

# 'THE HORN IS A NOBLE AND MELANCHOLY INSTRUMENT'

Hector Berlioz

## ALEC FRANK-GEMMILL

**BIS DEBUT CD**

**plus**

**SERIES OF SHORT *INSIGHT*  
FILMS ON HISTORIC HORNS**



Horn-player Alec Frank-Gemmill's unbounded passion for the wizardry, versatility and beauty of his instrument has inspired him to undertake the most challenging of projects - to explore the fascinating development of the horn with a debut CD on the BIS label and a series of *Insight* films accessible online. Not only does he present four different instruments on a single recording – two natural horns, Vienna horn and piston horn – but he also matches them with as many period keyboards, played by Alasdair Beatson. The venture was brought to fruition with the help of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust which made Alec a Fellowship winner in 2014.

He is keen to emphasise that the impetus behind the projects is inspirational, rather than musicological; this is not about historically informed performance, but more a personal fascination with finding a way into the music with precisely the type of instrument that composers such as Beethoven, Saint-Saëns and Dukas would have known. Alec is on a mission to explore lost sound worlds and reveal new perspectives in familiar works, from late classicism through the Romantic era to the 1940s.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was an extraordinarily rich period in the development of both the horn and the keyboard. The Industrial Revolution contributed to the growing complexities of design and manufacture, whereby the piano gained in both size and range of octaves and the horn acquired new valve mechanisms and, consequently, a diverse range of sounds and playing techniques. Cultural differences also played their part with different types of horn being developed in Britain, France, Germany and Austria. As the century progressed, therefore, generations of composers could exploit a growing range of horns and virtuoso techniques – and while these horns have survived in museums, they are not often heard nowadays as the repertoire can all be played on the modern horn (but, Alec would maintain, with a very different soul and sound).

Beethoven wrote for the natural horn, while Schumann would have written for the early valve horns including the Vienna horn, which is the instrument of choice in the Vienna Philharmonic to this day. Rossini and Saint-Saëns, meanwhile, chose the purity and openness of the natural horn. Later in the century composers such as Glazunov and Dukas absolutely relied on the full chromatic compass of the rotary-valve horn, but they still referred back to the playing techniques of the valve-less, earlier instrument.

**INSIGHT FILMS:** Alec's perception and wisdom is demonstrated not only on CD, but also in five short films – a general introduction to Alec himself plus four short films about the horns featured on the recording. His personal enthusiasm, humour and natural eloquence give rise to compelling stories about the instruments, each one a character in itself. He charts the progression from the simplicity of the natural horn to the convoluted array of *pumpen*, piston and rotary valves of the later models, by way of an assortment of removable and extendable crooks. He also relishes the complexities and trickeries of breathing, fingering and handstopping techniques required to master them and bring out the full palette of notes, intonation and expression.

Is there any other recording that features so many different period horns matched with as many pianos on one CD? For both musicians, the feat of swapping between the period instruments, as well as bringing together such a collection of them for a single recording period of five days, has been a test of both stamina and artistry. Alec concludes that his ongoing exploration of these different instruments and compositions has energized his playing generally and that, while playing these early horns often presents a huge challenge in performance, the necessary risk-taking makes for a thrilling experience.

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**INSIGHT FILMS: published online simultaneously on BBT and BIS websites: [www.bbtrust.com](http://www.bbtrust.com) [www.bis.se](http://www.bis.se)**

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## NOTES TO EDITORS

### Alec Frank-Gemmill

*"a phenomenon with a tone of golden purity, wraparound warmth and ecstatic afterglow"* Financial Times

*"a player of rare composure and subtlety"* The Guardian

- Recipient of a Borletti-Buitoni Fellowship 2014 and currently a member of the BBC New Generation Artists scheme.
- Professor of Horn at London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama.
- Frequently plays guest principal horn with Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra and Chamber Orchestra of Europe.
- Chamber music collaborators include pianist Alasdair Beatson and violinists Alexander Janiczek, Philippe Graffin and Pekka Kuusisto, as well as period instrument group Ensemble Marsyas.

- Has appeared as soloist with BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, BBC Philharmonic, Konzerthausorchester Berlin, Düsseldorfer Symphoniker, Sinfonietta Köln and Scottish Chamber Orchestra, of which he is Principal Horn.
- Soloist in numerous festivals including East Neuk, Spitalfields, Ryedale, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and St. Magnus. A regular at Open Chamber Music at Prussia Cove.
- Began playing horn aged 10 (tenor horn at 6) and period instruments at 19. Studied in Cambridge, London and Berlin. His teachers have included Hugh Seenan, Radovan Vlatković and Marie-Luise Neunecker.
- Repertoire extends from Baroque to contemporary.

*Top portrait photo by Jen Owens*

## **A NOBLE AND MELANCHOLY INSTRUMENT**

**Alec Frank-Gemmill** horn

**Alasdair Beatson** piano



**Ludwig van Beethoven**  
*Sonata in F major (1800)*

**Robert Schumann**  
*Adagio and Allegro Op 70 (1849)*

**Franz Strauss**  
*Nocturno Op 7 (1867)*

**Gioacchino Rossini**  
*Prelude, Theme and Variations (c 1860)*

**Camille Saint-Saëns**  
*Romance in E major op. 67 (1866)*

**Alexander Glazunov**  
*Rêverie (1890)*

**Paul Dukas**  
*Villanelle (1906)*

**Gilbert Vinter**  
*Hunter's Moon (1942)*

## **Instruments**

Lucien Joseph Raoux, c. 1800. Paris Cor d'orchestre

Salvatore Lagrassa, c. 1815. Palermo (Viennese school) 6 octaves, entirely wooden frame

*Beethoven: Sonata in F major, Op. 17*

Erste Wiener Productiv-Genossenschaft der Musik-Instrumentenmacher, end of the 19th century.

Vienna Wienerhorn

Jean Baptiste Streicher, 1847. Vienna 7 octaves, 2 iron braces

*Schumann: Adagio and Allegro, Op. 70 Strauss: Nocturno, Op. 7*

Marcel Auguste Raoux, 1823. Paris Cor solo

Julius Blüthner, 1867. Leipzig

7 octaves, 4 iron braces, hitch-pin plate

*Rossini: Prelude, Theme and Variations Saint-Saëns: Romance in E major, Op. 67*

Victor Charles Mahillon, beginning of the 20th century. Brussels Cor à pistons

Carl Bechstein, 1898. Berlin 7 1/4 octaves, cast iron frame

*Glazunov: Rêverie, Op. 24 Dukas: Villanelle Vinter: Hunter's Moon*