A Man on an Unusual Mission: Bringing the Alphorn Back to France

In a former silk weaver's workshop in Lyon, a carpenter and trained musician is breathing new life into an instrument that was on the brink of extinction in France.

MAY 30, 2025 · PAID

Dear Friends,

Late spring is a time of celebration in the Alps, when festivals large and small welco the gloriously green, all-too-brief summer season. One of the most beloved traditic still practiced in the region today are the *transhumance* festivals, marking the occas when herders drive their flocks to higher pastures for the warmer months. At these events, and a few others, one might still hear the sounds of the iconic Swiss alphorr an ancient herder's instrument used for centuries to summon livestock, or send messages across vast alpine valleys.

Today, the alphorn is making an unexpected return—not in its native Switzerland, b in France. Lyon-based writer Anna Richards introduces us to Sandro Faïta, a musicia and craftsman determined to breathe new life into a fading tradition, one handcraft alphorn at a time.

We hope you'll enjoy reading: **"A Man on an Unusual Mission: Bringing the Alph Back to France."** It was written by Anna Richards and photographed by Michelle Tu (And don't miss the short clip at the end of the story, of Sandro playing one of his alphorns.)

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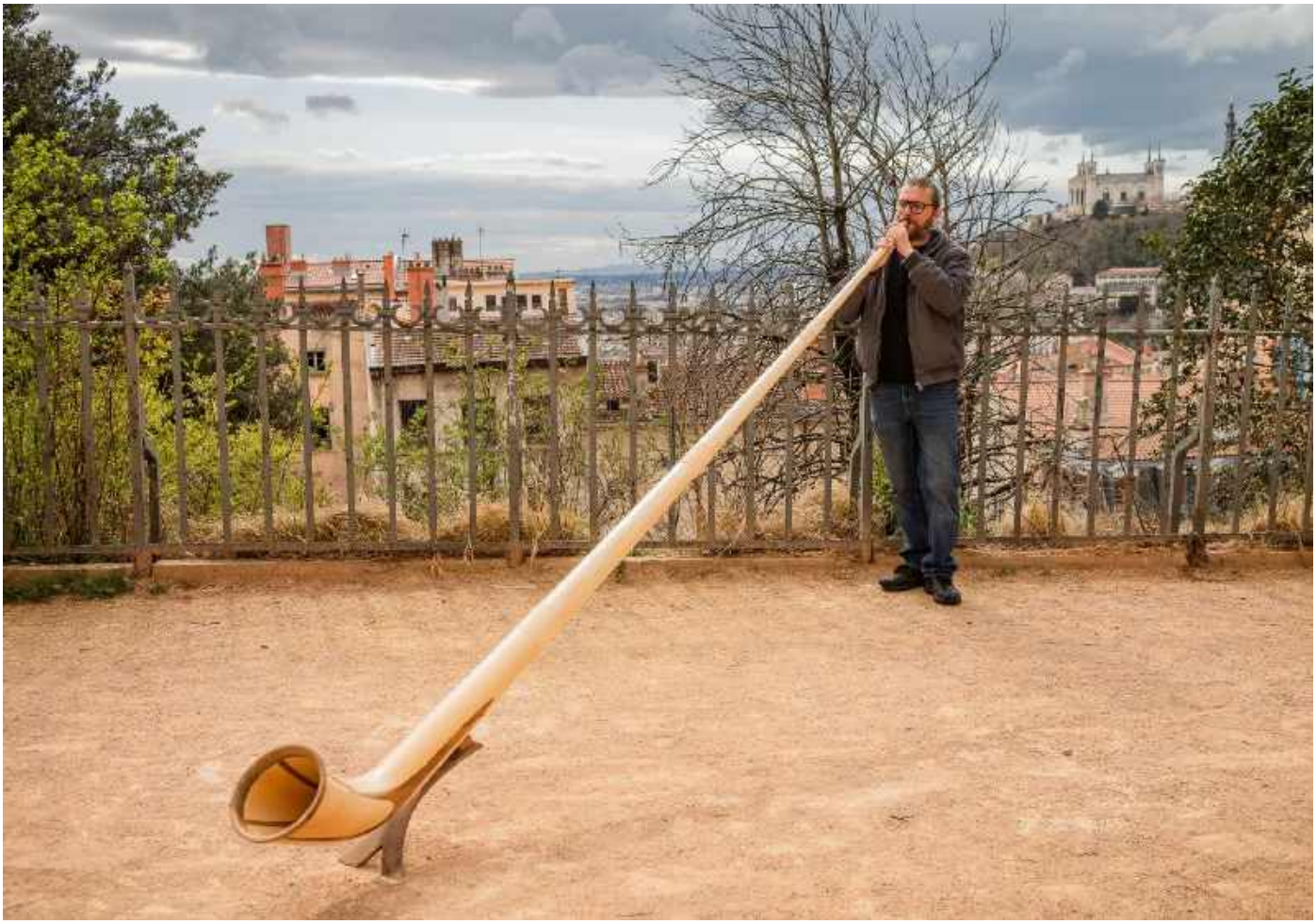
Sincerely,

