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RUSSIAN HORN BANDS

By ROBERT RICKS

ONE of the strangest ensembles in the history of music resulted when the ear of Prince Kirilovich Narishkin, the Master of the Hunt to the Empress Elizabeth, was offended by discords produced by the horns used to signal the progress of his hunts. These simple hunting horns (*Jagdhörner*), which still preserved the curved shape of an animal's horn, had been made by the coppersmith on Narishkin's estate and no attempt had been made to tune them. According to the account of J. C. Hinrichs,¹ they produced a horrible din when sounded together as the hunters signaled each other and, in 1751, the prince had sixteen new instruments made which were tuned to the tones of the D major chord. With these new instruments, no matter which horns were sounded together, a concord was produced.

Narishkin was so pleased with the result that he asked his chamber-musician, J. A. Maresch,² to combine these instruments of the hunt with a more refined ensemble of French horns for a concert. In order to do this, Maresch had to train the serfs who played the hunting horns to count the beats of the measure and to read a rudimentary form of rhythmic notation. Since the technique of overblowing was not employed on these simple instruments, each player produced but a single tone (the second partial, that is, the first usable natural tone), and Maresch was able to dispense with the normal notation of pitch. He merely indicated the name and octave of each instrument called for at the beginning of each composition and the player simply read rhythms.

Exactly what this group of hunting horns was able to play is not known, but Hinrichs says it was first used as an accompaniment to a group of twelve French horns, two trumpets, and two posthorns. The

¹ J. C. Hinrichs, *Entstehung, Fortgang und Jetzige Beschaffenheit der Russischen Jagdmusik* (St. Petersburg, 1796).

² According to Hinrichs, Maresch was born in Bohemia in 1719, studied the horn with Hampel, and after working in Dresden and Berlin, arrived in St. Petersburg in 1784. He died there in 1794, two years before the publication of Hinrichs' book.

complete scale of D was available in the French horns since six of them were in D, two in A, two in G, one in C-sharp and one in E. The single-toned hunting horns, however, were still limited to the tones of the D chord and must have been used in the type of fanfare figures that the French horns themselves were frequently called upon to play in the classical orchestra.

Narishkin seems to have been happy with the musical results of the combined group but since many of the French horn players (who had received some musical training) had to be borrowed from neighboring estates, the entire group was not always available. To remedy this situation, Narishkin directed Maresch to teach twelve serfs to play the French horn. Maresch, however, was only given a year in which to train these boys who had never had any musical instruction.

Realizing that he could not carry out this musical fiat exactly as his prince had ordered, Maresch experimented in secret with the hunting horns and finally taught the serfs, who could never have learned to play the French horn in a year, how to play some simple three-voiced compositions on the single-toned instruments. Each person was responsible for only one tone. To produce the various pitches needed in a given composition it was necessary, of course, to procure horns of different sizes, but this seems to have been no problem. After sufficient rehearsal, Maresch presented his group, whose technique seems best compared to that of hand-bell ringers, to Prince Narishkin who was entirely satisfied with the result.

Since each player was responsible for but one note, the number of instruments in a horn band of this type had to correspond to the number of pitches needed in a composition. Hinrichs says that Maresch's band had enough instruments for three complete octaves and, in Plate 1 (Hinrichs' Table 1), five of these horns with a scale for judging their size may be seen.

The pitches produced by these five instruments are given in Example 1. Instrument A was the lowest of the bass horns and instrument B was the lowest of the rank of tenors. Instruments C and D were the lowest of the ranks of alto and discant horns and instrument E, the smallest of the discants, produced the highest note of the band.



These horns were played in four rows that resembled the ranks of pipes in an organ. The discant players, with their small instruments, came in front and the altos and tenors, with their larger horns, formed the next two rows. The basses, whose instruments were so large that they had to be supported on trestles, made up the fourth row.

As in Maresch's earlier experiments, normal staff notation was not used by the individual horn-band players, but Hinrichs supplies a full score and its transcription into conventional notation (Plate 2) to show how the music was written.

