



# THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered Charity number 276199)

<http://www.alkansociety.org>

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## **BULLETIN no. 90 January 2014**

### **Alkan Bicentenary – a memorable year**

2013 saw a veritable flood of Alkan events, in concerts, recordings, publications and academic seminars. Although we have tried to keep up with these on the Society's website, we are all too conscious that pressures have prevented us from maintaining regularity of issuing the Bulletin. We hope that the present bumper issue may in part compensate for this.

We have noted Alkan celebrations all over the world on the website, although some of these slipped our notice; we have only just learned, for example, that our member George Hitching played the op. 39 *Symphonie* on the birthday itself in Tønsberg, Norway. But we hope the Society may give itself a modest pat on the back for its contributions and support to a number of these events, both at home and abroad. Your Society has organised concerts in its own right and in cooperation with the Liszt Society; it has supported a notable series of Alkan recitals by Jonathan Powell across the UK; it has enabled performances of Alkan (including the complete chamber music and songs, and transcriptions by Richard Murphy for string quartet) at the Levoča Music Festival in Slovakia; and it has assisted at academic colloquia on Alkan in the USA, France and Italy (more on all this below). Reviews of these events are included in this Bulletin.

Not only that, the Society saved the day for positively the last Alkan event of the year – a performance in Seattle at midnight on 31 December of the second *Concerto da camera* which might have been scuppered for want of a long-promised score until an appeal to your Society, and the kind cooperation of the Société Alkan in France, ensured that the music was there on time.

Apart from coverage of the above, this issue contains material which we hope will be of interest to the Alkan admirer, performer, and scholar alike. We are delighted to present Jonathan Powell's very important study of Alkan and 20<sup>th</sup> century British piano music, first presented in abbreviated form in Florence at the colloquium "*Le festin d'Alkan*" in November. Of great value is Mark Viner's analysis of the new publication of the op. 35 *Etudes*. We also offer news of a recent Alkan discovery, and the text of a talk given by David Conway at the French Alkan celebrations on the influence of Alkan's Jewish heritage on his life and music.

## Concerts

### Alkan Society Bicentenary Concert - St. James's Piccadilly, 28 November 2013.

Julian Haxby

The Society was fortunate enough to secure the services of two exceptionally gifted and committed young musicians, **Mark Viner** and **Patrick Tapio Johnson**, to mark Alkan's 200th birthday, with a magnificent recital at St James's, Piccadilly, on 28th November. Whilst Mark, despite his tender years, can already be considered an Alkan veteran, Patrick was a newcomer to this composer, though his performance entirely belied the fact.

Members who have heard Mark's interpretations of Alkan will know how seriously he takes this music, and indeed such an attitude seems essential: One cannot imagine any sane performer choosing Alkan's major works as vehicles for mere display! The intricacies of the writing are frequently of the thorniest and most taxing kind, the musical argument both rigorous in form and rich in substance.

Mark gave a characteristically pondered and strongly characterised rendition of the *Marche funèbre*, distinguished by its inexorable tread and striking evocation of tolling bells. Some respite from this relentless gloom was afforded by the gently melancholic *Barcarolle*, its elegant grace occasionally veiled by mysterious fleeting shadows. Here, Mark wove a magical tapestry of sound, which seemed to float in the air. The *Chanson de la folle* brought a chilling return to very dark regions, in a performance that powerfully conveyed both the sadness of this lonely figure and her terrifying inner turmoil. Mark's compelling reading of the Op 65 *Barcarolle* conjured up an enigmatic mood of naive charm subverted by ominous undercurrents. It was wonderful to hear the *Étude, Chant d'amour - chant de mort*, veritably a rarity amongst rarities. Mark wisely eschewed all sentimentalism and achieved a remarkably cohesive account of this somewhat problematical work.

With the *Symphonie*, we were back on relatively familiar territory, though it is hard to imagine that one could ever become jaded with such a towering creative feat, and certainly not in a performance as masterly as this! It is no surprise that numerous pianists have tackled the work, though few have displayed such consummate command of both form and content. One was struck equally by the diverse splendours of the music and by our performer's intrepid and often thrilling engagement with it. This was a truly memorable experience.

And Mark's labours were by no means over! After a second brief interval, he returned with his cellist partner to perform Alkan's magnificent *Sonate de concert* - his masterpiece, some say. These young players did full justice to the elegant nobility and ardour of the opening *Allegro molto*, beguiled us in the *Allegretto*, with its quirky harmonic turns, and the poised lyricism of the Adagio. The frenetic dash of the *prestissimo Finale* was delivered with an astonishing élan that kept us on the very edge of our seats. After this thrilling conclusion to an evening of such glorious musical riches, my sole regret was that such a small audience had come to enjoy it!

### Jonathan Powell recitals

Jonathan Powell was determined to take the message of Alkan around the country and during 2013 and January 2014 has played the op. 39 *Concerto* with a varying supporting programme, with the support of the Society, in Hatfield, London, Brighton, Oxford, Cambridge, and Manchester. Not only that but he has played all or some movements from the *Concerto* in Kiev

and Kirovograd (Ukraine), Florence (Italy) and Finchley – *en masse* a truly heroic achievement. The recitals accompanied the *Concerto* with complementary works, including some of Alkan's shorter pieces, and works by Busoni, John White, Dave Smith, Sorabji and others.

Your reviewer was present at the AS supported recital at University College London, hosted by the Institute of Jewish Studies (28 May), and at Powell's recitals at Kiev (17 May) and the New North London Synagogue in Finchley (30<sup>th</sup> May). The first of these prefaced the complete *Concerto* with some of Alkan's op. 31 *Préludes* and Busoni's *Fantasia Contrapuntistica*. The Kiev recital included the Busoni, Sorabji's *Le jardin parfumé* as well as the *Concerto*, whilst the synagogue recital comprised a selection of *Préludes*, the *Anciennes mélodies de la synagogue* (sung by Claudia Conway) and the first movement of the *Concerto*.

In all these performances, Powell's Alkan was rich, engaging and convincing. He has always been outstanding in technique, but he seems to have developed progressively more fire over recent years so that the heart is as convincing as the mind and the fingers. Playing to these audiences, for the vast majority of which Alkan's music (and maybe even the name of Alkan) was a novelty, he utterly convinced them and raised them to passionate applause. This was a real celebration of Alkan and I greatly regret I was not able to see and hear Powell carry it across the UK.

In particular I am sorry to have missed the opportunity to hear Alkan in the context of John White and Dave Smith (two of the composers whose relation to Alkan is discussed in Powell's essay in this issue). The *Fantasia Contrapuntistica* at UCL was a noble companion to the *Concerto* and clearly demonstrated that Alkan's concepts of engaging both form and virtuosity lived on in Busoni's work. Of the Sorabji in Kiev I was less convinced; although it was finely played, the piece itself seems less structurally engaging. Powell's recitals as a whole however could not have been better attuned to the mission of bringing Alkan to the public in a context displaying both the quality of his music and his legacy.

## Alkan in Levoča

The 2013 'Indian Summer in Levoča' festival in Levoča, Slovakia, took the opportunity of presenting Alkan's complete chamber music and songs at various of its concerts. The concert of October 6<sup>th</sup>, at which Mark Viner (piano), Igor Karško (violin) and Jozef Lupták (cello) played the Trio, the *Sonate de concert* and the *Grand duo concertante* was outstanding in every way, with the redoubtable Viner showing astonishing stamina as well as musicianship, and with passionate commitment from Lupták.

The previous afternoon, the Kaprálová Quartet gave Alkan's complete works for string quartet. With pardonable (I hope) licence, the seven-bar quartet fragment was complemented by Richard Murphy's arrangement of three of the op. 48 *Esquisses*. And on October 7<sup>th</sup>, the Budapest diva Klára Kolonits included in her recital the *Anciennes melodies de la synagogue* and the *Verset de psaume 42*. And in his recital of that afternoon the pianist Tomasz Kamieniak included the *Andante romantique op. 13/2*; the *Minuetto alla tedesca op. 46*; the *Grande etude op. 76/1 for the left hand*; and two little *Etudes* by Alkan's son Delaborde.

The following performances from the Festival can be viewed on YouTube:

Trio op 30 <http://youtu.be/FeiT-ypND-E>

Sonate de concert op. 47 <http://youtu.be/g3nz6nWUEx0>

Songs <http://youtu.be/cRvCYpOeMR4>

Quartet fragment and arrangements [http://youtu.be/\\_ttKK507AY8](http://youtu.be/_ttKK507AY8)

## Alkaniana

### Three Alkan Conferences

Three notable academic conferences celebrating Alkan took place during the year, at all of which the Alkan Society was represented and publicised.

The first was on 9<sup>th</sup> November at Utah Valley University, Orem, USA, where speakers included Alkan Society Vice-President Professor Hugh Macdonald of Washington University, St. Louis, Mark Kroll of Boston University, and David Conway of University College London and the Alkan Society. Presentations and performance were also given by a number of graduate students; notable amongst these was an analysis by Andrew Haringer, of Quest University, British Columbia, of Alkan's neglected *Quasi-Caccia*, op. 53, pointing its connections to works of Alkan's predecessors. The conference was concluded by a magnificent recital by Jack Gibbons, including both the *Symphony* and the *Concerto* from op. 39. Gibbons's spoken introductions to these works were welcomed by his audience, and definitely added to their appreciation.

In Alkan's home town of Paris, a three-day event, *Charles-Valentin Alkan, le piano visionnaire*, was organised between the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Conservatoire Régionale de Paris and the Musée de la musique (November 21-23). On the first day, at the Bibliothèque, the theme was Alkan's life and works in the context of his time and subsequent reception. Presentations were given by leading authorities including François Luguenot (who spoke on Raymond Lewenthal's unpublished Alkan biography), Jean-Jaques Eigeldinger on Alkan and Chopin, and Gemma Salas Vilar who discovered the Alkan-Masarnau correspondence in the Spanish historical archives. Etienne Jardin, who works with the foundation Palazzetto Bru Zane, gave a fascinating insight into charity concerts organised by pianists in Paris between 1822 and 1848, based on his researches into the records of the contemporary performance rights system which had a lien on concert proceeds towards poor relief. It is to be hoped that the Bibliothèque may make some publication of the proceedings; the talk by David Conway, "The Voice of the Lion", is printed at the end of this Bulletin.



*Funeral March for a Dead Parrot, Paris*



*Dalibor Miklavcic and the Erard pédalier, Musée de la musique*

The second day had a more musicological focus and included a lecture/performance by Kenneth Hamilton of Cardiff University demonstrating 'buried' references to Chopin, Liszt, Schumann and others in the first movement of Alkan's op. 39 *Concerto*. The session was followed by a concert at the Conservatoire which included Alkan's *Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un Pappagallo*. On the Saturday, Dalibor Miklavcic played Alkan's *pédalier* at the Musée de la musique, including music by Alkan and Schumann.

The *Festin d'Alkan* was organised by Marco Repetti at the Cherubini Conservatoire in Florence. Three afternoon and evening sessions included both performances and talks about Alkan. I don't know what the collective noun is for a posse of Alkan virtuosi – a *crescendo*, maybe – but Florence was certainly blessed with one, as not only did we have performances from Repetti and Jonathan Powell but also from two of the new generation of *Alkanisti* – Vincenzo Maltempo and Roberto Prosseda. Both of them more than lived up to the high expectations we have gained from their recent recordings – Maltempo playing "*Super flumina Babylonis*" op.52, the *Symphonie* and *Le festin d'Esope*, and Prosseda, on the Pinchi pedaller system, playing the *Benedictus* op. 54, three of the *Etudes* for pedals alone, and three of the *Grands préludes* op.66.



Prosseda at the *pédalier* in Florence

especially considering the limited resources available, this may have been the most enterprising of the three celebrations.

## Alkan's Hymn

The recent study of Alkan by Brigitte François-Sappey and François Luguénot<sup>1</sup>, reviewed in ASB 89, contained in its listing of his works a previously unknown item, the hymn for solo voice *Paix à la paix*. Thanks to information kindly provided by the hymn's discoverer, our vice-president Hugh Macdonald, and by François Luguénot himself, we can now reveal more about this mysterious piece.