Todd Oppenheimer
Publisher & Editor-in-Chief, *Craftsmanship Magazine*



photography by Michelle Tucci

A Man on an Unusual Mission: Bringing the Alphorn Back to France

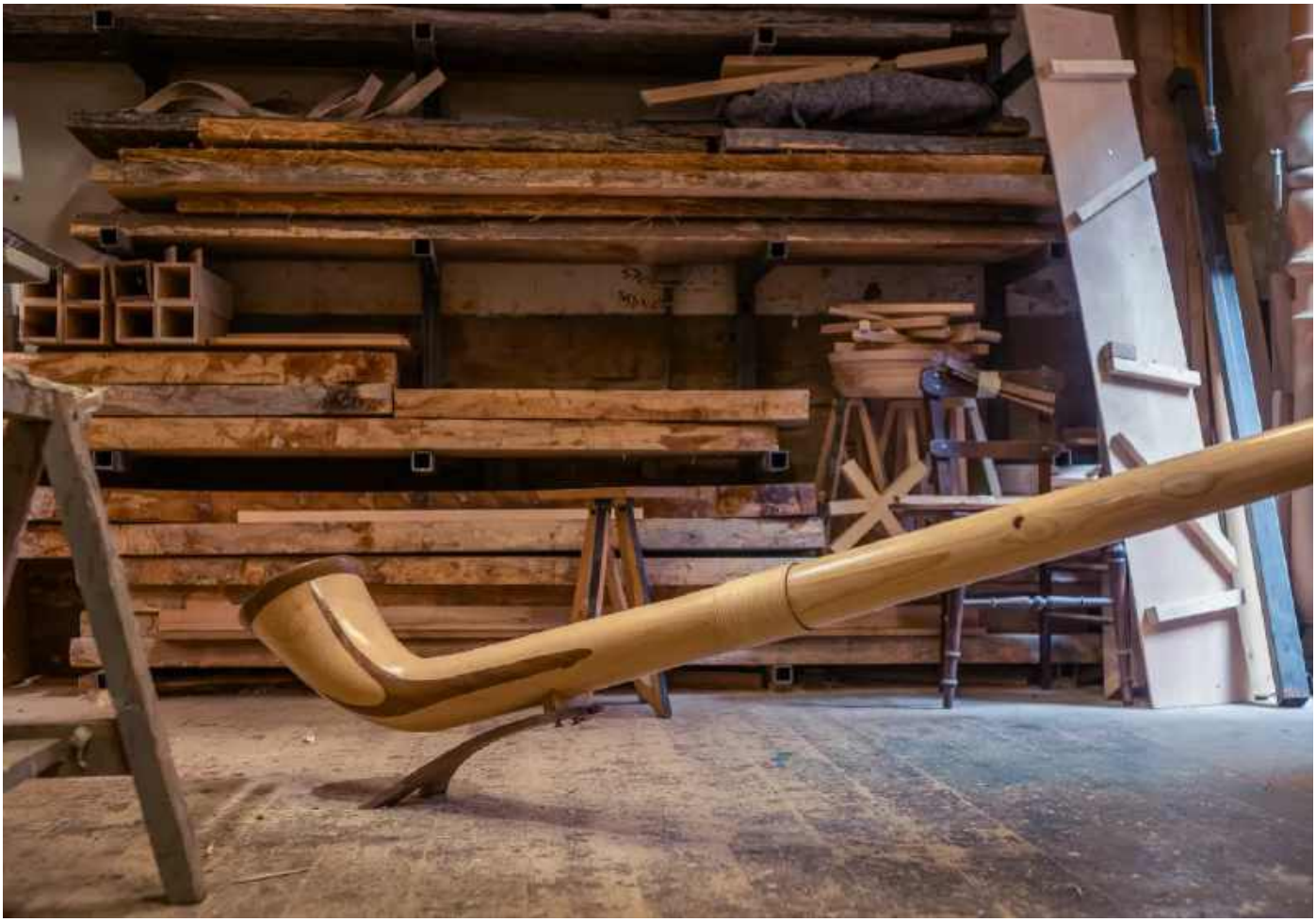
by Anna Richards

The sound of an alphorn can carry up to 6 miles, and for centuries, this was how herders would communicate wit each other across the high alpine valleys of Switzerland and France, or call their cattle back from grazing.

When Sandro Faïta blows into the mouthpiece of one of his alphorns, inside his workshop in central Lyon, I expect a deafening blare to come out and reverberate fr the half-built wooden furniture stacked along the walls. I'm surprised when the note emitted doesn't seem loud at all, but soft and velvety in quality.

