



The Alkan Society

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Bulletin 96: April 2018

Society concerts

Joint societies dinner-recital

Held in conjunction with the Liszt, Mahler, Schubert and Wagner Societies at Lancaster Hall Hotel, London on 17th January 2018

Society member Peter Grove reports on the evening

I had not been to one of these events before, and it proved to be an excellent way to meet members of four other composers' societies, as well as hear some well-chosen musical examples. The Schubert Society had overseen the arrangements, and organised everything admirably. The seating-plan for dinner had been done with care so that one had members of nearly every society at a table of six. The Alkan Society was represented by some ten members, a good proportion given the much higher membership of some of the others.

First came the music, which had to be limited to ten minutes per composer. For pianophiles the programme looked a little voice-dominated at first sight, but the variety of music and presentation was so wide that this soon became unimportant.



From left: Michelle Alexander, Andrew Yiangou, Charlotte Hoather, Nigel Foster, Simon Wallfisch and Leslie Howard

The American soprano Michelle Alexander began with two of Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*. She has a powerful voice which was almost too big for the venue and these intimate songs at first, but she tamed it well, ably supported by Leslie Howard. The world of *Tristan* was not far away, and indeed the composer described *Träume* as a study for the opera, with music used in the Act 2 duet. The singer was at her best when she could put the scores aside and sing *Dich, teure Halle* from *Tannhäuser*, giving it all the drama needed, with Leslie Howard relishing the orchestral textures on the piano.

Our Chairman Mark Viner was about to begin a concert tour in Italy and sent his apologies. No excuses needed for his replacement, Andrew Yiangou (pictured on the next page, in rehearsal), who played the last two movements of Alkan's *Symphonie* with great assurance. He may have been a little cautious in the



third movement, observing the *tempo di minuetto* more than the metronome mark, so that we missed Lewenthal's "Hexen Minuett, complete with broomsticks". It was certainly very accurate and had the full dynamic range needed. The finale, on the other hand, had all the breakneck pace and character required for a "ride in hell", still kept the accuracy, and deservedly earned a huge ovation.

The early *Frühlingsmorgen* and three of Mahler's *Rückert Lieder* followed, sung by Charlotte Hoather in memory of Gary Waller, the Chairman of the Society who died last year. Leslie Howard was

again the pianist. As a fan more of the Hamelin school of piano performance than Lang Lang, I can sometimes be uncomfortable watching a singer who expresses everything in the face as well as the voice. This performance, however, was irresistible, and done with such charm that one could not avoid being caught up in the emotion. With such a beautiful voice as well as acting ability, Charlotte surely has a fine career ahead in both song recitals and opera.

Leslie Howard returned with his third hat on to play one of Liszt's last operatic paraphrases, the *Sarabande* and *Chaconne* from Handel's *Almira*. Liszt composed it in 1879, some seven years before his death, and interestingly enough, it was Handel's first opera, written at the age of nineteen. Is there any more to be said about this remarkable musician and scholar? He can play any Liszt work from memory, give a cogent introduction, and even tell a student which of several available editions is the best. In spite of a rather old-sounding small piano, he coaxed some rich sounds out of it and never sounded under strain even in the most demanding passages.

Finally we heard a group of Schubert songs from Simon Wallfisch, with a change of accompanist in Nigel Foster. This is a really classy singer, and his easy projection of music and words reflected years of experience. Schubert's spare accompaniments suited each song to perfection, as always. While the Wagner and Mahler songs exist in piano versions, they were more comfortable writing for the orchestra and it was clear that Schubert was the master.

There was ample time after the dinner to meet others, and all that I spoke to were generally unfamiliar with Alkan's music, but had some very positive comments. I hope that they might investigate some of the shorter and more playable pieces recommended by Nick.

Criticisms? It was a little tedious to have recruiting speeches from all five societies, as well as from the London Music Club and Festival of Song. They could have been shorter and backed up with leaflets. On the other hand, everyone deserved to have a say.

The Richard Strauss Society has already volunteered to oversee next year's event, so let us look forward to another meeting of minds then.