In connection with the Paris Exhibition of 1867, the organisers arranged a competition to provide an anthem which could be sung by the participants, either *en masse* or for by a solo voice. It may be that it was felt that the strains of the *Marseillaise* were thought to be rather sanguinary for an event dedicated to the co-operation of nations, particularly at a time when international tensions were running relatively high - the Franco-Prussian War was to take place in 1870.<sup>2</sup> Even after that disastrous war, Alkan had no time for petty nationalism and was at a loss to understand political extremism and intolerance between France and Germany; he wrote to Hiller in 1871 'If out of 100 Frenchmen, 99 have lost their way, and one has retained any common sense, I think I am that one'. And at the same time he wrote to Masarnau 'It would take volumes for me to express to you the immense pity I feel for the feeble population and the wretched bourgeoisie; the immense horror I feel for [those who participated in] the Paris

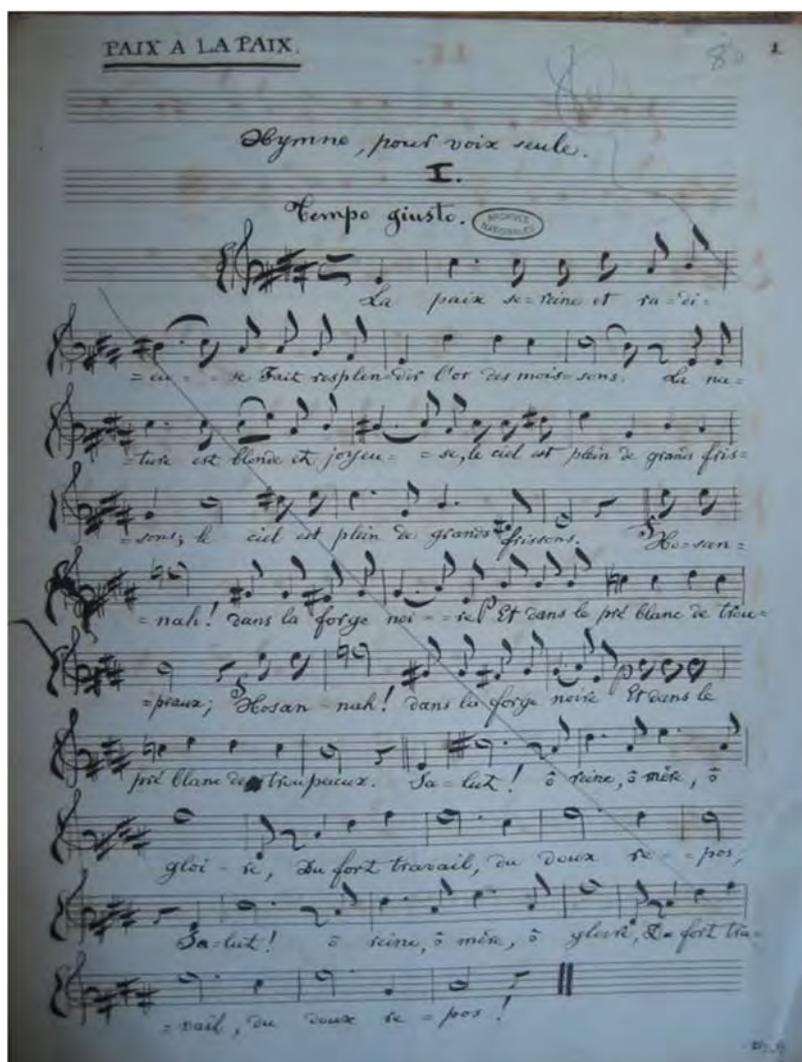
<sup>1</sup> *Charles-Valentin Alkan*, by Brigitte François-Sappey and François Luguénot. Collection Horizons/Bleu Nuit, 2013. ISBN 978-2-35884-023-1.

<sup>2</sup> For background to the competition, see Jacques Cheyronnaud, *Introuvable « Hymne de la paix »*, at <http://amnis.revues.org/1330>.

Commune; and not least the mortal hatred I feel for the idiots in the parliament (*aux coryphées parlementaires*)'. So we can understand that he may have felt some idealistic motivation (apart from, perhaps, his desire for the prize being offered) in taking part in the competition, which required a setting for solo voice of verses either by François Coppée (1842-1908) or by a certain Gustave Choquet (not to be confused with the mathematician of the same name).

However until recently no one knew, or indeed suspected, that Alkan had made any such entry. Hugh Macdonald, however, knew that Georges Bizet had entered and, learning that the entries were still stored in the *Archive nationale* determined to seek Bizet's hymn. The entries were stored uncatalogued in boxes, so he started to turn them over one by one until he came to Bizet's. Much to his surprise, he discovered Alkan's entry *en route* (he also later found Bizet's, I am glad to say).

The competition was however not a success. The judges reported that "Of the 807 pieces [entered] [...] 400 were written by brave amateurs lacking the rudiments of music [...] of the 400 remaining to be examined, we found about 200 that failed the laws of composition or prosody; 100 which, while not incorrect, offered no merit; 50 were more or less mediocre [...] a few revealed some real merit in composition, but they did not meet the proposed conditions. Not one fulfilled the conditions of the programme."



So no prize was awarded. A further irony (at least as far as Alkan is concerned) is that Coppée turned out in later years to be an enthusiastic *Dreyfusard*, militantly pro-Catholic and anti-Jewish.

The cantata had what was probably its first performance in Florence in November 2013 as part of the celebration "Le festin d'Alkan" organised by Mario Repetti at the *Conservatorio Luigi Cherubini*. The present writer does not feel that it is one of Alkan's most inspired compositions and is not surprised that the competition judges passed it over. But here is the first verse, so that readers can judge for themselves.

## Alkan : Douze Etudes dans les Tons Majeurs Op.35 : A Comparative Review and Errata Of The New PRHYTHM Inc. & Yamaha Music Media Corporation Edition

Mark Viner

It was with anticipation coupled with a slight sense of unease when I was first asked to review the PRHYTHM Inc. & Yamaha Music Media Corporation's newly typeset edition of the Alkan Douze études dans les tons majeurs op.35. Many of us have waited a great many years for such an edition to appear, yet we are all too aware of how easy this music can be to misread, from a pianist's perspective, let alone that of an editor with the admirable ambition to decipher the original antiquated plates therefore modernising the text for a wider audience. Indeed, a great many pianists these days, it must be said, are less than desirous of suffering the intimidation engendered by such centuried texts as these, with their forbidding beige and blue covers upon which, for years, Billaudot insisted on committing the blinding error of printing:

*'Nouvelle édition revue par F[sic]. M. DELABORDE et I. PHILIPP'*

while we all know that Elie was, in fact, the first name of Alkan's alleged illegitimate son.

Furthermore, nothing in the score had been remotely altered since Brandus pressed the first issues back in 1847, save the final number of the set which, for reasons beyond my knowledge, is a reprint of a reprint sanctioned by Isidor Philipp, probably for inclusion in one of the latter's numerous *Méthodes* and includes the title *Etude de Concert / (Technique des Octaves)*.

At first glance, the new Yamaha Music Media Corporation's edition appears hugely promising. Firstly, both *suites* have been united in one single volume, the typeface is clearer and pleasing to the eye and the paper is of fine quality. Each *étude* is discussed in a detailed preface (in Japanese) by Yui Morishita which also outlines Alkan's life a little more than we are accustomed to seeing on the back covers of the Billaudot<sup>3</sup> edition. Interesting, however, that the editors correctly employed a hyphen between the composer's two first names when they transliterated it into *hiragana*, yet somehow forgot to do so when it came to the Latin alphabet.

I have, despite all the merits of this new edition, taken it upon myself to compile a rather extensive *errata* which also includes various editorial changes which I consider to be of significance. Some changes I have not listed, such as the repositioning of bracketing numbers and phrase markings above or below a certain group of notes. Other such changes which serve no particular editorial agenda, such as the modernisation of the archaic spelling of key signatures and crochet rests lest the innocent eye be led astray are not included either. The one minor thing which I have mentioned from time to time is the repositioning of articulation markings above or below octaves or chords. As Alkan's employment of such markings isn't always consistent, I believe they may, at times, possibly bear interpretive significance.

### ERRATA

#### No.1

b.14 (l.h.) top note of second chord is printed as E in the Yamaha edition, yet this makes nonsense harmonically. In the Billaudot, it appears to be E, but on close examination, it is clearly a D with an F sharp above which has been partially effaced over time

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<sup>3</sup> I am aware of the Bote & Bock edition but have chosen to make the comparison between Billaudot as it is more readily available and really considered a standard text considering everything else they have published in Alkan's catalogue.

b.63 (l.h.) accent printed *above* the chord in the Yamaha rather than *below* as in the Billaudot  
**No.3**

b.14 direction of *rf* given in the Yamaha rather than *rinf* in the Billaudot

b.30 direction of *espressivo* given in the Yamaha rather than *espressif* in the Billaudot

b.35 deletion of the direction *affannato* in the Yamaha

bb.50-53 (r.h.) direction of *ten* given over each second chord in the Yamaha rather than *tenu* in the Billaudot

b.75 (r.h.) second beat, second semiquaver: *sf* marking printed much earlier than chord in the Yamaha. In the Billaudot, this is also far from clear. The preceding chord in the left hand suffers similarly in the Billaudot, but not in the Yamaha

b.129 *fermata* marking placed above crochet rest in the Yamaha rather than between crochet and minim rests in the Billaudot

#### **No.4**

b.1 direction of *scintillante* positioned *below* treble line in the Yamaha rather than *above* in the Billaudot. This performance direction surely applies to the accompaniment, not the theme

bb. 7&8, 17&18, 41&44 and 47 second beats: *fp* marking is given in the Yamaha rather than *rfp* in the Billaudot

b.30 (l.h.) first beat, third semiquaver: this note is lacking the double stem in the Yamaha and is clearly a correction. cf. b.32

b.60 (r.h.) second beat, first semiquaver: *sf* marking is missing in the Yamaha

bb.100-105 (l.h.) minim octaves: accents printed *above* in the Yamaha rather than *below* in the Billaudot

b.115 (r.h.) second beat, third semiquaver: incorrectly reads B in the Yamaha rather than C in the Billaudot

b.135 (r.h.) first beat: addition of accent in the Yamaha which is missing in the Billaudot

b.156 (l.h.) fourth beat: dagger *staccato* marking still missing in the Yamaha as it is in the Billaudot

b.176 (l.h.) first beat, first semiquaver: incorrectly reads A in the Yamaha rather than G in the Billaudot

b.214 direction of *bien ensemble* printed horizontally in the Yamaha rather than vertically in the Billaudot

#### **No.5**

b.93 (r.h.) third beat: an impossible misreading of Alkan's fingering in the Yamaha edition. (1)-4-(5),3,2 / (1)-4\*-(5),3,2 appears above the second and third beats which should read (1)-4-(5),3,2 / (1)-2\*-(5),3,2 as it does in the Billaudot

#### **No.7**

bb.1-6 phrasing marks have been placed *above* the stems in the Yamaha rather than *below* in the Billaudot. This is probably in order to provide greater clarity

b.16 (-17) l.h. (-r.h.) second beat, last semiquaver: a tie has been added in the Yamaha between this note in the left hand and its enharmonic equivalent in the right hand which falls on the first beat of b.17. This does not appear in the Billaudot, though seems logical

b.80 (r.h.) first and second beats, third to sixth semiquavers: a misreading of Alkan's fingering in the Yamaha edition. 1,2,3,4 is what is given rather than 1,2,5,4 in the Billaudot. This confusion between 3 and 5 in nineteenth century typography is not uncommon as the number

three was so often printed with a flat rather than curved top, providing an easy stumbling block, especially after years of erosion suffered by the original plates of 1847

b.149 (r.h.) a misreading of Alkan's fingering in the descending *glissando* passage: It incorrectly reads 5 in the Yamaha rather than 3 which is given in the Billaudot. Though the confusion between 3 and 5 is understandable, how the 5<sup>th</sup> finger could ever be sensibly conceived in such a passage, I can scarcely imagine

b.198 (r.h.) first beat: lower voice incorrectly reads A flat in the Yamaha rather than B flat in the Billaudot

bb.213-214 (l.h.) tremolo figuration is printed in small print in the Yamaha while in the Billaudot in print uniform to the rest of the text. This change I find wholly inappropriate. Typography in small print in such instances suggests a notion of the conceptual, elsewhere, of the rhapsodic: realms rarely approached by Alkan. Note that small print is, in such a rare instance, used at the close of the following *étude*, no.8