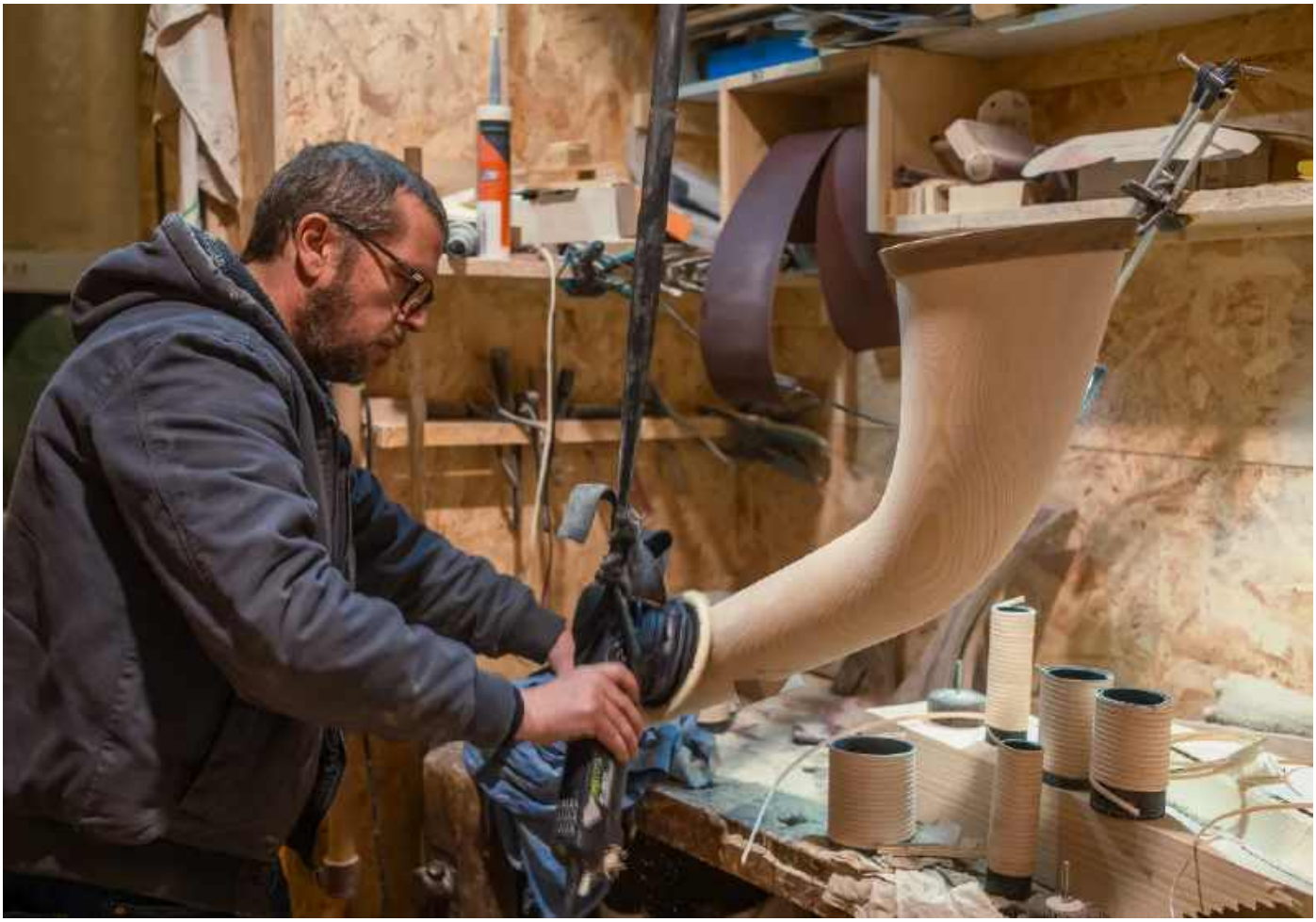
Shepherding is now a rarified career, and technology has erased the need to call a friend 6 miles away using a woodwind instrument, which means the 21st-century demand for alphorns in France is pretty slim. Faïta, 52, and his business partner, Cyprien de Breuvand, 33, who together form Resonance Bois, are among the last alphorn makers in the country. Curiously, that's not the case across the border: The alphorn is a Swiss national emblem, and demand for alphorns in Switzerland is high today than when they were used for their original purpose by herdsmen. The alpho renaissance, both in Switzerland and in Faïta's own revival project, stems from repurposing them as musical instruments.