The Society Bulletin can only flourish with a steady flow of input from its members. All members are encouraged to send articles, letters or comments to the Editor (Nick Hammond, email: treasurer@alkansociety.org, or by post to: Woodend House, High Stittenham, York YO60 7TW, UK)

Alkan's *Petits Préludes*: A Musical Time-Machine¹

Michael Beauvois, Independent Researcher, UK

Introduction

Possibly because of their small scale and seemingly simple surface, Alkan's *Petits Préludes sur les huit gammes du plain-chant* (henceforth, *Petits Préludes*) have been relatively overlooked in comparison to his other works. However, the attention they have received has often mentioned their quality of timelessness and their concentrated, interlocked nature. For example, they have been described by Allmusic as being "Sketched with elegant simplicity...affording glimpses of another world...[and evoking] a legendary timelessness," and by Seth Blacklock as creating "an air of timelessness and even mystery."² Similarly, Ronald Smith wrote that "The sequence, which is indivisible, seems to stand outside the barriers of time and space," later describing the set as "homogenous".³ Moreover, Nicholas King noted that they are "short but important works, passing through the eight Gregorian modes in a tightly-knit disciplined style. They show Alkan at his most devout, though the turbulence of the fourth and the brightness of the seventh remind us of other dimensions."⁴

The *Petits Préludes* themselves appeared as two suites (Nos. 1-4 and 5-8) in the music supplements of the August and September 1859 issues of *La Maîtrise*, a monthly journal for church music that focused on "plainchant, Palestrinian polyphony, and Bach's organ music" and was founded by Louis Niedermeyer and Joseph d'Ortigue, both devotees of plainchant and early church music.⁵ Alkan's own interest in early music is also well-attested, as shown by his series of *Petits concerts de musique classique* held from 1873 to 1880 where works by Couperin, Rameau, JS Bach, Handel, and Scarlatti were played, his piano transcriptions of works by Bach and Handel, and the significant number of his compositions written in the style or *genre ancien* – e.g., *Gigue et air de ballet dans le style ancien*.

Structural variables

Many years ago, the author was struck by an apparent chronological progression in musical style across the *Petits Préludes* where Nos. 1-4 seemed to have more of a plainchant or Medieval character than Nos. 5-8, which instead seemed reminiscent of Renaissance and Baroque music. The author's impressions of the style and possible models for each piece, which are given in Table 1, clearly suggest the existence of

Table 1. The author's impression of the eight pieces.

Piece-No.	Style, mood evoked, or possible model
1	Imitative points evoke plainchant echoing in cloisters.
2	Parallel 6/3 chords evoke fauxbourdon. Parallel octaves evoke plainchant. Trill in penultimate bar evokes Baroque period.
3	Monophony evokes Phrygian-mode plainchant. Antiphonal writing evokes Renaissance choral music.
4	Figuration evokes Baroque toccata in Phrygian mode.
5	Renaissance dance (e.g. a branle).
6	Siciliano or lullaby. Antiphonal writing evokes operatic duet.
7	Renaissance or folk dance. Figuration evokes Baroque toccata or trumpet voluntary.
8	Baroque two-part invention.

¹ This article is a greatly simplified summary of an original paper by the same author entitled *Alkan's Petits Préludes for organ: A case study of composition by constraints* which is freely available at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2059204317733107>. Thanks go to Katharine Ellis and David Conway for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

² Allmusic description – www.allmusic.com/composition/petits-préludes-sur-les-gammes-du-plain-chant-8-for-organ-in-2-suites-mc0002362192; Blacklock (2005, p.42).

³ Smith (1988; 2000, Vol. 2, p.223).

⁴ King (1988).

⁵ Ellis (2005, p.71); Garceau (1984).

a broad chronological progression across *Piece-No.* This indication that the *Petits Préludes* might be organized by chronological style prompted an examination of the pieces which revealed that six structural variables varied as a function of *Piece-No.*: the “tonic” of the Gregorian mode (*Tonic*), whether the mode is authentic or plagal (*Mode*), the occurrence of imitation between the left and right hands (*Im*), the occurrence of parallel octaves (*P8*), the initial sonority of the piece (*Ison*), and whether the piece is in duple or triple metre (*Metre*) – see Table 2. Table 2 not only shows that *Mode*, *Im*, *P8*, *Ison*, and *Metre* follow the same pattern in each suite, but also that a further grouping of these characteristics occurs where 1) only imitation (*Im*) is used when *Ison* = Single note, 2) both imitation (*Im*) and parallel octaves (*P8*) are used when *Ison* = Chord, and 3) only parallel octaves (*P8*) are used when *Ison* = Octave. These findings therefore indicate that Alkan imposed a superstructure on the *Petits Préludes* by fixing the order of the modes to ascend in pitch from D to G with authentic and plagal modes alternating, dividing this *Tonic-Mode* pattern into two suites of four pieces, then applying the same unique patterns for the use of *Im*, *P8*, *Ison*, and *Metre* to both suites.

