch die Einführung der Ventile ist für dieses Instrument unstreitig so viel gewonnen, daß es schwer fällt, diese Vervollständigung unbeachtet zu lassen, obgleich dadurch das Horn unleugbar an der Schönheit seines Tones, wie namentlich auch an der Fähigkeit, die Töne weich zu binden, verloren hat. Bei diesem großen Verluste müßte allerdings der Komponist, dem an der Erhaltung des echten Charakters des Hornes liegt, sich der Anwendung der Ventilhörner zu enthalten haben, wenn er nicht andererseits die Erfahrung gemacht hätte, daß vorzügliche Künstler durch besonders aufmerksame Behandlung die bezeichneten Nachteile *fast* bis zur Unmerklichkeit aufzuheben vermochten, so daß in Bezug auf Ton und Bindung kaum noch ein Unterschied wahrzunehmen war. In Erwartung einer hoffentlich unausbleiblichen Verbesserung des Ventilhornes sei daher den Hornbläsern dringend empfohlen, die in der vorliegenden Partitur ihnen zugewiesenen Partien sehr genau zu studieren” (Wagner 1990, p. XII). It is interesting that Wagner mentions just the horn, and none of the other instruments that went through similar processes of change. Voss argues in this context that the horn was taken as the ‘voice’ of Nature and could not be omitted: “[...] daß auf den ursprünglichen Ton des Horns nicht gut verzichtet werden konnte, weil er als ‘Stimme’ der Natur aufgefaßt wurde und die Ursprünglichkeit der Natur vermittelte bzw. vermitteln sollte.” (Voss 1970, p. 179). Henri Kling, a horn player himself, declared that his fellow horn players were to blame, as they were unaware of the true character of their instrument: “[...] von denen viele eigentlich nicht die geringste Idee davon haben, wie das chromatische Horn seinem wahren Charakter nach behandelt werden muss, und die in das Horn hineinblasen wie in eine Trompete oder Posaune oder gar in eine Giesskanne.” (Kling 1883, p. 41).

15 “[...] sanfte, süße, den Nachhall weckende, zärtlichklagende und die Lücken der Saiteninstrumente ganz ausfüllende Töne [...]. Das Waldhorn menschlich gedacht, ist ein guter ehrlicher Mann, der sich eben nicht als Genie, sondern als empfindsame Seele, fast allen Gesellschaften empfiehlt. [...] Lieblichkeit, und wenn man so sagen darf, freundschaftliche Traulichkeit, ist der Grundton dieses herrlichen Instruments.” (Schubart 1806, pp. 311–314. English adapted after DuBois 1983, pp. 366–369).

16 A list of the passages for brass instruments in the *Ring* may be found in Bock 2011. The horns are discussed on pp. 225–298.

17 “Das älteste, echtste und schönste Organ der Musik, das Organ, dem unsere Musik allein ihr Dasein verdankt, ist die *menschliche Stimme*; am natürlichsten wurde sie durch das *Blasinstrument*, dieses wiederum durch das *Saiteninstrument* nachgeahmt” (Wagner 1994, p. 130; English after Wagner 1995, p. 122).

18 However, as Ariane Jeßulat (2013, pp. 99–102) points out, the triad and the harmonics might not correspond merely to Nature itself.

in four-bar intervals, then every two bars, every bar and finally every half-bar, the entries follow each other and make the web of sound ever denser and more intense. Wagner achieves a further intensification by leading the canon onto the twelfth harmonic (g²) in bar 42. From the deep E^b of the beginning, the E^b-major sounds grow through the orchestra, reaching ever-higher registers. According to Wagner's assistant Heinrich Porges, Wagner emphasised the "impression of a self-developing natural phenomenon".¹⁹ The crescendo was thus meant to be self-evident, almost unintentional, and was achieved primarily by the successive addition of more instruments.

These roughly four minutes of E^b-major waves have been interpreted both as an image of the waves of the Rhine and as a kind of creation scenario. Wagner himself described this prelude (along with the ensuing song of the Rhinemaidens) as the "lullaby of the world".²⁰ The key of E^b major has often been regarded as holy and mysterious.²¹ The horns' connotation in connection with these so strikingly used harmonics and the smooth interweaving of sounds seems to be primordialism, purity and naturalness.