A glance at the full score in Plate 2 will show that the note values employed in the rhythmic notation are conventional and that their pitches may be found by reading the label at the beginning of the individual lines. Rests are indicated in an unusual way, however, and the symbol \square represents a quarter rest, a "Q" an eighth-rest, and "Q" represents a sixteenth-rest. Although there are mistakes which may be found in a comparison of the two versions of the composition (apparently the D of the basso octave should have played his tone on the downbeat of the fourth measure, and the notation of the rhythm in the transcription is incorrect in the treble of the same measure), the reader can see how the players performed not only chords, but running passages of sixteenth-notes.

It will be noted that the rhythmic notation of some note values is only approximate. This may be easily seen in Example 2 which compares measure five of the transcription (a) with that of the full score (b), and compares measure eight in its transcribed (c) and fully scored (d) versions.



Notice that the triplets of the ninth measure of the transcription are not always apparent in the full score. The interpretation of triplet figures in combination with sixteenth-note figures is, of course, a problematic aspect of 18th-century notation in general, but in this case the interpretation of the ninth measure was probably no problem at all since horn-band conductors apparently conducted the rhythm instead of the meter of a composition. Speaking of Maresch's conducting, Hinrichs says: "He held a little stick in his hand, with which he beat not the measure but every quarter-note."³ Beating "every quarter" merely suggests that the

³ *Ibid.*, Appendix.