Table 2. Structural variables (tick = present, cross = not present).

Piece-No.	Suite	Tonic	Mode	Im	P8	Ison	Metre
1	1	D	Authentic (Dorian)	✓	×	Single note	Triple (6/8)
2	1	D	Plagal (Hypodorian)	✓	✓	Chord (6/3)	Triple (3/4)
3	1	E	Authentic (Phrygian)	✓	×	Single note	Duple (C)
4	1	E	Plagal (Hypophrygian)	×	✓	Octave	Triple (3/8)
5	2	F	Authentic (Lydian)	✓	×	Single note	Triple (12/8)
6	2	F	Plagal (Hypolydian)	✓	✓	Chord (5/3)	Triple (12/8)
7	2	G	Authentic (Mixolydian)	✓	×	Single note	Duple (2/4)
8	2	G	Plagal (Hypomixolydian)	×	✓	Octave	Triple (3/4)

Style progression

Given the symmetrical patterning of the six structural variables, the *Petits Préludes* were examined further to see whether there were any stylistic features that indicated a progression in chronological style across *Piece-No.* Here the work of Constance Himelfarb became relevant. Himelfarb, from an examination of the 25 *Préludes* (Op.31), determined that Alkan used specific style elements in his *genre ancien* works to evoke “l’esprit de pieces anciennes”.⁶ These *genre ancien* style elements (henceforth, GASEs) were: monophony or evocations of monophony, fugal entries without development, antiphony or evocations of antiphony, passages using parallel thirds, Alberti basses or formulaic and repetitive left-hand figurations, homophonic sequences in parallel motion, toccata-style passages, and left-hand pedal-points or drone basses.

Now, eight of the 25 *Préludes* contain these GASEs. However, they are present either singly or in combination in *all* the *Petits Préludes*, strongly suggesting that Alkan created a style progression by using different combinations of GASEs to give each of the *Petits Préludes* a specific relative chronological “flavour”. By examining which GASEs appeared in which piece, a numerical measure of how “ancient” Alkan perceived each GASE was determined which was then used to calculate the specific chronological “flavour” or style for each piece. When the chronological “flavours” of the pieces were compared, a clear increase in chronological style across *Piece-No.* became evident, indicating that Alkan *did* incorporate a musical-style progression into the *Petits Préludes* and achieved this by using different combinations of GASEs for each piece so that, in effect, a musical time-machine was created when the pieces were played consecutively. Here, it should be noted that obvious or superficial early-music style elements such as the GASEs would have had to have been used by Alkan in order for the stylistic references to be recognized by his intended audience (Niedermayer, d’Ortigue, and the subscribers to *La Maîtrise*) and for them to perceive the progression in chronological style across *Piece-No.*

To illustrate how Alkan combined GASEs to create a piece with a specific chronological “flavour”, Figure 1 shows No.2 of the *Petits Préludes*. This piece is constructed of five stylistically-discrete sections, all of

⁶ Himelfarb (1997, pp.32-33).

Fauxbourdon

Alberti bass **Fauxbourdon**

Plainchant

Baroque

Figure 1. No.2 of the *Petits Préludes*, showing the five stylistically-discrete sections *Fauxbourdon*, *Alberti bass*, *Plainchant*, and *Baroque*.

which are obvious and easily recognisable generic examples of “early music”, and all of which contain at least one GASE. Here, in the first and third *Fauxbourdon*⁷ sections, we find passages using parallel thirds (all in the left hand) and homophonic sequences in parallel motion in bars 1-5 and 9-12. In the second *Alberti-bass* section, we find fugal entries without development (indicated by brackets and arrows between the staves) in bars 6 and 8 and Alberti basses or formulaic and repetitive left-hand figurations in bars 6-9. In the fourth *Plainchant* section, we find an evocation of monophony created by parallel octaves in bars 13-18. Finally, in the fifth *Baroque* section, we find fugal entries without development (indicated by brackets and arrows between the staves) in bars 19-20 and a Baroque-style trill to end the piece.

Alkan’s compositional process

As the chronological “flavours” of each piece had a numerical value, their increase in value across *Piece-No.* (i.e. the style progression) could be treated as a variable. This variable (*Style*) was found to be significantly correlated with a number of pitch-related variables for each piece – the total number of notes (*NoNotes*), the pitch range (*Range*), the percentage occurrence of 4-note sonorities (*Son4*), and the

⁷ Chains of 6/3 chords often found in Medieval music, sometimes called *faburden*.

median pitch (*MedPitch*) – indicating that Alkan conceived the style progression in terms of the high-level effects of the GASE combinations on perceived chronological style as well as their low-level pitch-related effects on musical structure. To reveal Alkan's compositional process when writing the *Petits Préludes*, the numerical values of these five variables were statistically analysed. The results indicated the following.