### No.8

b.74 (r.h.) second and third beats: both *tenuto* and *staccato* markings are printed *below* the two quaver chords in the Yamaha rather than *above* in the Billaudot

a diminuendo hairpin is also absent from below the bass line

b.75 Alkan's knowledge of Italian genders is still yet to be corrected here

b.88 dynamic marking of *ppp* appears in larger print in the Yamaha rather than small print in the Billaudot, conforming to the notes to which it is applied

### No.9

b.24 this, and b.32 are the only two bars in this entire set of études where performance directions are printed in italics in the Billaudot; specifically, the words *staccatissimo* and *staccato*. I do not consider this as accidental. This distinction is not made in the Yamaha

b.32 the words *Trio-Canonic* are unhyphenated in the Yamaha while in the Billaudot they are hyphenated

b.43 (r.h.) second beat, third semiquaver: an unnecessary double sharp sign which appears in the Billaudot is absent in the Yamaha

b.44 (l.h.) *ditto*

b.48 (r.h.) second beat, second semiquaver and third beat, first semiquaver: unnecessary accidental of a double sharp sign lingers in the Yamaha as in the Billaudot, but is, oddly enough, corrected in the following bar where the left hand enters with the same notes an octave lower. Similar instances occur in bars 52 and 53

b.55 (r.h.) first beat, fourth semiquaver incorrectly reads A flat instead in the Yamaha rather than A natural in the Billaudot. The same figuration in the following bar played by the left hand and octave lower, however, correctly reads A natural in the Yamaha as in the Billaudot.

b.82 (l.h.) second beat, minim octave: accent appears *above* the note in the Yamaha rather than *below* in the Billaudot

b.116 (l.h.) incorrect engraving of Alkan's fingering in the Billaudot has been corrected in the Yamaha: 4-3,3-1,4-2,3-1 in the Billaudot has been corrected to 4-2, 3-1, 4-2, 3-1 in the Yamaha

### No.10

b.60 a *crescendo* hairpin is incorrectly given in the Yamaha rather than a *diminuendo* hairpin in the Billaudot

b.104 (r.h.) third beat: chord incorrectly reads G flat and B flat in the Yamaha rather than B flat and D flat in the Billaudot

b.137 (l.h.) second beat, third quaver reads E sharp in the Yamaha rather than C sharp in the Billaudot. This could possibly be a correction. cf. b.139

b.193 (r.h.) second beat: chord does not align with the left hand

bb.204-5 (l.h.) the slur is written *above* the two closing chords in the Yamaha rather than *below* in the Billaudot

### **No.11**

bb.112-128 (l.h.) all accents appear *above* each bass octave on the first beat of the bar in the Yamaha rather than *below* in the Billaudot

### **No.12**

performance direction of *Andante* given in the Yamaha rather than *Andando* in the Billaudot

b.42 (l.h.) first beat: the five semiquaver octaves lack beamings in the Yamaha

b.79 (r.h.) second beat, fourth semiquaver: octave incorrectly reads F sharp in the Yamaha rather than D sharp in the Billaudot

b.131 (r.h.) second beat, third semiquaver: lacks lower B to make it an octave in the Yamaha.

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Despite the many shortcomings of this new edition, I am still happy that this extraordinary music is being newly typeset and therefore, through reasons I outlined above, is opening its covers to a wider legion of pianists. But, until these errors are addressed at the next reprint, we must return to the original edition. It is, and remarkably so for a nineteenth century edition, practically spotless, probably because Alkan was such a vigilant proof-reader. Indeed, most of the first printed impressions of his music are eerily accurate. All that really need be done is for the original plates to be cleaned just as Lewenthal had Schirmer do back in 1964 when he published his edition of Alkan's music. What is more, Lewenthal also argued in his preface that

*'Some composers have a very characteristic appearance on the printed page – take Reger, Godowsky, Grainger. Alkan is another. It would be a pity to lose this through re-engraving'.<sup>4</sup>*

I also strongly feel this is the case, but not everyone else does, despite that fact that it can really be a sensationally evocative and revealing experience when one peruses the leaves of an edition which saw the light of day in which it was written, even if it is a reproduction. Editions boasting lustrous frontispieces, which teem with florid opulence and inner pages which intrigue the eye with archaic spellings and seemingly occult alignments of printed notes still never fail to charm and captivate. I have also long felt that not only can one almost tangibly bridge that elusive chasm between centuries through some kind of transient inspiration evoked when studying and playing from first or early editions, but just as importantly, one can learn a great deal from them too.

## **Charles-Valentin Alkan and British piano music of the 20th century and beyond**

### **Jonathan Powell**

Over the last century, impact of Alkan's music on British piano music has been immense. This paper firstly will show how Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji's (1892—1988) writings brought Alkan's name to the musical public, and the influence he had over opinion makers. Two of

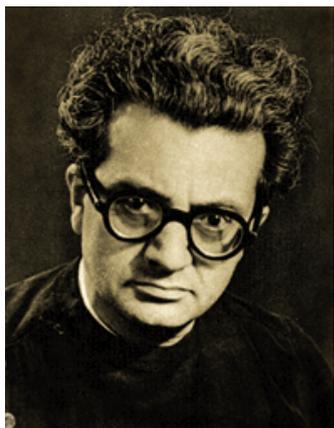
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<sup>4</sup> The Piano Music of Alkan edited and annotated by Raymond Lewenthal, G. Schirmer, Inc./New York (1964).

these – John Ireland and particularly Humphrey Searle – taught at the Royal College of Music in London, an institution that also played an important role in the propagation of Alkan's music. It was Searle who was instrumental in encouraging Ronald Smith to play Alkan's music.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the influence of Alkan's music on Sorabji's compositions is examined, as he is probably the first composer in the UK to have been influenced by Alkan. In the last part of the paper, I discuss the work of several living composers: John White, Dave Smith, Ronald Stevenson, Alistair Hinton and Michael Finnissy. Where possible, I chart how and when they first encountered Alkan's music, what impression it made, and how it influenced their own music, with specific works discussed when relevant.

### Sorabji's campaign for Alkan



Sorabji in 1945

Sorabji's name is eponymous with huge, transcendental piano works, most notably *Opus clavicembalisticum* (1930), the last work he published. Having received his musical education privately in the 1910s in London, he initially pursued careers as composer, music critic (until the 1940s) and, on rare occasions, pianist (until the mid-1930s). His music draws on varied influences including musical ones such as Alkan, Busoni, Reger, Szymanowski and Ravel, and others such as 13th-century Persian poetry, various aspects of the occult and supernatural, Tāntrik scripture and French Symbolism. Although he discouraged public performance of his music after the mid-1930s, he continued to compose prolifically until a few years short of his death.

Just as Sorabji was writing his first mature works, the first serious study of Alkan's music in the UK appeared: H. Bellamann's article 'The Piano Works of C.V. Alkan'<sup>6</sup> was published in 1924. A year later, Sorabji's review of a recital by Egon Petri suggests he had been familiar with Alkan's music for some time. It is possible that Sorabji was introduced to it by Bernard van Dieren (1887—1936), a Dutch-born composer who had studied with Busoni in 1908 before settling in London. Van Dieren later wrote about Alkan in his book *Down Among the Dead Men*, published in 1935,<sup>7</sup> and Sorabji may have met the older composer as early as 1916 through their mutual friendship with the composer Philip Heseltine. Moreover, it is equally plausible that Sorabji's worship of Busoni may have led him to explore Alkan's music. Petri, as a Busoni student playing Alkan's compositions in London, embodied a link between two key figures in Sorabji's pantheon, so this recital was clearly a very special event for the latter. Since Sorabji was the first UK critic to write at any length and with any regularity about Alkan, his reviews are worth quoting at length:

'With an admirable and lofty disdain for the hack recital programme and the prejudices of the newspaper critics, he gives us rare and unfamiliar, but splendid music. On 14 March his programme consisted of the op.109 Sonata of Beethoven, [...] the Schubert Fantasy in C, the complete Brahms Paganini Variations, a group of six preludes and four etudes of Alkan, and the *Indianisches Tagebuch* of Busoni. It was the first time one has had an opportunity of hearing a big group of Alkan played by an artist of the highest order, and one was made to realise the

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<sup>5</sup> In the 1940s Smith was first asked to record Alkan's Concerto for Solo Piano, having been first sent the score by Searle; when he first saw it he thought it "seemed unplayable" [see Ronald Smith: Obituary, *The Gramophone* (September 2004), p.12].

<sup>6</sup> Published in the *Musical Quarterly*, x (1924), pp.251–62.

<sup>7</sup> Pp.12 et seq.

very wonderful and powerful music that one more or less knew from the astonishing Concerto to lie buried, half-forgotten, or ignored in the work of this remarkable man, whose position among writers for the piano seems to me analogous to that of Berlioz as an orchestral composer – both of them deprecated by those who don't know their work, and misjudged by those who only know them by their inferior and, naturally, most played works. Original and individual in substance, expression, and technique, not the least remarkable about them is that they owe little or nothing to that other misunderstood and misjudged genius Franz Liszt. One would like now to hear the *Symphonie* for piano from Mr Petri sometime.<sup>8</sup>

Petri showed interest in performing Sorabji's *Opus clavicembalisticum* but in the end admitted that his concert schedule precluded serious study of such a large work. Sorabji dedicated to Petri what he thought was one of his best works: the seven-hour *Sequentia cyclica super Dies Irae* (completed 1949, and first performed by this author in 2010).

References, always positive, to Alkan appear in Sorabji's journalism over the next four decades. Sorabji scholar Marc-André Roberge has pointed out, in reference to the former's writings on Busoni, that Sorabji 'had no need for objectivity, because he was championing the cause of a composer whose music was then hardly known';<sup>9</sup> it hardly needs pointing out that until at least the 1970s Alkan's music was even more obscure than Busoni's. Only three years after the Petri review Sorabji was addressing – in a letter to the Editor of *The Musical Times* – 'the multitudinous ignorant ones who sniff when Reger, Mahler, and that earlier and very great genius Alkan, are mentioned (no, Sirs; *Le Vent* is *not* the only composition he wrote – it may be and probably is the only one of which you have heard, which is a different matter) one must point out that to affect and disregard two composers who are generally recognised as being big figures in music in lands like Holland, Germany and Austria, is rather silly'.<sup>10</sup>

Petri was responsible for another milestone in Alkan's rediscovery with a series of four recitals in early 1937. For Sorabji, this was 'a musical event of major, indeed unparalleled[,] importance, for never, in our times at least, will it have been possible to hear a large and representative cross-section of the creative work of one of the most original, fascinating and powerful minds that has ever expressed itself by means of musical sound [...]'. He goes on to muse on the nature of Alkan's style:

'It is a manner of writing for the keyboard that may best be termed a sort of pianistic orchestration, it is orchestration *in terms of the piano*. [...] And when all these fearsome demands are met, there is still the music to be considered, with its Beethoven-like quirks and twists that are yet not at all Beethovenian, the Berlioz-like audacity of imagination, the magnificent harmonic resource, the modulatory subtlety, the melodic individuality, and behind all that, or rather through it all, the immense dynamic mental force of the creator. [...] One thing in particular struck me as never before in listening to the Symphony – I have not looked at it for many years – was to observe the extent to which no less an one than Busoni himself has been influenced both at times in keyboard layout (especially in his Concerto) and harmonically by his great predecessor. There are several foreshadowings in Alkan of those extraordinary effects of shifting lights that Busoni knows so wonderfully to produce with his subtle oscillation of major and minor combined tonalities.'<sup>11</sup>

Over the following decades Sorabji continued to stress the importance he and others placed on Alkan and his position in the canon of composer-pianists: in his obituary of Rachmaninoff,

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<sup>8</sup> Review of recital by Egon Petri, 2 April 1925, *The New Age*.

<sup>9</sup> Roberge, p.95.

<sup>10</sup> Letter to the Editor, *The Musical Times*, 1 February 1928.

<sup>11</sup> *The New Age*, 27 January 1937.