A similar passage is found in *Götterdämmerung* (G587).²² Again, the context is one of growing or awakening – not of the world as in *Rheingold*, but of daytime. The stage direction speaks of the red dawn spreading across the sky and the ascent of the day. Again, all eight horns appear in canon above a pedal point in the double basses. However, Wagner here does not just use an ascending harmonic series, but a new motif, formed from the B^b-major triad and the B^b-major scale. Again, the horns begin with a canon, here two bars apart. When Siegfried appears, Wagner quotes both the magic helmet motif in muted horns, then the beginning of Siegfried's horn call. In just a few bars, the horns lead us from the experience of Nature through a sunrise, via the mysterious element of the Tarnhelm to the appearance of Siegfried the hero.

"The noblest hero in the world"²³

Siegfried himself is closely connected to the sound of the horn – according to the stage directions, he even carries a silver horn with him (Fig. 1).²⁴ The best example of this is probably his horn call (S590f.), which is a combination of two different motifs. Wolzogen calls them the "motif of Siegfried the Wälsung" and the "Call of the Forest Boy".²⁵ The former appears already in the *Walküre*, in the moment when Brünnhilde tells the desperate Sieglinde that she is to be a mother (W793f.) and in her conversation with Wotan (W941). It also sounds in response to Brünnhilde's request that Wotan should not hand her over to any man, but to a free hero; the hero is accordingly identified by the orchestra as Siegfried (W988). This motif is characterised by an ascending fourth at the beginning, and by a harmonic lightening from minor to major. Wolzogen emphasises its relationship with the curse motif in particular, writing of the "festive

19 "Eindruck eines sich ganz von selbst entwickelnden Naturphänomens" (Porges 1881, p. 8).

20 "Von der Wellenbewegung im Rheingold sagt R., 'es sei gleichsam das Wiegenlied der Welt.'" (WagnerC 1976, p. 129, entry of 17 July 1869).

21 See e.g. Borchmeyer 1995, p. 4.

22 A short reprise of the Rhine motif also appears in the third act of *Götterdämmerung*, before Siegfried meets the Rhinemaidens (G935f.). The numbers given here refer to the page in the Eulenburg miniature score of the respective opera: R stands for *Rheingold*, W for *Die Walküre*, S for *Siegfried* and G for *Götterdämmerung*, all published in Leipzig without a date.

23 "[...] den hehrsten Helden der Welt" (W793f.).

24 S31, S590.

25 "Motive Siegfrieds des Wälsungen", "Ruf des Waldkneben" (Wolzogen 1876, pp. 61 and 63).



Fig. 1 Jean de Reszke in the title role of Wagner's *Siegfried* (Photo: Félix Nadar ca 1896, MetOpera Database).

horn sound powerfully rising from minor to major”.²⁶ The “Call of the Forest Boy”, on the other hand, first appears in the strings (S31) at the first appearance of Siegfried, but is immediately taken over by the horns (and other winds) (S33). It reminds one of a hunting fanfare.

These two motifs are finally combined in Siegfried's call on his horn – or his “Waldweise”, as Siegfried himself announces it (S588). The whole of Siegfried's horn call would easily be playable on the natural horn. Only the frequent *f*’, the *a*’ and *b*’ in the Wälsung motif are not directly accessible as harmonics, and would have to be played by means of hand-stops.

The dichotomy of the motif is also determined stylistically. While the first part has a cheerful, irrepressible character, the motif of the Wälsung is more restrained, a quality that Wagner emphasises with the instruction “mässig” (moderately) (S590). In addition to the semantic meaning of the horn call, however, it should not be forgotten that the horn call is also an intrinsic part of the action on stage.²⁷ Siegfried wants to attract a companion with his horn (S589f.) – an ability with which the horn was already associated²⁸ – and thereby ultimately awakens the sleeping dragon, Fafner.

However, the importance of the horn to Siegfried's character is also proven in other parts of the score. Time and again, the horns play Siegfried's song in unison (their tessitura is roughly the same as that of the tenor voice). This occurs, for example, when Siegfried goes to the forest (“Aus dem Wald fort in die Welt zieh'n” – S138f.), during the forging of Nothung (“Blase, Balg!” – S331, “Wild im Walde wuchs ein Baum” – S333) and, finally, in his love duet with Brünnhilde (“Sie ist mir ewig” – S1152). Each of these situations is notable for a boisterous sense of happiness that can extend into presumptuousness. The horns express the joy and the impetuous, cocky nature of this ‘free’, naive hero.