> "When I first came across the alphorn, I never intended to make them," says Faïta



An alphorn is the length of a full-grown boa constrictor. Even placed diagonally, it spans almost the entire room, just under 10 feet long. The little workshops of Lyon's Croix-Rousse, where Faïta's business is located, were designed to accommodate Jacquard looms for weaving silk, hence the high ceilings. But the looms were compa in comparison with this hosepipe-like instrument, which is twice the length of my b and then some.

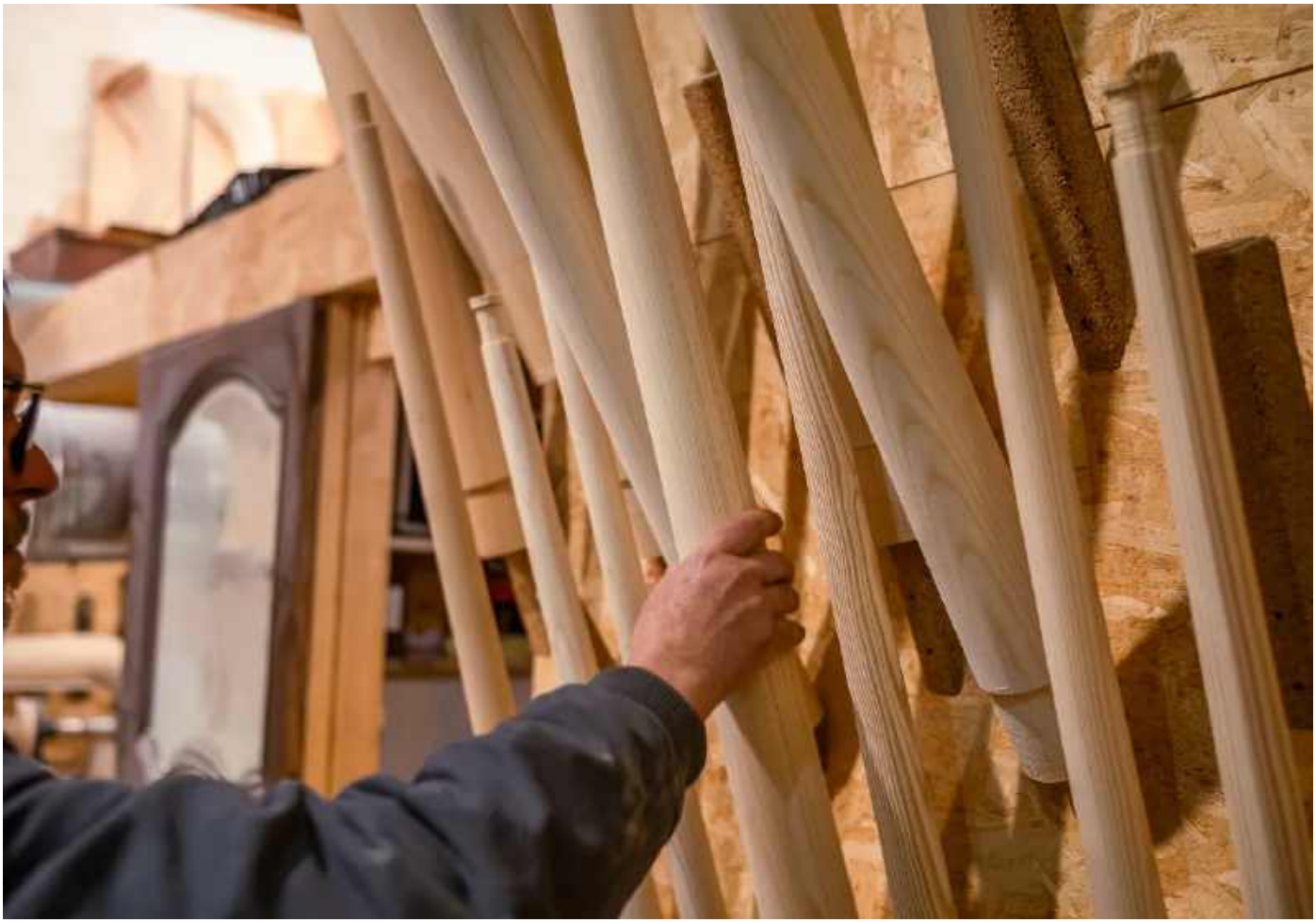
The studio has been primed and polished for my visit (or, more likely, for the TV cre that came by the previous day), but the air is still heavy with wood dust and shavinc a comforting smell, like clean hamster bedding. Although carved from wood, the alphorns are shinier than polished brass. Faïta shows off the various sanders he use achieve the end result, from a machine to buff the instrument to just a quarter of ar inch thick, to the scraps of sandpaper used for the finishing touches by hand.



Although the first alphorns weren't documented until the mid-16th century, they're likely descended from the traditional Tibetan dungchen, a long trumpet that predat the alphorn by at least 600 years. By the early 19th century, when cheese productio was moving out of rural mountain dairies into cooperatives in the villages and towr alphorns were already disappearing from the Alps. In the 1820s, the governor of Be Niklaus von Mülinen, lent a selection of alphorns to musicians in Grindelwald, and b 1827, they'd proved so popular that they'd already been named the national instrument of Switzerland. The alphorn revival crossed borders, and in 1878, Germa composer Richard Strauss wrote "Alphorn" for soprano, horn, and piano. The instrument's popularity has only grown since then: The Swiss Yodeling Association currently counts some 1,800 alphorn players among its membership.

"When I first came across the alphorn, I never intended to make them," says Faïta. "I appreciated them with a musician's eye and ear. They produce a note that carries fa