Sorabji felt that ‘with his [i.e. Rachmaninoff’s] death there seems, for the time, an end to the illustrious tradition of the great virtuoso-great composer duality that has persisted from the time of the Scarlattis, Couperin, and later, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Alkan, Busoni down to Rachmaninoff himself’.<sup>12</sup> Never afraid to nail his colours to the mast, Sorabji proclaimed in 1954 – still years before the main Alkan revival had got underway – that ‘I’m a fanatical Mahlerite, Regerite, Alkanite, Busoni-ite and have been for 20 years before it became the fashion’.<sup>13</sup> His last known mention of Alkan in print comes in 1965, by which time the composer’s name was beginning to become known, in another letter to the Editor of the *Musical Times*: ‘Mr Frank Dawes says it’s time to take Alkan seriously. He always HAS been taken seriously by a few people who matter; here are a few of them: the Paris Conservatoire, Liszt, Rubinstein, von Bülow, van Dieren, Busoni, Egon Petri. The last thing one wants for this great Master is that he should become “the done thing” like Mahler and Bruckner, killed by kindness as they are like to be [...]’.<sup>14</sup>

*Around Music* is a collection of Sorabji’s essays on various subjects, and chapter 31 is devoted to Alkan. In it we can find indications of which particular aspects of Alkan’s music fascinated Sorabji and which, in turn, informed some of his own works. Published in 1932, it is probably the second short study of Alkan’s music to be published in English, following Bellmann’s above-mentioned article by nearly a decade. After introductory remarks on Alkan’s ‘volcanic personal force, [...] towering and macabre imagination, [...] utter unconventionality and prodigious daring of method, [...] and] complete disregard for what one may call the conversational amiabilities of music’<sup>15</sup>, Sorabji addresses a number of works. ‘Mort’, the last of the *Trois morceaux* op.15, is described as a ‘moving elegy or dirge, making remarkable use of the *Dies iræ*, that stupendous theme that has ever haunted and fascinated so many of the great masters of music [...] its ending is as weirdly uncanny as it is original and daring’. Further clues to Sorabji’s attraction to Alkan’s music are found in his use of words such as ‘grotesque, caricatural and mocking’ (about the *Capriccio alla soldatesca* op.50); ‘vehement, droll, odd, gargoyle-like, child-like and naïve in turns’ (regarding the *Sonatina*); and ‘dour, harsh, heavy brutality’ (of *En rythme molossique* op.39 no.2). In summation, he compares Alkan to both Berlioz and Busoni, reminding the reader of their shared ‘preoccupation with the sinister, the macabre, the uncanny, the just-below-the-surface side of things that most people find so repellent and prefer either to ignore or deny – the same suggestions of Black Magic – devilry, sardonic, leering gargoyles that may come to life at any moment, masks of satyrs that may suddenly burst into cackling laughter as soon as your back is turned [...]’.<sup>16</sup> This dark element of Alkan’s music clearly held great fascination for Sorabji, and he refers to it in other contexts, comparing it to aspects of Musorgsky’s *Night on a Bald Mountain* (‘a fine specimen of that genre of diablerie in which Berlioz excelled, and later still, Alkan’<sup>17</sup> and Liszt’s *Malédiction*, where the composer ‘touches hands with Berlioz, Alkan and other rare masters of the fantastic, the macabre, and the eldritch’<sup>18</sup>).

Sorabji was also responsible for drawing the attention of other influential writers to Alkan. In his book on Liszt – surely one of the most remarkable on a composer ever written by a non-musician – Sacheverell Sitwell devotes the first of its appendices to a few paragraphs on Alkan

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<sup>12</sup> *The New English Weekly*, 22 April 1943.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to the Editor, *The Musical Times*, 1 February 1954.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to the Editor, *The Musical Times*, 1 October 1965.

<sup>15</sup> K.S. Sorabji: *Around Music* (London, 1932), p.213.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>17</sup> *The New Age*, 1 August 1935

<sup>18</sup> *The New Age*, 28 November 1935

in which he overtly draws on Sorabji's *Around Music* chapter on him; Sitwell's book was first published in 1934, just two years after *Around Music*. Sorabji's friendship with Sitwell was the longest in his life, lasting from around 1917 until Sitwell's death just a fortnight before Sorabji's own in 1988; it was almost certainly Sorabji who first drew Sitwell's attention to the music of Alkan.<sup>19</sup> Through his friendship with John Ireland, William Walton and others Sorabji helped put Alkan's name on the musical map of London and beyond, starting in the 1920s. It would be the pupils of these composers who initiated the Alkan revival in the UK. Humphrey Searle, for example, studied with John Ireland at the Royal College of Music in London, before going to Vienna to be a private pupil of Webern. He published an article on Alkan in 1937<sup>20</sup> and during the 1940s encouraged the pianist Ronald Smith to record some of his works. Also an early supporter of Sorabji, Searle taught both Alistair Hinton and Michael Finnissy during the 1960s at the Royal College.<sup>21</sup>

### Alkan and Sorabji: the Music

It is tempting to draw many analogies between the lives and characters of Sorabji and Alkan, reflected both in their life choices and the music they wrote. Both were members of ethnic minorities within their own countries; both are known to have been highly reclusive, despite early careers as virtuoso performers which they later abandoned (and sporadically resurrected, in Alkan's case). As young composers, they were astride and even epitomised contemporary trends, but grew to be dismissive of them, the early Alkan being very much representative of the glamorous Parisian world of the 1830s of Herz, Liszt and others, while Sorabji was a keen follower of the new music of the 1910s and 20s.

From a musical perspective, too, they have much in common: their works often demand unrelenting virtuosity, while the great length (and, in contrast, extreme brevity) of many of their pieces are coupled with their frequent use of unusual pianistic sonorities and unconventional physical aspects of playing. Both were also uncompromising regarding performers' stamina. Hugh Macdonald's description, here, of Alkan, could largely be applied to Sorabji with ease: 'his titles are obscure and elliptical, often with a satanic or mocking tone. He revelled in Faustian ideas yet at other times assumed a childish, domestic simplicity. Military motifs and quasi-religious tones [...] are also common. Superscriptions and instructions abound'.<sup>22</sup> The diabolic informed both composer's works: both penned *scherzi diabolichi*,<sup>23</sup> while a dark undercurrent informs many of Sorabji's pieces, particularly the two pieces after M.R. James, *Opus archimagicum* and, presumably, his abandoned plans for a *Black Mass*. Furthermore, a mocking element upon which several commentators have remarked in Alkan's oeuvre is also found in many of Sorabji's pieces, most obviously in the [\*Variazione maliziosa e perversa sopra La Morte d'Åse da Grieg \(1974\)\*](#).

Numerous other issues related to technique and choice of genres link the two composers. Both are fond of inordinately extended pedal notes; Alkan's statement of the *Dies irae* theme in

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<sup>19</sup> The author is indebted to Alistair Hinton, friend of Sorabji during the last 16 years of the composer's life, for this and other information.

<sup>20</sup> H. Searle: 'A Plea for Alkan', *Music and Letters*, xviii (1937), pp.276–9.

<sup>21</sup> Hinton recalls that 'it was not until the beginning of my studies with Searle that I had opportunities to try out Alkan's works. Initially, I found the appearance of some of them rather forbidding, but as soon as I tried to play through them I discovered for myself so uniquely individual and powerful a voice in 19th-century piano music that I wondered why his work was receiving such scant attention. As Searle was quick to point out, however, Alkan's time was already coming and he encouraged me to attend such performances as I could, just as Rubbra had encouraged *him* decades earlier to listen, whenever possible, to Sorabji'. Email to author, 13.11.2013.

<sup>22</sup> H. Macdonald: 'Alkan', *Revised New Grove Dictionary of Music* (London, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> Alkan's etude op.39 no.3, and the last movement of Sorabji's *Concerto per suonare da me solo* (1946).

‘Mort’, op.15 no.3 over a I-V pedal, remarked upon by Sorabji, was no doubt in the latter’s mind when he laid out the theme for not only the early *Variazioni e fuga triplice sopra Dies iræ per pianoforte* (1923—26), but also for its successor the *Sequentia cyclica*. Further examples can be found in the development section of the first movement of Alkan’s Concerto for solo piano, and in the third section – ‘Punto d’organo-cadenza’ – of Sorabji’s *Rosario d’arabeschi* (1956, dedicated to Sacheverell Sitwell). The latter work proceeds with a lively *tarantella*,<sup>24</sup> and this – or rather its cousin, the *saltarello* – is a dance form found several times in Alkan’s oeuvre, perhaps most notably as the highly-fuelled finale of the *Grande sonate de concert* for ’cello and piano. Another more unusual dance form, the *zorzo*, is found in both composers’ works: Sorabji’s use of the genre in the central part of the second section of his *Fantasia ispanica* (1933) seems to be clearly modelled on a section of Alkan’s *Réconciliation* op.45. Both composers also took delight in paying homage to and, to some extent, parodying, 18th-century forms such as the minuet;<sup>25</sup> the funeral march, unsurprisingly, also found favour with both, prompting amongst their most striking products of their imaginations.

For the most part, the style of writing of either composer could not be described as economical. But there are certainly occasions when both men seem to delight in making a very small amount of material go a very long way, filling entire works (or significant sections of larger pieces) with repetitions and variations of just one figuration. Many of Alkan’s miniatures and Sorabji’s *100 Transcendental Studies* are conceived along such obsessive lines. An instruction that frequently accompanies such writing in both cases is *senza alcuna licenza* or some variation thereof,<sup>26</sup> thus linking a compositional outcome with Alkan’s own adherence to the *style sévère* of early 19th-century French pianism. As Roberge has pointed out, in general, ‘taking his lead from Alkan and Skryabin, Sorabji was a most expressive [i.e. communicative] composer, and his indications to the performer are a delight to the readers of his scores’.<sup>27</sup>

Given Sorabji’s obvious enthusiasm for Petri’s 1937 performance of Alkan’s *Symphonie pour piano seul*, it comes as little surprise that he should have set out on his path as composer of piano symphonies just one year later. Sorabji had written what turned out to be in effect a symphony for solo piano during 1930—31, by composing the piano part of a work that seems to have been intended for piano, orchestra, organ, chorus and solo voices. In any event, he wrote only the piano part and later declared that it could in fact be performed in its own right (and as such is now referred to as ‘no.0’). Eight years elapsed before Sorabji embarked on his ‘Tāntrik’ Symphony for piano solo (completed 1939), the first of six such essays in massive construction, kaleidoscopic colours and moods, almost preternatural stamina and volcanic virtuosity. All except one (no.3, of 1959—60) are multi-sectioned: some are divided into parts, which are then further subdivided into movements. Of the seven, the last three have received public performance over the past decade. Sorabji was occupied with the composition of these works, on and off, for nearly five decades.

Before he had probably even contemplated providing the ‘Tāntrik’ with a successor, Sorabji produced an offspring of the other giant of Alkan’s op.39, the Concerto for solo piano, completing his *Concerto da suonare da me solo* in 1946. A work of similar proportions to Alkan’s, it is similarly demanding for the performer – but while Alkan provided clear indications as to which he imagined as ‘solo’ and ‘tutti’ parts consistently throughout his work, any such remarks from Sorabji peter out after the first few pages. Certain similarities of

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<sup>24</sup> Sorabji’s *Passeggiata veneziana* (1955—56) also contains a tarantella.

<sup>25</sup> In Alkan’s *Symphonie* op.39 no.6, and Sorabji’s *Un nido di scatole* (1954).

<sup>26</sup> The former is a favourite of Sorabji’s, while Alkan’s *Le Festin d’Esopo* is marked ‘senza licenza quantunque’.

<sup>27</sup> Roberge: *Opus sorabjianum*, p.15

205

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a piano solo. Each system consists of three staves: a top staff with a treble clef, a middle staff with a treble clef, and a bottom staff with a bass clef. The notation is highly complex, featuring numerous triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings. The first system begins with a *pp* (pianissimo) marking. The second system includes a *loco* marking. The third system also includes a *loco* marking. The music is written in a key signature of one flat and a 3/4 time signature. The page number '205' is located in the upper right corner of the first system.

*From Sorabji's 'Quasi-Alkan' (fourth movement of the Symphony no. 6 for piano solo, 1974-6).  
© Sorabji Archive (music): Jonathan Powell and Alexander Abercrombie (edition)*

treatment can be found in both compositions: ‘tutti’ passages often employ diatonic chordal writing in both hands, often moving consecutively, while others simulate orchestral sonority by using many registers of the instrument simultaneously. While Sorabji’s ‘solo’ writing is sometimes parodic of Romantic archetypes, both composers reserve highly sinuous, florid lines for the soloist. Sorabji considered his one of his most successful works, and is reported to have said that he would play it to someone as an introduction to his music.