Hunt

We have already mentioned Siegfried's horn call as akin to a hunting fanfare, so we cannot fail to mention the acoustic design of the hunting scene in *Götterdämmerung* (G933f., G1067f.). Horns – including that of Siegfried – are heard from different sides and at different distances from us. But Wagner elsewhere refers to hunting and hunting horns not just with regard to a real hunt taking place on stage, but also as a metaphor. Thus, for example, the metre, motifs and orchestration in the “Ride of the Valkyries” (W619) all refer to hunting – here, of course, in connection with the ‘wild hunt’ of the Valkyries. The atypical minor third at the beginning quite possibly refers to the sphere of ghosts and death. Normally, hunting motifs adhere to the harmonic series and are thus given in major keys. Nevertheless, as in Siegmund's description of the hunt for Wolfe (W55–62), minor triads and unexpected tonal changes here repeatedly impinge on the hunting motif, which in turn is influenced by Hunding's motif.²⁹ The symbol of the ‘hunt’ is thus also transformed by Wagner by means of other motifs and their emotional signification.

Youth and health

The horn is also a symbol of the youth and health of the gods, as in the motif of the “golden apples” (R237f.). Although the quiet horn fifths and thirds here could also signify the ‘natural

26 “[...] mit festlichem Hörnerschalle im kraftvoll aus moll zu dur sich erhebenden Motive Siegfrieds des Wälsungen [...] ertönt.” (Ibid., p. 61).

27 Schäfer 1982, p. 194.

28 See e.g. Schubart 1806, p. 314 (DuBois 1983, p. 368) and Voss 1970b, p. 177.

29 Apart from during Siegfried's hunting tale, this motif is played instead by the Wagner tubas.

product' of the apple or the gold,³⁰ it is notable that the cor anglais and bassoon take over the motif as soon as illness is mentioned. When the giants bring Freia back to the gods (R581f.), the theme sounds again, once more as a canon. So it seems likely that the horns signify not merely the apples themselves, but primarily their positive qualities such as health and eternal youth.

Love

The use of the horn in connection with love is also striking. Examples of this include the motif of the renunciation of love ("Wer der Minne Macht entsagt"), which is quoted again in the orchestral interlude after Alberich's robbery of the gold (R179), played by the horn and cor anglais. The horns also play an important role in Siegfried's story of the mating and brooding animals of the forest (S88f.) and in Mime's narration about fear (S280), which Siegfried probably misunderstands: a motif appears here in the horn and woodwind that is found again later in connection with Brünnhilde (S960f.). Its loveliness (it is marked *dolcissimo*!) hardly makes this motif suitable for awakening fear. The horns also sound when Siegfried thinks about his mother at the words "ein Menschenweib" (S568f.) and in the vast love duet of Brünnhilde and Siegfried in the last act of *Siegfried*. Already at the point where the two of them begin singing together (S1146), the horns announce a motif consisting of a sequence of fourths and thirds that Wolzogen calls the motif of "love's decision"³¹ (otherwise known as the "love union motif"), and which the couple takes up later (S1152f.). Wagner himself described this musical idea as "heroically rejoicing, yet quite popular".³² In addition to its "expression of joy"³³ – and especially when viewed in the context of the other passages mentioned – it can be assumed that Wagner intended to depict not just this jubilation, but also the reason for it – love – with his orchestration.

The horn in orchestration treatises

These connotations, which seem to show Wagner's idea of the "true nature" of the horn, have their roots in historical and commonplace views of his day. At the same time, Wagner's compositions themselves influenced future attitudes towards the horn. For this reason, I shall now look at the characterisations of the horn as stated in treatises that Wagner either knew or could have known, along with those in publications that he influenced.

Such characterisations of the horn often go back to its rise in the eighteenth century, to authors like Johann Mattheson and Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart. In the nineteenth century, Hector Berlioz and many others after him published treatises that had a varying impact on how the instrument was viewed and used.³⁴

The horn occupies a special position in most orchestration treatises. It is given more space than the other brass instruments and is often treated as the primary brass instrument. The reason for this is probably its much more frequent use when compared to trumpets or trombones, both in terms of its general use in orchestras and in individual works. Mozart and Haydn, for example, often wrote for an orchestra comprising just strings, two oboes and two horns – but no further woodwind, let alone brass. And up to the late-Romantic era, most scores that contain other brass instruments make far more use of the horns than of trumpets or trombones. This

30 The Rhinegold motif appears first in the horn (R105f.), but probably more as sort of premonition (in G major) of the radiance of the trumpet (R110, in C major). See Voss 1970b, p. 191.

31 "Melodie des Liebesentschlusses" (Wolzogen 1876, p. 95).

32 "[...] heroisch jubelnd, und doch dabei ganz volkstümlich" (Wagner 1859, p. 157).

33 "Ausdruck des Jubels" (Voss 1970b, p. 183).