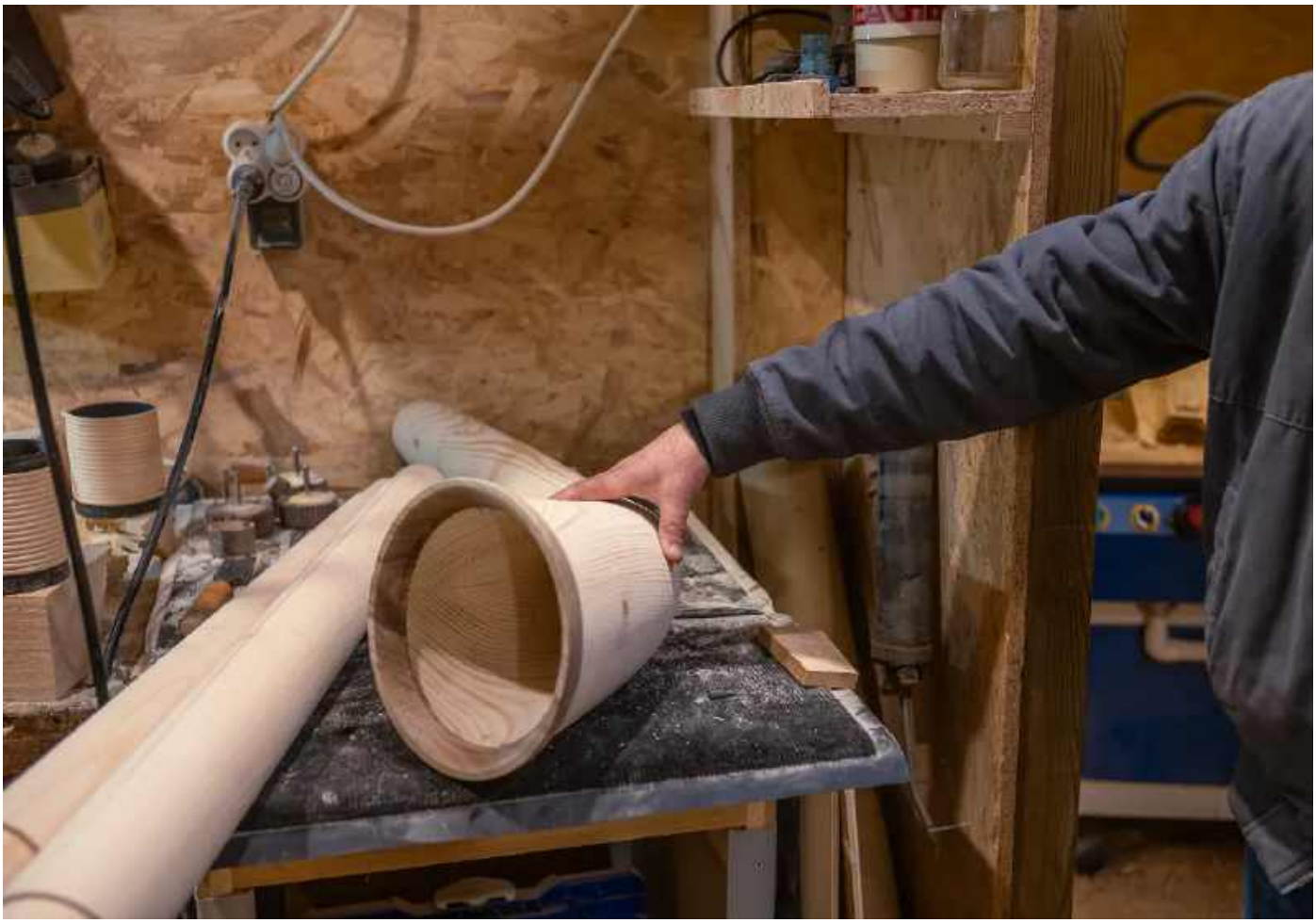
but feels relaxing and peaceful, rather than a harsh sound."



A talented French hornist, Faïta studied in a Lyon *conservatoire* (music academy) bef becoming a full-time musician. He spent a decade of his career playing for the Swis Italian Orchestra in Lugano. Although there were no alphorns in the orchestra, seve of his fellow musicians played the instrument, and one of them even made them. Curiosity led Faïta to shadow this artisan and learn his trade, which would come in handy some years later when he made the jump from full-time musician to carpent Having picked up the basics of carpentry from his grandfather as a child, Faïta decic to specialize in restoring and building wooden furniture. Unable to completely leav his musical past behind, he soon began experimenting with making alphorns. He fir tried cedar wood, which made a lovely sound, but was cumbersome. Spruce, the

material he uses for all of his alphorns today, is much lighter. When I take the alphc from him, it's surprisingly lightweight; I could almost balance it on one hand.