Five more piano symphonies followed over the next three decades, and in the last Sorabji made a direct act of homage to the inventor of the genre. ‘Quasi-Alkan’ is the title of the fourth movement (and the concluding section of the *parte seconda*) of Symphony no.6 for solo piano (written 1975—76) and first performed by this author in October 2013. Its opening is concentrated, dry and severe (all qualities immediately associated with the object of the homage), and it is easy to see a link to the opening of Alkan’s *Ouverture* op.39 no.11 with their repeated semiquaver chords. The movement is as unpredictable as it is difficult to play: at only 15 minutes in length it occupies less than five percent of the overall duration of the symphony (at some four hours and fifty minutes or so) and yet it contains the work’s most quixotic moments. The stark opening gradually expands over the entire keyboard before the texture is interrupted by cackling interjections and (unusually for this piece) diatonic sequential material. A fantasia section leads to an *adagio triste*, highly pared down, almost naïve at times then developing into a fantastic web of chordal textures. The opening brutally and demonically resurges for a brisk conclusion. In 1979 Sorabji became one of the (honorary) vice-presidents of the Alkan Society in recognition of his early championship.<sup>1</sup>

### Later generations: White, Smith, Stevenson, Hinton and Finnissy

Although Sorabji began to distance himself from mainstream musical life in the country during the 1930s, with his writings on Alkan, his critical support of those performing his work, and his spreading the word to other musicians and members of the cultural elite, he set in motion a process of growth of interest in and acceptance of Alkan’s music. As a result, amongst composers active in the UK in his own century and beyond, Sorabji turns out to be far from anomalous in being deeply affected and influenced by Alkan’s music. He is the first of many British composers<sup>2</sup> who have looked to Alkan’s (and also, perhaps unsurprisingly, Busoni’s) examples of startling pianistic imagination.



John White

Although not the eldest of these, John White, born in Berlin in 1936 but brought up and living in London ever since, provides what is chronologically the next example (after Sorabji) of a work directly related to Alkan. In the mid-1950s while a student at the Royal College of Music (where he studied composition with Bernard Stevens, and piano with the Medtner student Arthur Alexander) White was shown Alkan’s music by a colleague. Initially inspired to start composing as a teenager when he heard Messiaen’s *Turangalîla-Symphonie*, White’s first works were written in the mid-1950s and indicate his interest in

<sup>1</sup> ‘News Items’, *Alkan Society Bulletin*, 1 January 1979: 2.

<sup>2</sup> Sorabji abhorred being called a British composer, but with an English mother and having lived and worked in the country all his life, he must surely be counted as one. His father was an Indian Parsi from Mumbai.

advanced modal harmony.<sup>3</sup> White even briefly shared a publisher with Messiaen in the 1960. Other influences, including Satie, Medtner, Bruckner, Poulenc, Busoni, Reger, Scriabin, Jazz and popular music soon manifested themselves to congeal into a tantalisingly uncategorisable voice. Alkan appealed for his ‘exposition of mysterious order’<sup>4</sup> and his influence is detectable certainly as early as 1961, when White wrote his *Sonatina* no.8. This a gargantuan, technically demanding work, and contains within it a five-movement ‘Symphony in memory of Ch.V. Morhange’. Subsequent works (and in particular many of the 180+ piano sonatas) also reference Alkan in diverse ways. *Sonata* no.152 (2006) is subtitled ‘Concerto for Solo Piano’, and is dedicated to this author. Although miniature in comparison to Alkan’s work of the same name, in its three-minute duration White plays upon different archetypes of soloistic and *tutti* material, allowing the performer great scope for tonal variation between the two. Diatonic harmonies and repeated chord textures, familiar from the Alkan and Sorabji works, dominate the first type, while dogged *staccato* figuration provides contrast in the second. In the late 1960s, White was one of many non-conformist composers – including Cornelius Cardew, Michael Nyman, Howard Skempton, Gavin Bryars,<sup>5</sup> and others – to be later described as British Experimentalists, several of whom have displayed great interest in Alkan. Starting from this period White produced remarkable examples of systems music and was involved in many other experimental endeavours.<sup>6</sup>

Another composer linked to this experimental group, and a fellow-member of Cardew’s Scratch Orchestra in the early 1970s, is Dave Smith (b.1949). A pianist himself, he has been fascinated with Alkan’s music since his supervisor Philip Radcliffe played him the *Barcarolle* op.65 no.6 when a student at Cambridge University in the late 1960s. Smith ‘filed it [the experience] away for future reference but did nothing about it until John Lewis brought round the Ronald Smith recording of the Concerto in late 1971. He accidentally left it at my place for a week and I played it often!’<sup>7</sup> This work particularly impressed Smith, with Alkan’s ‘successful handling of a large amount of repetition (beyond what is/was considered decent), the bass lines in octaves, the tunes, a particularly strong element of contradiction encouraged by obsession and perversion within an apparently well-behaved exterior: Beethoven was the only other pre-1880 example familiar at that time’.<sup>8</sup> It was these elements<sup>9</sup> that were to have particular and noticeable impact on Smith’s own compositions, many of which are grouped into a series of ‘piano concerts’ each typically occupying a recital programme.

Several of Smith’s works are informed by Alkan’s music, and the most substantial of these is *Al contrario*, one of five études that comprise the Third Piano Concert (1983—92). In direct allusion to Alkan’s mighty op.39 no.8, *Al contrario* is subtitled ‘Etude in G sharp minor’ and the composer describes it as ‘an extended contrapuntal fantasy in memory of Alkan’.<sup>10</sup> The title means ‘on the contrary’ in Spanish and, as well as being a pun on Alkan’s name, refers to the

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<sup>3</sup> Particularly evident in the first two piano sonatas, of 1956 and 1957. The former impressed critic Felix Arahamian who facilitated its publication by Alphonse Leduc (1961).

<sup>4</sup> See D. Smith: ‘The piano sonatas of John White’, *Contact*, no. 21 (Autumn 1980), pp. 4-11.

<sup>5</sup> Bryars (b. 1943) has been interested in Sorabji’s music since the 1970s.

<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he is one of Britain’s most prolific composers for the theatre, having written cues for plays since the 1950s; he has since worked in the National Theatre.

<sup>7</sup> Email to the author, 17.11.2013.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> And the fact that many of Alkan’s pieces are amenable to arrangement for percussion ensemble, something he found useful while teaching at De Monfort University in the 1980s and 90s.

<sup>10</sup> D. Smith: Programme notes for *Al contrario*, concert by author, 10 May 2013 (in a programme also featuring Alkan’s *Etude* op.39 no.8).

contrary, unexpected nature of a lot of his music. It is an adagio of some 30 minutes' duration. 'Much of the counterpoint', according to Smith, 'is based on motifs from Alkan's dooier excursions into the rarely used key of G sharp minor, in particular *Morituri te salutant* op.63 no.1 and the last movement of the *Grande sonate* op.33'.<sup>11</sup> There's also a reference to *Les Diablotins* (also in G sharp minor) at one point, and sequences which go up a semitone (as in the first movement of solo concerto). The final chord is the same as that which concludes *Opus clavicembalisticum* by Sorabji who, as noted above, was the Honorary President of the Alkan Society at the time of composition of *Al contrario*.<sup>12</sup> Smith also obliquely refers to Shostakovich with its use of the DSCH motif,<sup>13</sup> this group of pitches also predetermine much of the octatonic harmonic character of the canonic sections. Frank Martin is also invoked: Smith admits that 'I do rip off some cadences, e.g., on the first page, from Martin (can't remember if it's the *Trombone Ballade* or *Petite symphonie concertante*) who is apt to use the same motif'.<sup>14</sup>

In general Smith's work, according to broadcaster and pianist Sarah Walker, is 'chock-full of references, but still has that elusive quality that makes you wonder "how does he do it?" and "where does it come from?"' The raw material provides only half the answer – the rest is that X factor, which perhaps has something to do with a brilliant ear, a wide-ranging imagination and an instinctive feel for structure (so that one phrase follows the next with total rightness yet unpredictability, and at the end of the piece the listener has an indisputable sense of closure).<sup>15</sup> Smith feels that several other works of his have an Alkan connection: on 1 December 2012 he gave a

concert entitled *Music for Yesterday's Alkan Birthday* which apart from *Al contrario* included *On the Virtues of Forests* [...], *Inter alia* and *Żytnia* [...], the idea being to include pieces I felt had an Alkan connection. Quite what the connections are I've never consciously analysed, especially as *Inter alia* and *Forests* were written in a bit of a hurry: possibly others may feel that *Al contrario* (despite the Alkan material) is a collision of Busoni + Experimental and *Żytnia* is a collision of Szymanowski + Experimental. At least Phil Howard, who's played *Inter alia*, agreed there was a load of Alkan there. Trouble is that if one writes something rather quickly without too much pre-conception, then one can feel unable to comment sensibly.<sup>16</sup>

Ronald Stevenson (b. 1928) is perhaps best known for his 80-minute *Passacaglia on DSCH* (1960—62); he is also the author of orchestral, chamber and vocal works. He is a redoubtable pianist with works by Alkan and Sorabji in his repertoire, and is the dedicatee of the latter's *Villa Tasca* (1979, first performed by this author). His most recent completed major work is the three movement *Le Festin d'Alkan* (1988—97). Its subtitle 'petit concert' naturally alludes to the *petits concerts* Alkan gave in the Salle Érard towards the end of his life. The first movement is entitled 'Concerto for solo piano without orchestra'; like Alkan (as well as Sorabji, White and Finnissy), Stevenson actively distinguishes between solo and *tutti* material. Notwithstanding the pianistic demands of the *Passacaglia*, one passage of this movement contains according to one commentator 'the most difficult piano music in the entire Stevenson canon – one passage in particular, lasting about two minutes, exhausting the composer to such

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> This tonality is also nodal within Sorabji's *Toccata no.1* (premiered by this author) which also closes therewith.

<sup>13</sup> This choice of pitches is symbolic of the work's dedication to composer Chris Hobbs (Dave Smith to Chris Hobbs). Hobbs (b. 1950) is another Scratch Orchestra veteran, and a composer with significant interest in Alkan.

<sup>14</sup> Email to author, 23 November 2013.

<sup>15</sup> S. Walker: 'Piano music by Dave Smith', <http://www.drSarahWalker.co.uk/page6.htm> [accessed 21.11.2013].

<sup>16</sup> Email to author, 18 November 2013.

an extent as to prevent further performance [by him]<sup>17</sup>. While this movement is indirectly and conceptually informed by Alkan's thinking, the second movement refers to his music directly, being a free transcription of Alkan's *Barcarolle* op.65 no.6,<sup>18</sup> from the third collection of *Chants*. Stevenson treats the material canonically and then, in the second of two trio sections, quotes material by Paganini, thus forging a link between the two figures Finnissy would unite in his eponymous 1997 work discussed below. The last movement contains several quotations from Alkan: the opening theme of the first movement of the solo Concerto is used as the subject of a fughetta, while the melody of the prelude op.25 no.8 'Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer'<sup>19</sup> appears frequently; only in this movement does Stevenson use the theme of *Le Festin d'Esope*. Like Sorabji, Alkan and Finnissy (see below), Stevenson has been much occupied by the process of transcription, and his essays in this genre refer to music as varied as African folksong and Berg's *Wozzeck*. *Le Festin d'Alkan* 'embodies the composer's conviction that there is no fundamental difference between [...] original composition, free transcription and free variation'.

Like Stevenson, Alistair Hinton (b.1950) is Scots and it's possible to view both their work as outgrowths of 19th- and early 20th-century composer-pianists such as Alkan, Godowsky and Busoni. Hinton studied with Searle at the Royal College of Music,<sup>20</sup> and while still in his early 20s he befriended Sorabji and was instrumental in persuading the latter to sanction public performance of his work. Hinton has written a substantial body of piano music, including free transcriptions, and works based on other composers' material.<sup>21</sup> Much of his work is highly contrapuntal but has a harmonic clarity that lends the overall texture distinctive brightness. He recalls that 'I was but dimly conscious of Alkan and his work before attending Royal College of Music in September 1969. None of his music had featured regularly in performances or broadcasts in those days and there were no recordings of which I was aware'. Hinton's own 'overt tribute to Alkan does not seek to draw together aspects of Alkan's writing by means of quotation' and is a section of the finale of his Piano Sonata no.5 (1994—95) marked *Alkanique*.<sup>22</sup> Hinton, like others, remarks on 'the sense of obsessiveness that permeates certain of Alkan's works; it is perhaps no surprise, then, that taking things to extremes is a notable feature of some of his music'. The *Alkanique* section consists of 'simply textured music in 4/1

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<sup>17</sup> A. Orga: 'The piano music', in *Ronald Stevenson, the Man and the Music: a Symposium*, ed. C. Scott-Sutherland (London, 2005), p.123.