34 For an overview see Messwarb 1997.

was probably compounded by the reputation of the horn's sound and musical significance: "Its expressiveness is the most versatile, and is greater than that of other metal instruments."³⁵ For this reason, it has often been suggested as "a link between the brass and woodwind"³⁶ and is therefore usually treated more generously than the trumpets. Together with them, it is considered an instrument for fanfares ("joyeuses fanfares de chasse")³⁷ and for middle-range harmonies, which can be performed according to needs of the moment, either with characteristic rhythms or held notes.³⁸ Fanfares are usually mentioned in connection to the forest or the hunt: "The valve horn in no way denies its origin in the forest. Its calls, its fanfares have the same freshness and infinitely more melodic variety than those of the old hunting horn."³⁹ The ability of the horn to blend with all other instruments was also emphasised, especially with the bassoons.⁴⁰ In addition, Hermann Erpf's orchestration treatise mentions the "chordal use of the horns", which became a "core support for the overall sound" and thus an important component of the Romantic orchestra.⁴¹ Eugen Thomas says: "The horn tone saturates in such a way that it alone in many cases replaces the full wind section,"⁴² but at the same time he emphasises the contrast of the different registers: "The soft yet rich horn sound contrasts with the thinner timbre of the woodwinds and strings most favourably."⁴³

The horn is suited not only for accompanying, but also for melodic tasks, though the melody must sometimes be adapted to the "technical capabilities of the French horn, in particular [it must be] simplified and modified."⁴⁴ Its melodic capabilities are especially limited by the horn's properties as a natural instrument, and its harmonics should be preferred for important passages. Thus Koch writes: "Horn solos, as long as they are mainly limited to open notes, always exert a great enchantment on the listener and acquire a certain charm."⁴⁵ For this reason, Berlioz proposed using horns in several keys simultaneously, using an open horn to reinforce stopped notes played by a horn in another key.⁴⁶ Rimsky-Korsakov, on the other hand, wrote about its melodic capabilities as follows: "[i]n spite of valves the horn has but little mobility and would seem to produce its tone in a languid and lazy manner."⁴⁷ As for using the horn with other instruments, various combinations are conceivable for melodic tasks. As Mayerhoff admits: "None of the orchestral instruments has increased in importance, i.e. in use and usefulness, in the course of time, as much as the horn,

35 "Seine Ausdrucksfähigkeit ist die vielseitigste, und ist grösser als bei den anderen Metallinstrumenten." (Hofmann 1893, p. 7).

36 See e.g. Rimsky-Korsakov 1922a, p. 24.

37 Berlioz 1994, p. 74.

38 "Markieren des Rhythmus, mit oder ohne Trompeten und Pauken, thematisch oder akkordisch" (Erpf 1959, p. 90).

39 "Le cor à pistons ne renie pas son origine forestière. Ses appels, ses fanfares brillantes comportent autant de savoir et infiniment plus de variété mélodique que ceux de l'ancienne trompe de chasse." (Gevaert 1885, p. 276).

40 Prout 1877, p. 47. – "Füllung in der tiefen Mittellage, auch zusammen mit Holzbläsern, besonders Fagotten" (Erpf 1959, p. 90) – "Das Horn ist vielleicht von sämtlichen Instrumenten dasjenige, welches sich am besten mit allen Gruppen mischt. Ich müßte, um dies in seinem Reichtum zu erhärten, die ganze Meistersinger-Partitur hier einfügen" (Strauss 1905, p. 279).

41 "[...] mehrstimmige[n] Akkordsatz der Hörner"; "tragenden Kern des Gesamtklangs" (Erpf 1959, p. 192).

42 "[...] der Horn ton sättigt eben derart, dass er allein, in vielen Fällen eine volle Harmonie ersetzt." (Thomas 1899, p. 109).

43 "Der weiche und doch satte Hornklang kontrastiert mit dem dünneren Timbre der Holzbläser und Streicher auf das Vorteilhafteste." (Ibid., p. 27).

44 "[...] den technischen Möglichkeiten des Waldhorns angeglichen oder [...] besonders vereinfacht und abgewandelt" (Erpf 1959, pp. 90f.).

45 "Hornsoli, solange sie sich hauptsächlich auf offene Töne beschränken, üben stets einen großen Zauber auf die Zuhörer aus, sie gewinnen ihren Liebreiz." (Koch 1912, p. 191).