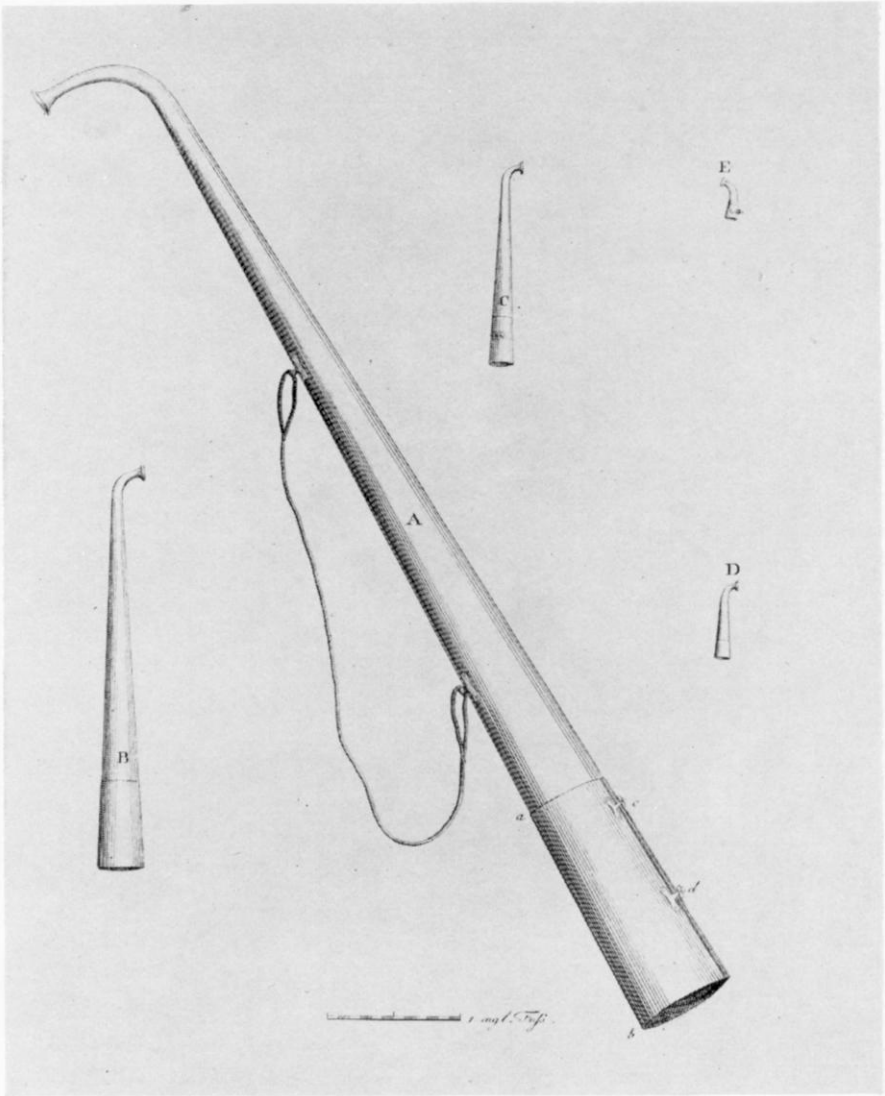


Plate 1: Russian Horns

15. 14. 13. 12. 11. 10. 9. 8. 7. 6. 5. 4. 3. 2. 1.

D.Canto
C.H.
A.A.
G.E.
E.D.
C.Alto
B.H.
A.A.
G.F.
E.F.
D.C.Tenor
H.A.
A.G.
E.E.
D.C.Basso
H.A.
G.E.
E.D.
C.Cornet B
I.A.

Plate 2: Russian Horn Band notation

rhythm, rather than the meter, might be conducted, but a review of a concert presented by a Russian horn band in London in 1831 clearly states that the "conductor beats with a stick audibly, not the meter, but the actual rhythm."⁴

After Narishkin presented his band in a concert at a grand hunt held for the Empress Elizabeth in 1757, the ensembles soon spread over Russia and many duplications and variants resulted. In some bands, the higher rank of players was supposed to have overblown its instruments to produce the higher overtones, thus extending the upward range.⁵ Another variant was the addition of a key which raised the pitch of the instrument a semitone.⁶ In some bands, selected players were charged with more than one instrument. Hinrichs reports that several of Maresch's discant players used three horns and, according to the review of the London concert mentioned above, thirty-five players of that band used fifty-five instruments.⁷

These refinements, however, did not alter the basic technique of performance, and during a single composition most of the players were responsible for but one note. This unique method of performance was highly developed and some horn bands seem to have played with a surprising degree of proficiency. In 1803, Louis Spohr heard the Russian Imperial Horn Band in St. Petersburg and said that the

hornists executed an overture by Gluck with a rapidity and exactness which would have been difficult for stringed instruments; how much the more so, then, for hornists, each of whom blew only one tone! It is hardly to be believed that they performed the most rapid passages with the greatest precision, and I could not have conceived it possible had I not heard it with my own ears.⁸

Coming from a musician of Spohr's standing, this is a most complimentary account. Later observers of other bands are not always so laudatory. *The Harmonicon's* review of the London concert in December 1831 discusses a program that contained not only Russian airs and dances but Boieldieu's *Caliph of Bagdad* overture and the overture to Mozart's *Die Entführung*. The review concludes by stating that what the audience

⁴ "Russian Horn Music," *The Harmonicon* (December, 1831), 12.

⁵ Victor Charles Mahillon, *Catalogue . . . instrumental du Conservatoire royal de musique de Bruxelles* (Ghent, 1896), II, 377.

⁶ The Library of Congress has a set of parts for a horn band of this type in which some of the players were responsible for tones a chromatic half-step apart. The instruments, pictured on the covers, are similar to those in Plate 1 except for the addition of a single key near the bell.

⁷ "Russian Horn Music."

⁸ Louis Spohr, *Autobiography*, trans. anon. (London, 1878), I, 46.

heard was “probably a very first rate band of Russian horns, but what is certainly a very second rate band of wind instruments.”⁹

This reviewer’s main objections concerned the lack of expression and the fact that the trebles were “shrill and very frequently sadly out of tune.”¹⁰ One is prepared to accept intonation problems as being a common fault in these bands; especially since Hinrichs notes that a tuning mechanism (a-b in Plate 1) was added to the horns of Maresch’s group only in 1777, twenty-six years after his experiments began.¹¹ The expressive possibilities of the best of these bands, however, should not be discounted automatically.