<sup>18</sup> Memorably and aptly described by Ronald Smith as 'the piece of Mendelssohn that Gerswhin forgot to write'; R. Smith: *Alkan*, vol.2 (London, 1987), p.61.

<sup>19</sup> Erroneously called 'Chanson de la folle au bord de la plage' in Scott-Sutherland, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> See fn.13.

<sup>21</sup> The *Cabaraphrase* op.14 (1978) is a concert paraphrase from the musical play/film *Cabaret* by John Kander; *A Birthday Paraphrase for Ronald Stevenson* op.20 (1980) is a Godowskian meditation on the second movement of Schumann's G minor sonata op.22. There are several other examples including two works based on Rachmaninoff songs.

<sup>22</sup> It was Hinton who suggested to Marc-André Hamelin (b.1961 in Canada, now resident in the US therefore technically outside the scope of this study) the idea of writing an étude combining this material with op.76 no.3, in the wake of writing for Hamelin his *Étude en forme de Chopin* which likewise combines material from the three Chopin études in A minor. Hinton explains that 'at the time that I did this (1993), I had yet to write my PS5 (1994—5)! I did not see the outcome of M-AH's study no. 4 until a long while after completing my PS5, so, in a way, it was perhaps in part a recollection of my having made that suggestion to M-AH that set off the idea of its *Alkanique* section which [...] never directly quotes Alkan' [email to author 24 November 2013]. Possibly due to performing commitments, Hamelin is – so far – largely a composer of light-weight (though technically demanding) miniatures that scarcely acknowledge any musical developments post 1925. This étude is the fourth of 12 brought together under the collective title *Douze études dans les tons mineurs*, written over almost a quarter century (1986—2009). Also exploiting material based on the finale of Alkan's *Symphonie*, it is entitled *Étude a mouvement perpetuelle semblable (d'après Alkan)*.

time marked *Aussi vite que possible – spietatamente* and carries the improbable metronome mark  $o = 96$ .<sup>23</sup> After a ‘valiant effort to achieve the impossible, *Alkanique* ends – or rather just stops – in the only way that it could, by an explosive breach of the sound barrier straight into another return to the ideas of the movement’s first main section’. The remaining 11 pages of the work that follow ‘are characterised by unyielding energy, urgency and momentum’.<sup>24</sup>

If Stevenson and Hinton represent a relatively traditional approach to the piano, in contrast, Michael Finnissy (b.1946) is one of the most daring and provocative composer-pianists of our time. He has paid tribute to a wide range of composers, many of whose names function as (or in) titles: these range from the *Ives-Grainger-Nancarrow* trilogy of the 1970s to more recent pieces such as *Mit Arnold Schönberg* (2002) and *Scriabin in Itself* (2007, first performed by this author). These pieces are distinct from but linked to his many transcriptions, some of which are close to the originals (such as the *Gershwin Arrangements*) and others not (including many of the 36 *Verdi Transcriptions*, first performed also by this author). It can be fairly said that like Stevenson, Hinton, Sorabji and Alkan, Finnissy regards transcription, quotation, variation and free composition as all part of a single continuum. However, unlike them, he will sometimes abstract and deconstruct material to an extent that the contours of, say, a Verdi aria are reconfigured as a series of wild clusters;<sup>25</sup> equally, he may transcribe material by reassembling the pitch material of a third work.<sup>26</sup>

Finnissy ‘first found Alkan’s music in either United Music Publishers showroom/shop in Montague Street near the British Museum, or in Holleyman and Treachers in Brighton’.<sup>27</sup> Humphrey Searle again seems instrumental in encouraging discussion of the composer: he and Finnissy ‘started talking about [Alkan’s music] in a tutorial (so I would have been 19 or 20 – 1965 or 66) because I had come across the name and thought from descriptions of the music (dark, transcendently difficult, even Satanic) that it sounded fascinating (similar fascination with Sorabji at around the same time). It lived up to its promise, in fact was BETTER music than I could have hoped. I have quite a large collection, and I continue to play it a lot simply for myself – its mixture of Bach and Baudelaire continues to haunt my own frequent appropriations from it’. He remembers being particularly impressed by the 25 *Préludes* and the *Recueils de Chants*, describing them as ‘weighty, mysterious, exotic, sometimes lean and sleek, sometimes intricate, beautifully sculpted, larger works that had somehow imploded’.

Alkan’s work very obviously informs Finnissy’s two concerti for solo piano<sup>28</sup> and Alkan/Paganini, a movement from the epic *The History of Photography in Sound*. Finnissy, furthermore, states that Alkan’s “‘historicism”, his interest in an earlier “classicism” (transcriptions and performances of Bach, of Mozart, of Beethoven), perhaps something of his impact on Busoni, something about the gothic, esoteric sensibility of the music – all percolate in various ways through into a great deal (not only piano music) of what I have written’. As well as writing a few vast pieces (or collections of pieces), Finnissy is also the author of a huge number of shorter piano works which, although ‘not gathered [them] into “recueils” [as Alkan did with his *Chants*] are similarly poised between the picturesque and abstract addressing of a

<sup>23</sup> As does the finale of Alkan’s *Symphonie*, op.39 no.7.

<sup>24</sup> The *Alkanique* section’s 20 pages are all over in less than 5 minutes; the sonata as a whole occupies around an hour. All quotes, email to author, 13.11.2013.

<sup>25</sup> As in the sixth Verdi Transcription: ‘Tace il vento, è queta l’onda’ (*I Due Foscari*, Act 3).

<sup>26</sup> Transcription no.8 ‘Il pianto ... l’angoscia ... di lena mi priva’ (*Alzira*, act 2), reworks the first piece of Busoni’s *Indianisches Tagebuch I*, even down to retaining its marking *allegro affetuoso, un poco agitato*.

<sup>27</sup> Email to author, 18 November 2013.

<sup>28</sup> These are numbers four and six of his seven concerti that employ chamber ensembles and orchestras in addition to the two solo works. All were written between 1975 and 1981.

particular compositional/technical issue. I also have an early set of diverse instrumental pieces called *Songs*, which although I have claimed that their direct forebears were the films of Stan Brakhage, might have been blessed by the presence of Alkan's *Chants*. There is a much more recent miniature string quartet (*Mad Men in the Sand*) which alludes to Alkan's String Quartet fragment'.<sup>29</sup>

While one can feel sure, from reading the above remarks, that Alkan's music has certainly informed Finnissey work, the latter is 'not entirely sure [...] just HOW Alkan's music "relates" to the concerti and *Alkan/Paganini*. In the case of the concerto-format, Alkan is the main template (and I do know, but derived less from Schumann Op.14, and the Italian Concerto and other concerto-transcriptions for keyboard by Bach), and its "over the top" piano writing provides the most obvious model (particularly for no.4)'.<sup>30</sup> This latter work is possibly the most demanding and outrageous work Finnissey has written,<sup>31</sup> the extreme physicality required of the pianist does not let up for its 20-minute duration. As in Alkan's Concerto, sections are discretely labelled solo and *tutti*; the former sections seem consciously designed to coerce the performer into ever increasing perils. This type of writing seems to stem directly from what Finnissey feels about Alkan's treatment of the piano: his 'exploration of keyboard textures and "acrobatics" is more obvious, knowing, and more extreme, than Chopin, and more introverted, more cogently written and even darkly profound than [he finds] Liszt'.

One work that pays very direct homage to Alkan is *Alkan/Paganini*, the fifth movement of Finnissey's *The History of Photography in Sound*, a cycle of pieces that lasts some five and a half hours. According to Ian Pace, 'through the course of its eleven chapters, the work employs (often hidden) sources from across the Western classical tradition (in particular music of Bach, Beethoven, Paganini, Berlioz, Alkan, Meyerbeer, Félicien David, Bruckner, Wagner, Busoni and Debussy), through 1940s popular song, music hall songs, hymns from Britain and America, war songs from several countries, African-American spirituals, to folk music from England, Ireland, Norway, Spain, Sardinia, Sicily, Crete, Tunisia, Ethiopia, the Transvaal, Native Americans and the Inuit'.<sup>32</sup> Alkan's presence in the *History* is partly due to the pianist Nic Hodges, who wanted Finnissey to use the model of the *Trois grandes études de bravoure* op.76 in the pianistic layout: LH solo, RH solo, both hands together. As earlier discussion of the 4th Piano Concerto has highlighted, *Alkan/Paganini* is by no means the only work of Finnissey's that explores the potential of virtuosity for musical expression, and not as a vehicle for pianistic display. Alkan's characteristic use of break-neck tempi, fearsome leaps, obsessive repetition of certain figurations and bravura passagework all feature in Finnissey's piece. The first section of the work employs material from Alkan's *Jean qui pleure, Jean qui rit* (1840), the second part of which is a fugato based on the aria 'Fin ch'han dal vino' from act one of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Finnissey creates a set of variations in which the original Mozart melody is scarcely discernible; in doing so he borrows various pianistic figurations from Alkan's set of op.35

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<sup>29</sup> Email to author, 18 November 2013. This piece was first performed on 2 November 2013 as part of the 2nd Stoke Newington Contemporary Music Festival, London. The Alkan String Quartet project featured the Virr String Quartet performing a series of new works, all miniatures based on a fragment of a string quartet by Alkan in the collection of the British Library. After performing the fragment itself, pieces were heard by Richard Lannoy, Alex Nikiporenko, Alison Beckett, Susie Self, Neil Luck, Adam de la Cour, Laonikos Psimikakis-Chalkokondylis, Gina Fergione, Lisa Reim, Gabriel Keen, Matthew Lee Knowles, Joshua Kaye, Michael Finnissey and Andy Ingamells.

<sup>30</sup> Email to author, 18 November 2013.

<sup>31</sup> It was described as being "akin to extreme sports" during an introduction by David Conway to this author's performance of the work in Kiev, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> I. Pace: *Michael Finnissey's The History of Photography in Sound* [book to accompany the CD recording of the work, Métier MSV 77501], p.8.

studies (compare the quintuplet section on page two of the Finnissy with the E major episode of Alkan's étude op.35 no.12). Finnissy employs vast pitch matrices based on Alkan's material, his name, and corresponding material related to Paganini in the right hand section that follows.<sup>33</sup>

In summing up his feelings about Alkan, Finnissy concludes that:

'My music library would be a lot emptier without Alkan's music, although his influence is more widespread and general than confined to specific works. It even has to do with a kind of "spiritual" or emotional quality in his music, not unlike Redon's graphic work: edging towards surrealism. I find it strange that quite a few "serious musicians" that I have met, have either never heard of Alkan, or regard him as an eccentric and marginal figure (this latter position seems to be my destiny at least in the UK). Although I mentioned Baudelaire previously, I actually think Alkan might be closer to Flaubert (another writer I esteem very highly but to whom I have not rendered specific homage).'<sup>34</sup>

### **Closing thoughts**

One cannot underestimate the roles played by van Dieren, Sitwell, Searle, Ronald Smith, Ogdon and the Royal College of Music in making the UK the cradle of the Alkan revival. However, I hope to have shown that it was Sorabji who set the process in motion. Over the decades after Sorabji wrote his first piano symphony, the Alkan revival maybe owed more to composers' than pianists' fascination with his work. Two early performers of Alkan's music in the UK – Smith and Ogdon – were, after all, also composers, particularly so when they were discovering his music.

Sorabji, Stevenson, White and Finnissy *et al.* are all located outside the mainstream of British musical culture, perhaps consciously so; some works of Smith and Finnissy actually engage with political and social agenda. They stand out not only for their musical 'otherness' but also for the fact they have made the piano the focus of their creative world (not to say that they haven't written prolifically for many other forces, opera included). All four have produced a prodigious body of highly original work for the instrument, in quantity alone far surpassing that of almost any composer in any country. As performers themselves,<sup>35</sup> these composers share that special relationship to the piano with Alkan, Busoni and others; Sorabji performed only his own works during the early part of his career; Stevenson has enjoyed a great reputation as an interpreter of Romantic repertoire; White is still active as a concert performer in his later 70s; Finnissy, on the other hand, gave his first concert only in his later 30s when he realised that few other pianists were willing to tackle some of his more daunting scores, and in the 80s and 90s his phenomenal virtuosity attracted a huge number of composers to write for him, resulting in a busy concert schedule.