46 Berlioz 1994, pp. 71–73.

47 Rimsky-Korsakov 1922a, p. 24.

which, alone or blended with other solo instruments (violoncello, viola, violin, clarinet, etc.) gives the most sentimental melodic expression with warmth and beauty of sound”.⁴⁸ Thomas also praises the sound of the horns together with the violas and cellos as being “liquid silver”.⁴⁹

The sound of the horn has been described as very versatile. In addition to its rather dark⁵⁰ or even dull⁵¹ low range and its rough, fanfare-like tones, which are “not so rude by nature as the trumpets”,⁵² various authors have praised the “elegiac, mysterious-fantastic”,⁵³ dreamy⁵⁴ and “lovely-pompous”⁵⁵ sound character of the horn – “soft, poetical, and full of beauty”,⁵⁶ “chaste et réservée”,⁵⁷ “genial”,⁵⁸ melancholic,⁵⁹ enthusiastic,⁶⁰ “noble and lugubrious”,⁶¹ balanced, warm and “at the same time characterised by a maximum sustaining power”.⁶² Thus, “sustained melodies are the most effective”;⁶³ Kunitz even speaks of the orchestra’s “leading bel canto soloist”.⁶⁴ Despite its tendency to melancholic sounds, commentators have also repeatedly stressed the horn’s suitability for all kinds of music. “It nestles, one might say, in all conceivable moods of life, and has been used best and most often in the works of our masters to express joy, pain, sorrow and sadness.”⁶⁵ Specifically with reference to the “scores of the great magician [Richard Wagner]”, Richard Strauss speaks of the various possibilities of orchestrating for the horn:

whether it calls ringingly Siegfried’s exuberant vitality in the virgin forest, [...] whether it seeks to conjure the picture of the unknown mother to Siegfried, who is pining for her like a child [...], whether it is the symbol of Freya’s youth-giving apples [...], whether it sings in muted sounds of the miracles of the Tarnhelm [...] – it always serves its task fully and entirely, it is unique in its versatility, and its effect is always conspicuous.⁶⁶

48 “Keines der Orchesterinstrumente hat im Laufe der Zeiten an Wichtigkeit, d. h. an Verwendungsmöglichkeit und Verwendungsfähigkeit, so zugenommen wie das Horn, welches, allein oder mit anderen Soloinstrumenten (Violoncello, Bratsche, Violine, Klarinette usw.) gemischt [...], die empfindungsvollsten melodischen Wendungen mit Wärme und Klangschönheit wiedergibt” (Mayerhoff 1913, p. 74).

49 “flüssiges Silber” (Thomas 1899, p. 28). Others offer very similar images: “[...] sonore und weiche Klänge wie flüssiges Edelmetall das Ganze durchfluten” (Mayerhoff 1913, p. 74).

50 Rimsky-Korsakov 1922a, p. 24.

51 Thomas 1899, p. 84.

52 “[...] nicht so rude von Natur sind / als die Trompeten” (Mattheson 1713, p. 267).

53 “[...] weiche, elegische, geheimnisvoll-phantastische Ton des Horns” (Erpf 1959, p. 192).

54 Sachs 1913, p. 419.

55 “Die lieblich-pompeusen Waldhörner” (Mattheson 1713, p. 267).

56 Rimsky-Korsakov 1922a, p. 27.

57 Berlioz 1994, p. 74.

58 Rimsky-Korsakov 1922a, p. 54. In the German translation: “herzlich” (“heartily”). Rimsky-Korsakov 1922b, p. 62.

59 Prout 1877, p. 51.

60 Koch 1912, p. 190.

61 “[...] edel und schwermüthig” (Hofmann 1893, p. 7).

62 “[...] zugleich von grösster Tragfähigkeit” (Kunitz 1956, p. 374).

63 Prout 1877, p. 45.

64 “[...] führenden ‘Belcanto-Solisten’ des Orchesters” (Kunitz 1956, p. 420).

65 “Es schmiegt sich, könnte man sagen, in alle denkbaren Stimmungen des Lebens und ist in den Werken unserer Meister zu Ausdrücken von Jubel, Freude, Schmerz und Trauer auf’s Beste und Vielfachste verwendet worden.” (Hofmann 1893, p. 7). Gevaert writes in this context that the horn has “devenu une des voix les plus riches de l’orchestre moderne. Voix tour à tour énergique et douce, rude et moëlleuse, elle relie dans l’ensemble symphonique les sonorités opposées des bois et des cuivres; isolée de la masse instrumentale, elle communique à la plus simple cantilène le charme de son timbre pénétrant.” (Gevaert 1885, p. 210). See also Berlioz 1994, p. 68.