Hinrichs shows that Maresch employed the usual abbreviations for the terms piano, mezzo forte, and forte and the conventional signs for crescendo and diminuendo, as well as the term calando and four different kinds of staccato notation. With these terms and signs, Hinrichs says that Maresch’s players are able to give “the pathetic movements an extraordinary effect.”¹²

Spohr does not mention any serious defects in the performance and says that the group of forty horns he heard replace an organ in the accompaniment of a choral work had great “firmness and strength” and “in several soli, their effect was ravishing.”¹³ Another observer, Sir John Graham Dalyell, thinks “prejudice has swayed both sides” in conflicting reports concerning the musicality of the bands.¹⁴ In speaking of a touring group that he heard in Scotland in 1833 (one wonders if it were the band that had received the unfavorable review in London in December 1831), Dalyell says that some had “undervalued a band of this kind, comparing its effect to that of a bad organ. . . .”¹⁵ He states that at the concert a blind man in the audience was deceived by the sound of the band and exclaimed, “what a fine organ!”¹⁶ Dalyell himself says that in this band “the best works of the modern composers are executed admirably” and their performance was “pleasing and affecting — whence it can only be where the performers are unskillful that [a horn band] can resemble a ‘bad organ.’”¹⁷

⁹ “Russian Horn Music.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Hinrichs, p. 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, Appendix.

¹³ Spohr, I, 45.

¹⁴ Sir John Graham Dalyell, *Musical Memoirs of Scotland* (Edinburgh and London, 1849), p. 171.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Also in 1833, Fétis heard a concert of Russian horns in Paris and compared them to an organ: “the [ensemble] is perfect, equal in intensity, and homogeneous. Particularly remarkable are the basses, whose beauty no other instrument could equal.”¹⁸

This review mentions what were probably the finest qualities of the Russian horn band. Undoubtedly, its homogeneous, organlike tone with its equal intensity and unexcelled bass provided a preview of the sound of the late 19th-century orchestral brass section. Even though the individual players could execute but a single tone in what Dalyell called an “immense Syrinx,” their combined efforts produced a complete brass texture that was not common until the later works of Wagner.

Although neither Spohr, Dalyell, nor Fétis mentions it, the most serious fault in some of the bands seems to have been their excessive volume. Hinrichs reports that on a quiet night a horn band could be heard up to a “German mile” (five English miles) and that various expedients had been tried when a less deafening effect was desired. One method that seems to have been effective was the use of leather-covered wooden horns. These were used in the accompaniment of operas, and though it is not the material that determines tone quality but the bore and mouthpiece, the leather covering may have somewhat softened the volume of sound. But Maresch had a more original method of producing piano and forte.

His players, using the usual brass instruments, stood around a large hollow case that was placed in the middle of the concert room. Holes the size of each player’s bell were cut in the sides of the case “and all stuck the end of their hunting horns in the box” to produce a piano passage.¹⁹

Apparently changes in social conditions, rather than musical inadequacy, caused the use of horn bands to die out. Dalyell reports that the number of bands had declined early in the century when many of the serf-musicians had been drafted into the army to fight Napoleon. Then too, even in Imperial Russia where the players had been bought and sold along with the instruments they played, times had changed and the serfs were freed.

But even while the serfs existed, reaction to the human aspect of this type of musical organization had been registered throughout Western Europe. Spohr felt that it was “unnatural” to perform music “with these living organ pipes, and . . . could not help thinking of the thrashings which must have been inflicted” in order to train the players.²⁰ Fétis was also con-

¹⁸ F. J. Fétis, “Concert des cors russes,” *Revue musicale* No. 36 (1833), 285.

¹⁹ Hinrichs, Appendix.

²⁰ Spohr, I, 46.

cerned and mentions the monotony and fatigue²¹ that the players must have endured. But it was in England, which was soon to benefit from the reforms of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, that the strongest protests were heard.