Transporting an instrument the size of a boa constrictor with rigor mortis isn't easy, alphorns are dismantled into three sections, joined with tube-like sockets. Each of those three pieces is made from two hollowed wooden shells that slot together, like the halves of a chocolate Easter egg. This design keeps the veins of the wood perfe symmetrical. Faïta calls it a "butterfly formation."



Although pretty and uniform, the instrument's symmetry goes beyond aesthetic appeal: It ensures that the wood's density is the same on both sides of the alphorn, leading to better sound quality.

“There are no valves, keys, or holes like you’d get with other woodwind instruments says Faïta. “You can't lengthen or shorten the instrument as you play, which limits th range of notes, although you’ve still got twelve different notes over three octaves.”

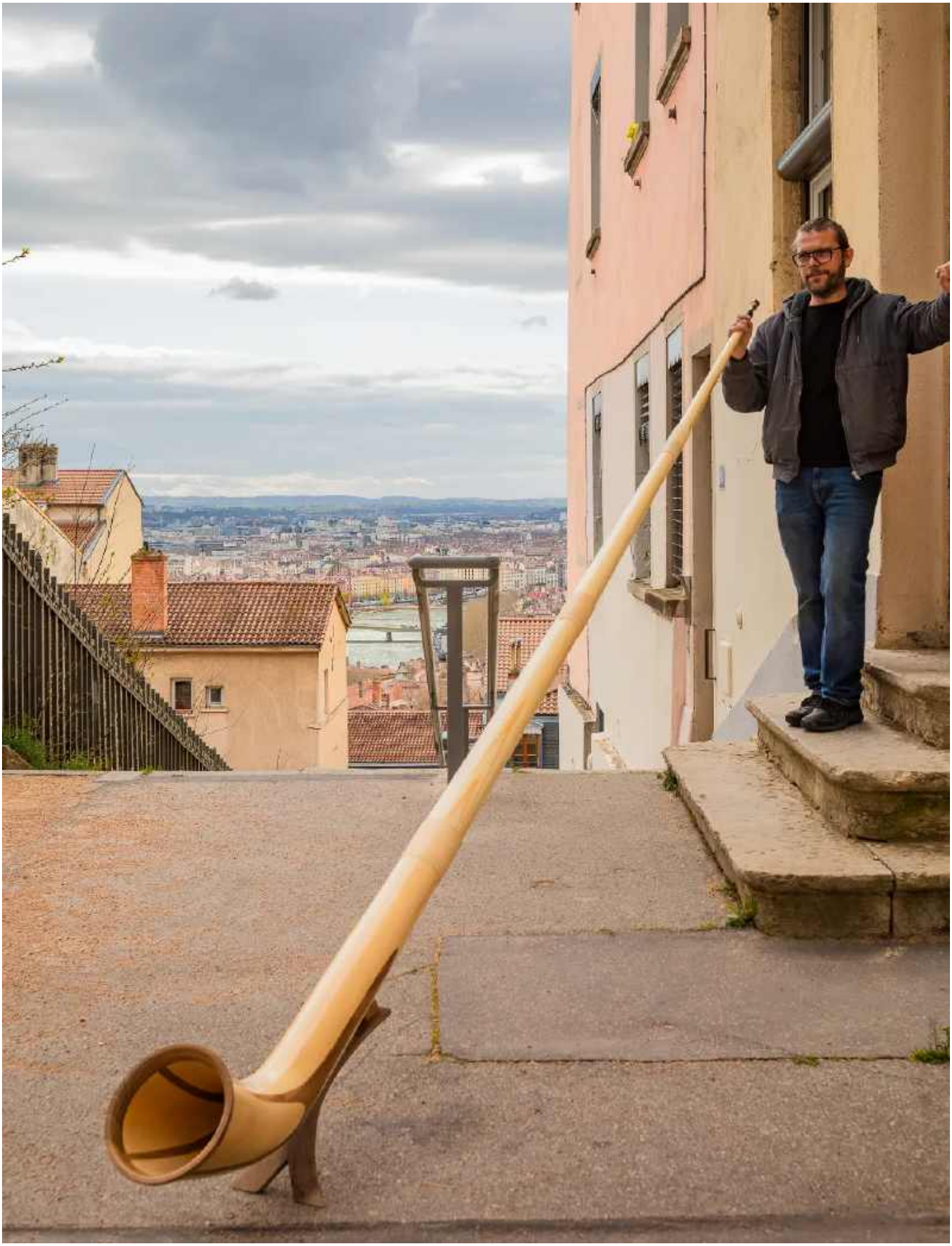
He demonstrates, creating an undulating, pitch-perfect melody. His hands are motionless on the horn; the changes in pitch are created by simply changing the tension in his lips. It’s an impractical instrument, not just in size, but in the complexi of playing it. Then again, alphorns weren’t originally designed for musicality. Until th early 19th century, the call to prayer in Swiss Reformed Cantons would have been a musical as it got.