66 “[...] die Partituren des großen Magiers vom Rheingold an Takt für Takt durchgehen. Das Horn, ob es aus dem übervollen Herzen Siegfrieds den Jubel sonnigster Lebenskraft in Germaniens Urwald hinausschmettert [...], ob es der kindlichen Sehnsucht Siegfrieds das Bild der ungekannten Mutter hervorzuzaubern sucht [...], ob es Symbol der, Jugendfrische verleihenden Äpfel der Freia ist [...], oder in gedämpften Lauten von den Wundern des Tarnhelms singt [...], stets ist es ganz und voll auf dem Platz, einzig in seiner Vieldeutigkeit und immer von

This noble, melancholic sound also has an effect on the symbolism attributed to the horn, which is manifested already in the metaphor-rich descriptions given above. For example, the horn is supposedly particularly suited to “the expression of that romantic longing for the far-away, the indeterminate, the unreal and the fantastic”,⁶⁷ above all for the forest and the great outdoors.⁶⁸ This author might have been thinking of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony (the *Pastoral*) in his assessment. And as for Carl Maria von Weber, he “discovered in the former hunting and forest instrument new, sometimes dreamy, sometimes picturesque sounds, full of that deep sense of nature which seems to be inborn among the peoples of the Germanic race.”⁶⁹ This description reveals an assumption in certain circles of a supposed German purity and depth, derived in part from myth and also found represented in Richard Wagner's *Ring*.

Where man comes into play, the horn's connotations are – perhaps also given the hunting context⁷⁰ – “heroic, knightly expression”,⁷¹ “[e]nergetic power, free or restrained, simplicity and eloquence”,⁷² and the “cheerful male courage of young Siegfried”⁷³ – but also “Charm and, if one may say so, cordial familiarity”, as mentioned before.⁷⁴

Gevaert denies brass players the ability to play melodies and as such to express “the instinctual feelings of the human being”, though he refers to the “brazen and masculine accents” that “express more complex states of mind, where the moral consciousness plays a role.”⁷⁵ However, he contradicts himself a few pages later:

The horn is essentially a poetic instrument like the harp and the flute; but his poetry is more intimate, more romantic. It does not affect emotion as the reed instruments do, by the direct imitation of the cry of passion, uttered by the human voice; the impressions it conveys come mainly out of associations of ideas. No other instrument seems to act so powerfully on the imagination of the listener. The sounds of the horn carry the mind yonder, into the infinite, into the vast forests, in the shade of age-old oak trees, or into the sweet worlds of dreams and fairy-tales, to the edge of bright fountains, where one can hear through the beautiful summer nights the echoing of the mysterious sounds of Oberon's horn.⁷⁶

besonders hervorleuchtender Wirkung.” (Berlioz/Strauss 1905, p. 279; English after Berlioz/Strauss 1948, p. 260). Strauss mentions other operas as well, I cite here only the examples from the *Ring des Nibelungen*.

67 “Auch das Hr eignet sich also besonders zum Ausdruck jener romantischen *Fernsehnsucht* wie überhaupt des Unbestimmten, Irrealen und Fantastischen.” (Bartenstein 1974, p. 125). See also Holmes et al. 1996, col. 384: Ahrens speaks of the human desire for rest and security (“*Sehnsucht des Menschen nach Ruhe und Geborgenheit*”).

68 Ibid., col. 376. Kling mentions the souvenirs of fragrant mountains and forests (“*duftigen Berge und Wälder*”) as well as the invitation to a joyful hunt (“*Vergnügen der Jagd*”). Kling 1883, p. 39.

69 “Weber sut trouver pour l'ancien instrument forestier des accents tour à tour rêveurs et pittoresques, pleins de ce sentiment profond de la nature qui semble inné chez les peuples de race germanique.” (Gevaert 1885, p. 213).

70 Ahrens points to the hunt and the horn as “attributes of aristocratic splendour” (“*Attribute aristokratischer Prachtentfaltung*”). Holmes et al. 1996, col. 376.

71 “[...] l'accent héroïque, chevaleresque” (Gevaert 1885, p. 211).

72 Rimsky-Korsakov 1922a, p. 55.

73 “[...] den fröhlichen Mannesmut Jungsiegfrieds” (Mayerhoff 1913, p. 74).

74 “*Lieblichkeit, und wenn man so sagen darf, freundschaftliche Traulichkeit*” (Schubart 1806, p. 314; English after DuBois 1983, p. 369).

75 “Aussi les cors, les trompettes et les trombones ne sont pas faits pour la mélodie monodique, expression naturelle des sentiments instinctifs de l'être humain; leur accents métalliques et mâles appellent l'harmonie simultanée; ils traduisent des états de l'âme plus complexes, où intervient la conscience morale.” (Gevaert 1885, p. 196).