In the account of the London horn band concert of 1831, *The Harmonicon* had published:

Of all the ingenious devices for reducing man to the level of a machine, . . . this is, perhaps, the most curious; a number of persons are trained to hit with unerring precision, to the infinitesimal part of a second, the very instant when each is to produce a sound from a tube, the sounding of which, in exact time, is the whole business of his musical existence. The bare idea of devoting so many fellow-creatures to the drilling necessary to the acquirement of this clockwork regularity could have been conceived only by one who had but to will and be obeyed; and the disheartening drudgery of learning the art would have been submitted to only by those who were habituated to consider the commands of their superiors the sole law of their actions. Accordingly, it is in Russia that we find this instrument invented, and that at a period when the ancient hereditary tyranny of its princes and nobles was as yet unsoftened. . . .²²

Even earlier, in 1824, the same magazine had published a letter from one who was supposed to have been a former horn-band player. Although its ironic humor, literary style, and commentary on contemporary musical developments could hardly have come from a Russian serf, it shows the English reaction to the social conditions that had allowed horn bands to flourish.

To the editor of *The Harmonicon*

From the *F-sharp* of the Russian Imperial Horn Music

Sir,

In a country where philosophy and political science are applied to the purpose of reducing man to his most simple expression, all institutions have a particular character, which may appear strange to the civilized inhabitants of those countries where some kind of liberty exists, and where the dignity of human nature is not abused to a condition that is merely mechanical and vegetative.

Russia, as you are well aware, is that part of Europe into which the light of science has the least penetrated.

You cannot be ignorant that music (I mean musical execution) is a very different thing at Petersburg, from what it is at Vienna, Berlin, Milan, Paris, London, in a word, in any other part of the world, where melody has made some advances. A concert of harmony at Petersburg is composed of about four-and-twenty musicians. The functions of each of these performers are limited to the giving of a note, of one single note. The most rigid and scrupulous attention is the only instinctive

²¹ Fétis, "Concert des cors russes."

²² "Russian Horn Music," p. 11.

quality exacted from these bellows in the human form; hence, they show no disposition for any other talent, because they have no idea of extending their range of thought beyond this limited sphere. They are in every respect automata, possessed of no determinate faculty.

Can you figure to yourself a man reduced to the condition of an organ pipe? Will you believe, sir, that the person who now addresses you, has, during thirty years of his life, been the *F sharp* of the music of the Emperor of all the Russias? I was called, at least I am willing so to believe, to more brilliant destinies; but a cruel event has changed my fate. My fortune having been destroyed in a single day, I was reduced to the necessity of soliciting the favour of the Court; I hoped for an employment worthy of a thinking being, and they have conferred upon me that of a piece of mechanism. I became *mono-musical* at the rate of a hundred roubles per annum.

One day I took it into my head to play an entire air upon a flute, which had been sent me from France. As a return for my presumption, I received a dozen lashes of the knout, which were unsparingly applied and my appointment stopped. After this I *blew* for six months for the King of Prussia, but wearied out at length by the rigorous treatment I was doomed to endure, I deserted from a body where no encouragement is held out to emulation, and from a country, where intelligent beings are converted into wind instruments, incapable of any farther degree of advancement. My comrades, G, B flat, and A, have followed my example. We have lately arrived in London and wish to give some concerts. We propose playing an air in four notes, and solemnly assure you that we will not cheat the public by being pleasing; we will scrupulously adhere to the prevailing fashion, and be only surprising.

We have, and that may prove a disadvantage, no condemned fugitive felon in our band; nevertheless we hope that the novelty of our performance may excite some interest, and that it may inspire pity for the slaves, whom ignorance has reduced to the barbarous condition in which was lately

Your humble servant,

(*signed*) Kouloff

Formerly *F sharp* to H.I.M. the
Emperor of all the Russias²³

May 3d, 1824

²³ "From the *F sharp* of the Russian Imperial Horn Music," *The Harmonicon*, XVIII (June, 1824), 104.