Now it’s my turn. “Pretend you’re blowing a raspberry,” advises Faïta. “Ninety percer of kids manage to make a sound the first time… adults often struggle.”

I’m pleasantly surprised when I make a decent sound on my first try. I experiment w pursing and relaxing my lips, and the note changes—although I’ve no idea whether what I’m doing will produce a higher or lower pitch.

“It’s a tiring instrument to play,” says Faïta. “Even if the wood is only seven millimete [one-quarter inch] thick, it takes a lot of puff to create the vibrations. Woodwind instruments made from metal are typically only about a millimeter thick.”

Faïta generally produces batches of three to four alphorns at a time, with each batc taking around a month to make. After almost a decade of working entirely by hand, switched to a digital wood-carver for the initial prototype 6 years ago, to enable mo precise dimensions. His alphorns are made to order, with prices starting from €3,00 (about $3,387 US), and he ships all over the world—the alphorn he’s working on no destined for Canada.



I accompany Faïta to Croix-Rousse's plateau, where he begins to play, and a crowd quickly amasses. Although alphorns are now a rare sight in France (even more so in the city center), they're still sometimes used at Transhumance festivals—the traditio moving of cows to mountain pastures—in late May and June; or, at the *Retour des Alpages* (when the cows come home again) in September and October.

As part of the bid to revive France's fading alphorn tradition, Faïta and two fellow alphornists play in a band, with regular gigs in Lyon and beyond. He also organizes residential courses to teach others how to play the instrument.

"Switzerland has preserved its folklore, but it's something we've largely lost in Franc he laments. "I want to help bring the alphorn back, and make it a twenty-first-centu instrument."

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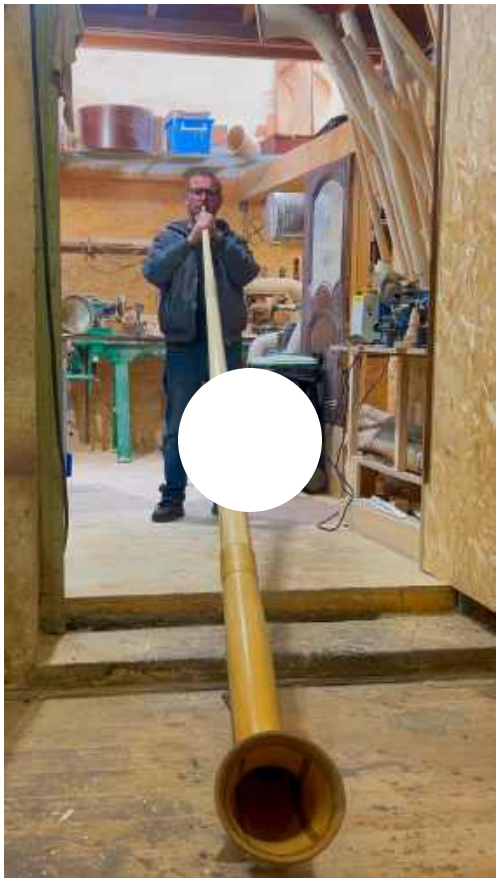
Listen to Sandro Faïta demonstrate the delightful sound of one of his alphorns (*video Michelle Tucci*):



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