76 “Le cor est un instrument essentiellement poétique, comme la harpe et la flûte; mais sa poésie est plus intime, plus romantique. Il n'affecte pas le sentiment à la manière des instruments à anche, en reproduisant directement le cri de la passion modulé par l'organe humain; les impressions qu'il procure naissent surtout d'associations d'idées. Aucun instrument peut-être n'agit aussi puissamment sur la fantaisie de l'auditeur. Les sons du cor transportent l'esprit au loin, dans les libres espaces, au sein des vastes forêts, sous l'ombrage des chênes séculaires, ou

Furthermore,

sensations and situations in which the imagination actively intervenes are the domain of the horn as a solo instrument: hope for the future [...]; remembrance of the past, remembering moving words spoken in a solemn moment [...]; commemoration of the beloved [...]; invocation of an unknown, mysterious being [...]; restless expectation of the beloved [...]. In all these, the horn is thought to be an ideal voice, sounding sublime across time and space.⁷⁷

In short, Gevaert calls this the “somewhat metaphysical nature of the horn.”⁷⁸

With Gluck, the horn, along with the trombones, appears in a sacred context along with being a martial symbol.⁷⁹ But this latter aspect is denied by a scholar of our own time, Christoph Reuter, who explicitly excludes war and martiality in the context of the horn: “In contrast to the trumpet, it was not used for warlike purposes, and it was almost exclusively associated with positive, ‘noble’ attributes.”⁸⁰

Stopped notes

The use of stopped notes on the horn and the symbolism this evokes stand in stark contrast to all the above-listed attributes. Instrumentation treatises write of its “eerie impact.”⁸¹ Its sound is greatly dampened by introducing one’s hand into the bell of the instrument. The result is a pungent, metallic colour and it also increases the pitch by a semitone, since the air column is shortened. Stopped notes “are used *piano*, regardless of their nature and colour, to achieve echo effects. In a *forte*, the wind player can give them a dull-sounding yet still blaring character. These (stopped) *forte* notes are excellently suited to representing certain gruesome, oppressive, threatening moods.”⁸² This “horrifying sound” expresses with “gruesome blaring” “revenge, fear, poverty, danger, the terrible, devilish and ominous, or the angry, maddening, passionate” and, played *piano*, “painful, unpleasant and oppressive feelings.”⁸³ Berlioz also speaks of a “muffled, raucous, wild timbre”, which is to be used above all “in certain scenes of silent horror.”⁸⁴

dans les pays charmants du rêve et de la féerie, aux bords des claires fontaines où l’on entend par les belles nuits d’été résonner les notes mystérieuses du cor d’Obéron.” (Ibid., p. 210).

77 “Dans l’orchestre dramatique, qui s’attache à traduire non-seulement de vagues aspirations, mais des états déterminés de l’âme, le cor traité en instrument principal a pour domaine les sentiments et les situations où l’imagination intervient d’une manière active: espoir en l’avenir [...]; rappel du passé, réminiscence de paroles émouvantes prononcées dans un moment solennel [...]; souvenir de l’objet aimé [...]; appel à un être inconnu et mystérieux [...]; attente inquiète du bien-aimé [...]. Partout ici le cor est conçu comme une voix tout idéale, qui se fait entendre à travers le temps et l’espace.” (Ibid., p. 211).

78 “[...] ce caractère en quelque sorte métaphysique des sons du cor.” (Ibid., p. 211).

79 See Bartenstein 1974, p. 125.

80 “Da es im Gegensatz zur Trompete nicht für kriegerische Zwecke eingesetzt wurde, wurde es nahezu ausschließlich mit positiven, ‘edlen’ Attributen verknüpft.” (Reuter 2002, p. 330).

81 “Einschlag des Schauerlichen” (Bartenstein 1974, p. 125).

82 “Sie werden, im *piano* wesen- und farblos, zur Erzielung von Echowirkungen verwendet. Im *forte* kann ihnen der Bläser einen dumpfdröhnenden und dabei doch schmetternden Charakter verleihen. Zur Darstellung gewisser schauerlicher, bedrückender und bedrohlicher Stimmungen eignen sich diese (gestopften) Fortetöne vorzüglich” (Mayerhoff 1913, p. 72).

83 “Die gestopften Töne, wenn man diese stark blasen lässt, haben eine dumpfe, schaudererregende Klangfarbe, man wende diese nur für besonders dramatisch motivierte Szenen an. Dann können diese dumpfen aber doch grauenvoll schmetternden Klänge auch die Rache, die Angst, die Noth, die Gefahr, das Schreckliche, Teuflische und Unheil verkündende oder das Zornige, Wuthvolle, Leidenschaftliche ausdrücken. Lässt man dagegen diese gestopften Töne pianissimo und in ausgehaltenen Noten blasen, so erregen sie schmerzliche, unangenehme und beklemmende Gefühle” (Kling 1883, p. 39).