The 'elephant in the room' during this discussion is of course Busoni, who played a pivotal role not only in performing Alkan during the early years of the century<sup>36</sup> and, presumably, encouraging his pupil Petri to take an interest in his work, but also by being an object of fascination – along with Alkan himself – for all the composers considered here. Other figures crop up repeatedly in conversation with the composers (and reading Sorabji); they are all performers, producers of often transcendental piano music (in the technical and spiritual senses), and include Godowsky, Grainger, Ives and many others.

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<sup>33</sup> The author is indebted to Ian Pace's highly detailed work (see fn. 55) for this technical information.

<sup>34</sup> Email to author, 14 November 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Apart from Hinton, who describes himself as 'a composer who can play the piano a bit'.

<sup>36</sup> To critical disapproval in Berlin.

Like Alkan, all the composers discussed have a complex relation to music of the past. Sorabji, Stevenson, Hinton, Smith and Finnissy place transcription as well as the use of others' material at the heart of their work, often in the context of homage; White, on the other hand, constantly alludes to others' music – particularly Busoni, Satie, Bruckner, Medtner, Poulenc and various popular musics – without using specific material, preferring instead to employ thematic, harmonic and pianistic archetypes within his work. It is possible to discern a genealogy spanning some two centuries starting with Alkan's numerous transcriptions (not forgetting his outrageous cadenza for Beethoven's C minor Concerto, and his use of synagogue melodies), developed by Busoni's varied approach to other composers' material (in transcriptions, variations and original compositions), and Sorabji with his transcriptions (of Bach, Richard Strauss and Ravel) and use of foreign material (*Trois pastiches* and *Passeggiata veneziana*), right to the end of the 20th century and beyond with the works of Stevenson and Finnissy.

Each composer has explained their reasons for being attracted to Alkan's music, but several themes recur with frequency: his penchant for the diabolic, gothic and surreal, the uncanny dualism and contradiction present in many works, obsessional repetitions or extenuation of material beyond what is considered 'normal' or 'tasteful', extreme levels of virtuosity, use of all registers of the keyboard and particularly his ear for quasi-orchestral sonorities, Alkan's modulatory individuality often caused by the ineluctable prolongation of a process, his disregard for polite convention, giving a peculiar twist to archaic archetypes, and many others.

One facet of Alkan's influence appears to be that descriptions of his music can with validity be applied to those composers who look to his example. 'His music can be exacting beyond the capacity of any but the most powerful players in technique, dynamic demands and stamina. It can also be disarmingly simple. He exploited the extreme ends of the keyboard, often in deliberate contrast with the middle range'<sup>37</sup> is an assessment of Alkan's piano writing, yet it could for the most part be a description of, for example, Finnissy's.

Given their lifetime fascination, it is perhaps hardly surprising that Alkan references occur in these composers' most ambitious works: Sorabji in his piano symphonies, White in his Sonatina no.8 and many of the sonatas, Stevenson in *Le Festin d'Alkan*, Hinton in his Sonata no.5, Smith in *Al contrario*, and Finnissy in his two solo concertos and *The History of Photography in Sound*. As the early attempts by Sorabji, Searle, Sitwell and others make plain, Alkan's reputation in the early and mid-20th century was obscure, and the suggestion that he might effect any lasting artistic influence on British music would have then been met with incomprehension. Now, however, it's incontrovertible that his impact on British piano music has been huge as four compositional giants of the instrument – Sorabji, Stevenson, White and Finnissy – not to mention other significant figures repeatedly pay homage to him in their music.

## **The Voice of the Lion**

*Talk given at the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, at the international colloquium 'Charles-Valentin Alkan: le piano visionnaire', 21 November 2013.*

### **David Conway**

It is a story told of Rabbi Aryeh Leib the learned, Aryeh Leib the brilliant commentator, Aryeh Leib the misanthrope, Aryeh Leib who was known by the title of his swingeing attack on his fellow scholars, 'Sha'agat Aryeh', Hebrew for 'Roar of the Lion'.

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<sup>37</sup> Hugh Macdonald: 'Alkan', *The Revised New Grove Dictionary of Music* (London, 2000).

It is told that the students of the Sha'agat Aryeh were outside his study when they heard a sound like a tremendous clap of thunder. Rushing in, they found their teacher almost submerged in a sea of books and manuscripts that had tumbled from his shelves. They rescued him from this disaster and gave thanks that after such an accident the Rabbi had survived. But the Sha'agat Aryeh knew better, and told them - 'Whilst I was buried under the books, I prayed for forgiveness from all whom I had attacked – all my adversaries forgave me except one – and this means that I must now die.'

This is a tale which could have been set at any time during the 2000 years of Jewish exile and dispersion, from the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem to the period of the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment movement, at the end of the eighteenth century. Like the orthodox Jewish communities throughout this period, it is suspended virtually out of time, cut off from any influence of the society surrounding its characters, living in a parallel vanished, world, obsessed with text and its interpretation. But, in fact, Rabbi Aryeh Leib ben Asher Gunzberg died right at the end of this era, in Metz in Lorraine in 1785. And it was barely four years after his death when, in the early throes of the French Revolution, the National Convention in Paris made the astonishing proclamation that Jews could be citizens of France.

Today I want to consider the parallel worlds of Valentin Alkan as a Frenchman and as a French Jew, and to suggest how the voice of his Jewish heritage, and his interpretations of that voice, touched on both his life and his music.

Alkan's very birth and death both give testimony to the interactions of these two worlds. His *acte de naissance* as Charles Valentin Morhange shows that he was given the name of his parents' Gentile neighbour, who is cited as '*Charles Valentin, employé.*' This in itself shattered thousands of years of tradition in Judaism, whereby a child would be given the first name of a deceased ancestor. For example, the composer's own father, Alkan Morhange, was named for his maternal grandfather, Alkan Henlé Mayence. The purely French name which Alkan Morhange chose for his own son was in effect a statement of allegiance to the French nation – confirmed later in the naming of Valentin's siblings, including of course his brother Napoléon.

And yet, paradoxically, tradition was to carry the day with the children's surname. The Ashkenazi Jews of France's Rhineland provinces, including Alkan's ancestors, named themselves to their French neighbours by a transliteration into French of their Hebrew names, that is, first name followed by father's first name. As a parallel, I myself am formally named David Conway, but my name in the synagogue is Dovid ben-Yitzchok, David son of Isaac. In 18<sup>th</sup> century Lorraine I would have called myself Davide Isaac; and my son Alexander might have been Sender Davide – and so on. This practice was specifically forbidden by a decree of Napoleon in 1808, which instructed all Jews to take fixed surnames – and in 1813, when Valentin Alkan was born, Napoleon was still Emperor. But the first record of Valentin's name that we have after his birth certificate, his solfège examination record at the Paris Conservatoire when he was not yet 6 years old - but when, of course, Napoleon was no longer Emperor - gives it in the old Ashkenazi style as 'Valentin Alkan' - the style which Valentin and his siblings used in fact throughout their lives. Growing up in the Ashkenazi community in Paris, the family had clearly and simply reverted to the Jewish traditions of naming.

At the other end of our story, the tale of the death of the Sha'agat Aryeh was a century later transferred, as an urban legend, to that of Alkan himself - famously, though erroneously, said to have been crushed by a bookcase whilst reaching for the Talmud, the encyclopaedic compendium of rabbinical analysis of the books of the Bible. But the attribution of this tale was no random association: Rabbi Gunzberg had been a patron of the monumental project of Moses May to print the Talmud in Hebrew at Metz in the 1770s. One of the master printers on this project was Reb Mordechai ben Sender Morchingen. 'Morchingen' is the German and

Yiddish name for the village of Morhange, 20 miles or so from Metz – and we will presently meet Reb Mordechai in Paris; he was Valentin Alkan's grandfather Marix Morhange. Like the Sha'agat Aryeh, Valentin Alkan was renowned for his outstanding abilities, was a loner, was assured of his own values, and was unsparing with his contemporaries - a cultural, if not a theological, lion; although we are assured by his rival Antoine Marmontel that he had the knowledge and capacity to be a rabbi. In the legend of his death Alkan became relinked to the world of his family's origins.

Amongst the Rhineland Jews living in Paris in the 1810s were Marix Morhange and his son Alkan Morhange. Marix is described in 1827 at the birth of Valentin's brother Gustave as an '*instituteur*' (teacher); possibly he acted as a *melamed*, a teacher to the Paris Jewish community. Presumably through him, and through Alkan Morhange, came Valentin Alkan's facility in the Hebrew language and in Hebrew lettering. His manuscripts for the three synagogue melodies, now in the Geneva Conservatoire, show that he wrote in Hebrew with the elegance of a '*sofer*' or scribe. The second of these settings, '*Terakhem Tsiyon*' displays a recondite knowledge of Jewish ritual which Alkan must also have acquired from his family, since this prayer is recited only once a year, at the Fast of the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, recalling the destruction of the Temple.

This type of learning cannot however explain the greatest mystery of Alkan's early career, and one which has never been properly tackled; how was it possible for a child of a poor Jew in Paris to become a keyboard virtuoso? How indeed would he even have had access to a keyboard, or to a teacher? We just don't know. We do have traces of how his father's musical career developed. In 1819, Alkan Morhange is described, not, as at Valentin's birth, an '*employé*' but as a '*régleur de papier de musique*' - surely a rather uncertain way of making a living, unless perhaps he was also a copyist. Subsequent descriptions see him advance - at the birth of Napoléon in 1826 he is recorded as an '*artiste musicien*', and in 1827 at the birth of Gustave he has become a '*professeur de musique*'; at this time he had recently opened the school at which the young Valentin was to be a teacher himself.

One more clue: at Valentin's solfège audition we find he is not only, as with all the other candidates, '*présenté par M. son père*', but also by '*M. Méric*.' M. Méric is of course Marix Morhange. His presence might just be grandfatherly pride; but it may also imply that he had a hand in Valentin's musical education.

At the age of six, Alkan became the youngest person ever to gain a scholarship at the Conservatoire; which at this time was in fact the only advanced school of music in Europe to which a Jew could obtain entry. The Conservatoire records of the period show many other Jewish entrants who took advantage of this opportunity, including Fromental Halévy, Henri Herz, Jacques Offenbach and all of Valentin Alkan's siblings. The granting of French citizenship to the country's Jews turned out also to be a key enabling them to enter the musical professions.

Before we leave the enigma of Valentin Alkan's early musical prowess, I want to consider him in the context of the Jewish cultural tradition of the '*ilui*', or infant Talmudic prodigy. At this time when Jews began to transfer their cultural loyalties from memories of Solomon's temple to the temple of European culture, a string of Jewish musical wunderkinds suddenly began to manifest itself - apart from Alkan, we can mention from those born around this period Mendelssohn, Moscheles, Anton Rubinstein, Herz, Schulhoff, Rosenhain, Meyer, the violinists Joachim and Ernst, and many others. As Jews formed less than 1% of Europe's population at this period they were, to say the least, punching above their weight in the world of music. Many of the skills and practices of an '*ilui*' are intriguingly also of great use to the musician - what human resource specialists would call 'transferable skills' - amongst these are memory,

analysis, repetition and the necessary charisma to impress an audience. I'll presently return to this Talmudic aspect.

The choice by Alkan Morhange of musical careers for the family at this time was wise, indeed prescient. Released into the patronage of the rising bourgeoisie, music was a growth industry and - as it does today - provided a career of choice for those from communities outside mainstream society. The potential was reflected in the success of Alkan Morhange's school, which a student was to recall as a 'preparatory class for the Conservatoire', with both Jewish and Gentile pupils. Alkan Morhange's strategy was to be fully when in the 1830s and 1840s, Paris became the musical, and especially the piano, capital of the world; Meyerbeer was to call it, ironically, 'Pianopolis'.