84 “[...] produire des effets inhérents à leur timbre sourd, rauque et sauvage. [...] Il peut résulter, dans certaines scènes d’horreur silencieuse, un très grand effet de ces notes bouchées” (Berlioz 1994, p. 70).

So whereas the open horn may stand for Nature, loveliness and power, the stopped horn turns these attributes into their opposite, such as threatening, horrible moods, fear or anger. There are also numerous examples of this in the *Ring of the Nibelung*. Words or phrases are highlighted by stopped notes and thus assigned negative meaning (even where this is not already obvious). These include “pfui” (R64), “Schelm” (R266), “Nibelungenherr” (R389), “so ist es aus” (W295), “verblüht” (W872), “traurig” (S113), “Unheil” (S161), “Alberich” (S696), “Ekel” (S851), “unbeweibt” (G209), “gerächt” (G758), “erschlagen” (G1209) or “verfluchter Reif” (G1281).

The stopped horns are also used for echo or distance effects, as for example in the appearance of Waltraute, where the Valkyrie motif is first given in this manner (G378f.). But muted horns (*con sordino*) must not be equated with the stopped horn; they are often also meant as echoes (see, for example, G1240). Wagner usually uses the mute only in low dynamics, for example in connection with the magic helmet (R377, G502). This sound becomes something ‘veiled’, but without assuming the brassy colour of the stopped horn.

It is surprising that Alberich’s curse on love (R166) is accompanied by open horns, though this is rather the exception that confirms the rule. Other curses, such as that of Siegmund (W466), are marked by stopped notes, and the curse motif⁸⁵ also appears in the *Götterdämmerung* played by a stopped horn (G373, G843). Apart from these curses, it is remarkable how often stopped horns can be heard in connection with the two Nibelung dwarves, namely Mime (e.g. in *Siegfried*, beginning in the third scene or G1117) and Alberich (S455f.). This serves to characterise them as being the opposite of the hero Siegfried.

The stopped horn initiates the rhythm that accompanies the motif that Hans von Wolzogen calls the “work of destruction of the Nibelungs”⁸⁶ (e.g. R564, G738), which is later also often associated with gloomy prophecies by Erda (R631, W413). Wagner also uses stopped horns in the Norn scene and in connection with the fate motif⁸⁷ (W893, W1011, G1195). It therefore seems that he preferred to use this sound for gloomy, despairing and threatening purposes.

Conclusion

When one examines the semantics of the horn in Wagner’s *Ring*, one marvels at the variety of uses and meanings that are conveyed by his leitmotifs, quite apart from their music itself. There is no doubt that Wagner carefully considered how to use the instruments of his orchestra and attached great importance to the resulting (collective) sound and its semantic connotations. On the one hand, he referred back to older music theorists and composers by incorporating traditional connotations for certain instruments, but on the other hand, he also helped to determine the perceptions of his contemporaries, and constructed connotations that have lasted until our own day. At a time when the valve horn was prevailing ever more over the old natural horn, Wagner drew increasingly on the possibilities of the valve horn in his works, sometimes driving the instrument to the limits of what was feasible. Wagner thus also made new demands on his performers, who accepted them with varying degrees of enthusiasm, and endeavoured to fulfil these demands as best they could.⁸⁸

85 Wolzogen 1876, pp. 39f.

86 “Vernichtungsarbeit der Nibelungen” (Ibid.).

87 “Motiv der Schicksalskunde” (Ibid., pp. 56–58).

88 Constant hostility existed, for example, between Wagner and Richard Strauss’s father, the horn player Franz Strauss. According to all reports, the latter was a gifted horn player, with whom Wagner reputedly could not be angry “when he blows [his horn]” (“wenn er bläst”), but who described Wagner’s music as “contrary to the nature of the horn” (“wider die Natur des Horns”). See Janetzky 1985, pp. 112–114.

What is striking about the use of the horn is its predominantly positive symbolism (in its open state), which is closely connected with its origins and the original playing possibilities of the natural horn. Nature, happy hunting, heroism, youth, health and love are just a few key words that it connotes. The peculiarities of hand-stopping have also been preserved for special effects. Along with echo effects, stopped notes often effect a reversal of the horn's positive attributes, connoting something negative instead. In any case, it is clear that the versatility of the horn and its variable sound had a decisive impact on the semantic levels of Wagner's operas. After all, the horn is not just one-dimensional, but a multi-faceted instrument, able to express a rich variety of feelings, associations and sounds.

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