Alkan's attitude to his religion was robust. We do not find in his correspondence any reference to, or concern about, discrimination – as we frequently do in the letters of the German Jews Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn. Even the disaster, in 1848, of Alkan's defeat by his former pupil Marmontel for the piano professorship at the Conservatoire is treated with a wry - indeed, with a Jewish – humour in a letter to Masarnau, without attribution of the setback to anti-Jewish prejudice: *'Si j'étais bon catholique j'en prendrais peut-être mon parti; mais, comme je ne suis que mauvais juif, je t'avoue qu'il m'en cuit beaucoup.'*

Alkan's other references in his correspondence to his Jewishness are also on the border of the playful and the sardonic - the quip that one has to be a Jew to understand the New Testament, or his crack at Liszt taking minor Roman Catholic orders - 'if I ever become a rabbi, I will not accept the authority of the synagogue, but will operate in a quite independent manner.' Such comments indicate the very individual way in which he himself interpreted his religion; they also I think give, paradoxically, evidence of a confidence in his attachment to Judaism, strong enough to joke about. However his attachment to the basic traditions of his religion may have gone very deep indeed. His fastidiousness about food, for example, which has been interpreted by some as a symptom of neurosis, may simply have been due to keeping the Jewish rules of *kashrut*.

Alkan was recognized as a musical authority by the Paris Jewish Consistoire; he was, for example, invited by them to audition Samuel Naumbourg as a *chazzan* (cantor), and he later contributed two works to Naumbourg's collection of choral music for the synagogue. Admittedly these are not Alkan's most inspired compositions, and this itself suggests to me Alkan's equivocal attitude to the ways in which French synagogue practice temporised to make it acceptable to its country.

The original music of the Ashkenazi synagogues was not amenable to standard Gentile musical systems. The melodies of prayers, of the cantillation of the Bible portions, and of the chanting of the *chazzan*, were frequently based on modes, sometimes including microtonal elements, which did not suit the foursquare rhythms and harmonies that can be found, for example, in a church. And indeed this was recognised by Alkan in the settings he made, which I referred to earlier, of synagogue songs. Here the piano accompaniment in the first two melodies, 'Adon Olam' and 'Terakhem Tsiyon', is exceedingly spare – so as not to 'pin down' the songs too much in Western European harmonic space. When we compare this, for example, to the clumsy efforts made by the English Jew Isaac Nathan to harmonize synagogue melodies in his 'Hebrew Melodies' of 1815, we can see the significance and the virtue of Alkan's sensitivity. Alkan's rather satirical portrayal of hazzanic excess, tainted by operatic imitation, in his *Prelude* op. 66 no.7 – entitled 'alla giudesca' – seems to be a poke at French Jewry's attempts to assimilate outside practices. This attitude may have informed his surprise decision to abandon, apparently

for artistic reasons, the post of organist at the Consistoire synagogue, within a few days of accepting it.

When we come to consider the extent to which Alkan's Jewishness is reflected in his other music, we should be aware of the wise words of Charles Rosen on musical influence. He outlines a scale of influence running from, at the bottom end, plagiarism, through borrowing, quotation and transformation, to inspiration, at the most subtle. At this top end, Rosen suggests:

‘When the transformation is an almost total one, evidence for identity is erased in a work which now appears completely original. The source is likely to *seem* irrelevant to the critic, because it is not clear by what method he can reach it, although in this case the source is in fact *more relevant for criticism than any other. The most important form of influence is that which provokes the most original and personal work.*’ (My italics).

In this perspective I venture to propose that virtually all of Alkan's mature musical activity is influenced by his Jewishness, not only in his composition of pieces which have overt Jewish references. The two particular deep-level underlying factors here are musical canon and musical structure.

I have already suggested the transference of cultural allegiance in the emerging Jewish European intelligentsia from the intellectual icon of the Temple and Jerusalem to the spirit of Enlightenment culture – what in Germany was called ‘*Bildung*’. But for the Jews this transfer was associated with some traditional values – notably that of canon, the hierarchy of primary documentation. For the value and integrity of the Old Testament and the Talmud, were substituted those of the masters – and especially the German masters – of arts and culture. In music, this meant particularly Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Like his fellow Jews Mendelssohn, Moscheles and Anton Rubinstein, all of whom organized what they called ‘historical concerts’ comprising such music – and unlike many French musicians - Alkan held this German canon in the highest esteem. This is supremely testified in the series of *Petits Concerts* which Alkan gave from 1873 onwards, on the model of those of Moscheles and Rubinstein. These recitals in their tripartite structure – two sections of pieces nearly all by deceased German masters, enclosing, literally and spiritually, works of Alkan himself – resolutely announced Alkan's faith in his canon; and this was despite the opprobrium attaching to all things German in France since the disaster of the War of 1870. In the haughty disdain that Alkan showed for the clamour of patriotic opinion in the advocacy of his musical ideals, we might recall the title of his *Esquisse* op. 63 no. 34, taken from Horace - *Odi profanum vulgus et arceo, Favete linguis* (I detest and despise the vulgar crowd: Keep silent!)

This tradition of canon also informed the structure and architecture of Alkan's own compositions. Not for him were the rhapsodies or structural innovations of Liszt, Wagner and the so-called New German school – as Alkan wrote to his friend the German composer Ferdinand Hiller, ‘Wagner is not music, he is a disease’. He remained a steadfast classicist as regards musical forms. Even the gigantic first movement of the Concerto for Solo Piano is effective because, as Ronald Smith points out, it keeps firmly to the principles of the Viennese classical tradition, with “the underlying unity of its principal themes, and a key structure that is basically simple and sound.” What extends the piece structurally into worlds undreamt of even by Beethoven is what I regard as Alkan's rigorously Talmudic approach. In the Talmud, generations of rabbis dispute and dissect every phrase of the Pentateuch, God's message to the Jews, to distil from it every last element of that message. In the same way, Alkan will often in his music follow an idea remorselessly wherever it may lead – even if, as in the Concerto, we find ourselves at one point in the key of G double sharp major, necessitating one note being designated as F triple sharp. A similar determination - we shall perhaps not call it obsession - can be found in Alkan's continual reworking, in his five books of *Chants*, of the first book of

Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*, retaining in each case the sequence of keys and even the moods of Mendelssohn's pieces. And it reaches an apogee in the *Chant* op. 38 no 2, 'Fa', in which the same note is repeated 414 times against sometimes startling and disturbing harmonic backgrounds. These examples indeed show a Talmudic determination to extract every possible morsel of meaning from a concept. Alkan's heroic extensions of piano technique and potential can also be viewed in the same perspective - as can, indeed, his translation of the complete Bible into French. His paraphrase, almost word by word, of Psalm 137, *Super flumina Babylonis*, which is headed by perhaps the only surviving remnant of this translation, is engendered by the same spirit.

The specifically Jewish element in Alkan's musical compositions does not appear until 1847, when the 25 *Préludes* op. 31 were published. Perhaps in the 1830s his hand was stayed in this respect by the popularity in Paris of two examples of supposedly Jewish music which he must have despised; the travesty of the Passover service dished up by Halévy in his opera 'La juive', and the bizarre vogue for the Jewish Hassidic xylophone klezmer musician Josef Gusikov, whom Liszt described as 'This Paganini of the pavements'.

Alkan's op. 31 must represent the earliest proper representation of Jewish tropes and melodies in the world of art-music. At least a third of these have specific references to Judaism or to the synagogue service. No. 13, based on the verse 'Je dors, mais mon coeur veillait' 'I sleep but my heart waketh' from the *Song of Songs*, hints at the rabbinical exegetic process of *gematriya*, whereby deductions are made from the numerical equivalents of Hebrew letters. In this case, the quotation heading the piece coming from chapter 5, verse 2 of the Biblical *Song of Songs*, the music consists of bars each containing two sets of quintuplets. A previously unnoticed Jewish reference can be discerned in no. 22, 'Anniversaire'. In the original edition this piece is uniquely given a German subtitle – 'Für das neues Jahr' ('For the New Year') – and its throbbing first section, giving way to serene but solemn closing bars, surely represents the sequence of repentance and forgiveness associated with the Jewish New Year.

There are other clues related to esoteric Hebrew knowledge scattered in Alkan's works, and we have not yet found them all. The third movement of the Cello Sonata op. 47, which is headed by a verse from the prophet Micah, draws its melodies from the rhythms and the spirit of the chanting in the synagogue of the *haftorah*, the weekly portion from the Prophets. And take, for example, the set of 48 *Esquisses* op. 63. They are followed by an unnumbered no. 49. We may recall that the book of Leviticus specifies a calendar of seven-year cycles, with the last year of the seventh cycle – that is, the 49<sup>th</sup> year - being designated the Year of Jubilee. Alkan's cycle is thus completed, at the same value as the cycle of years - and the 'extra' piece, no. 49, is, naturally, titled 'Laus Deo' - 'Praise be to God'. And for myself, I am pretty certain that the roar of the lion which we hear in op. 39 no. 12, *Le Festin d'Esop*, has a reference to the Sha'agat Aryeh as well as to Aesop's fables.

Alkan ceased composing just before he made his final return to the concert platform in 1873. His last messages to us are in his will, written in August 1886, which starkly sets out the two parallel elements of his life. This remarkable handwritten document is at once the financial directions of a relatively prosperous French bourgeois *rentier* – Alkan left well over 100,000 francs in securities and effects - and also a Jewish spiritual testament. In its opening paragraph Alkan thunders 'May God bless those who enable its execution, and punish those who try to obstruct it.'

The bequests to family members are carefully specified – and at the head of the list are the key elements of Alkan's life - the bequest to Napoléon Alkan of 'the totality of my books, my music and my manuscripts.' We know from the inventory of his estate that this included a large number of books in Hebrew. There is the legacy for a biblical cantata prize, with indicative Old

Testament subjects specified. Alkan is keen to ensure that his brother Gustave's legacy for beds at the '*Hospice Israelite*' is properly marked on commemorative plaques; '*Nous porton tous le nom Morhange dit Alkan; mais...c'est le nom d'Alkan qu'il faudra faire prédominer*'. Instructions are given for his tombstone, which should read, apart from the traditional Hebrew formulae, simply 'Charles Valentin Morhange, dit Alkan aîné.' Any surplus in the estate after the bequests should be given to the Consistory.

In a later codicil, Alkan gives a legacy to the "Society for the Support of Jewish Workers and Apprentices (*Société de Patronage des ouvriers et apprentis Israélites*).” This association grew out of a movement in the 1830s and 1840s to encourage Jews to move out of their 'traditional professions' to more active crafts and trades; and Alkan's bequest indicates his interest in the social liberalization of French Jews, however conservative he may have been as regards the religion itself. Of course it might also have been a parting shot, a *coup d'adieu* at Delaborde, for whom the bequest was originally intended. There are no family quarrels like Jewish family quarrels. Despite Alkan's stern injunction at the head of the will, this and a number of his other legacies were in the upshot frustrated.

I mentioned earlier Alkan's Prelude based on 'I sleep but my heart waketh.' The *Song of Songs*, from which this verse comes, has always been highly prized in the Jewish mystical tradition, which interprets it as dealing with the love between God and the children of Israel. It is one of the very few books of the Old Testament apart from those of the Pentateuch that is treated at length in the ancient rabbinical commentary known as the *Midrash*. The midrashic exposition of this particular verse is one which Alkan must have known. In it we hear, as Alkan himself must have done, the voice of his religion calling out to him through the ages. It applied all too clearly to one who, like him, lived between the worlds of artistic and religious spirituality and the materialism of 19<sup>th</sup> century France:

Sovereign of the Universe! I am asleep in the neglect of religious observance, but my heart is awake for the performance of charity; I am asleep in respect of righteous deeds, but my heart is awake in the desire to do them ... I am asleep in respect of the Temple, but my heart is awake for the synagogue and the house of study; I am asleep in respect of the end, but my heart is awake for the redemption.

## **Last Word: Alkan in Wikipedia**

Wikipedia now having become everyone's reference of first resort, your editor joined with other Wikipediacs to ensure that, in his bicentenary year, the article on Alkan on English Wikipedia was up to scratch. By mid-year the article was up to official Wikipedia 'Good Article' status. With a further burst of work it reached the hallowed 'Featured Article' status. This allowed me to nominate it as the front-page Wikipedia article on Alkan's actual bicentenary on November 30<sup>th</sup>. I am glad to say the nomination was approved. The effect was dramatic. Normally the article gets viewed an average 140 times per day. On November 30<sup>th</sup> it was viewed 9,068 times, and on the following three days a further 5,000 times in total. This may be about the most intensive publicity Alkan has ever achieved. You can see the article at:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles-Valentin\\_Alkan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles-Valentin_Alkan)