Firstly, the final form of the *Petits Préludes* was determined by a complex hierarchical structure of compositional constraints. Here, Alkan manipulated two sets of inter-related variables – the first composed of *Style*, *NoNotes*, and *Range* (D_1), and the second composed of *Son4* and *MedPitch* (D_2) – in conjunction with the predetermined symmetrical patterning of the six structural variables. Secondly, Alkan not only incorporated a chronological progression in musical style across *Piece-No.* into the *Petits Préludes*, but also decided to systematically increase the values of the D_1 and D_2 variables across *Piece-No.* However, due to the brevity of the pieces, he found the task of increasing the D_2 variables too difficult to maintain without violating one or more of the pre-existing compositional constraints – i.e. the symmetrical arrangement of the structural variables, the style progression / GASE usage, and the systematic increase of the D_1 variables – and decided to broadly, rather than systematically increase them across *Piece-No.* Finally, Alkan's overloading of the *Petits Préludes* with self-imposed compositional constraints is an extreme example of his habitual use of multiple compositional constraints,⁸ which is itself a musical problem-solving strategy that maximally reduces the number of compositional problems, thereby enabling the work to be composed more efficiently and quickly. Figure 2, which shows a modified version of Matthew Brown's adaptation of John Sloboda's cognitive model of musical composition, is a flowchart that summarises the compositional process Alkan employed in the creation of the *Petits Préludes*.⁹ Here, Alkan's compositional constraints and other relevant findings are given in italics in each box and lines indicate processes that transform or use the contents of the boxes. Box A represents Alkan's initial idea; box B, the material he based it on; box C, his plans, drafts, jottings etc; box D, the finished piece; box E, his goals and any historical/external constraints; box F, his knowledge of broad musical systems and specific musical types (e.g. tonal counterpoint/harmony, early music); boxes G1 and G2 his self-imposed high- and low-level compositional constraints; and box H, his knowledge of specific compositional styles, strategies, techniques, and models.

Alkan's *Petits Préludes*: a postscript

Following the appearance of my article in *Music & Science*, I sent a copy to Katharine Ellis at Cambridge University because of its relevance to her research interests in 19th-century French music and plainchant. In the email exchange that followed, her comments about the article and some of her remarks concerning *La Maîtrise* made me realise that while I had addressed how Alkan wrote the *Petits Préludes*, I had not really addressed why, instead assuming that he “either decided or was asked to make a compositional contribution to *La Maîtrise* and, aware of the interest in plainchant and early church music of Niedermeyer, d'Ortigue, and the subscribers to *La Maîtrise*, decided to base his composition on the eight Gregorian modes.”

In our correspondence, Ellis remarked that the people at *La Maîtrise* would probably have been appalled by the *Petits Préludes* due to them being “[stylistically] extreme...especially in relation to Niedermeyer's own compositions, which one might take as a benchmark for the journal.” Furthermore, she noted that she was unable to find, after scanning through some of the journal's music supplements available online, “anything non-tonal among the newly-composed organ works. Many of these take their cue more from Bach than from plainchant, and although Bach sometimes writes modally, he doesn't do what Alkan is doing,” and concluded that “Alkan's pieces seem to me to be very experimental indeed. Quite apart from the use of mode, their extreme simplicity, their repetitive stasis, their multiple generic references within a single piece, also mark them out.” Finally, she remarked that she was “struck...by the stylistic juxtapositions, with no transitions between them, of No.2...[and] the silences in No.4, whose musical logic within a ‘prelude’ is difficult to pin down.”¹⁰

⁸ For example, the *Chants* rework the structural framework of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* Book 1 while preserving both the key sequence and the styles and textures of Mendelssohn's original pieces (Smith, 2000, Vol.2, Ch.5).

⁹ Brown (2003, 2012); Sloboda (1985).

¹⁰ Ellis also noted that there is a distinct possibility that Niedermeyer and d'Ortigue didn't even see the *Petits Préludes* before they were published: “As I recall, although Niedermeyer's compositions still appear in the supplements his name has disappeared from the masthead of the journal by 1859. Moreover, there was a ‘commission musicale’ installed (presumably to

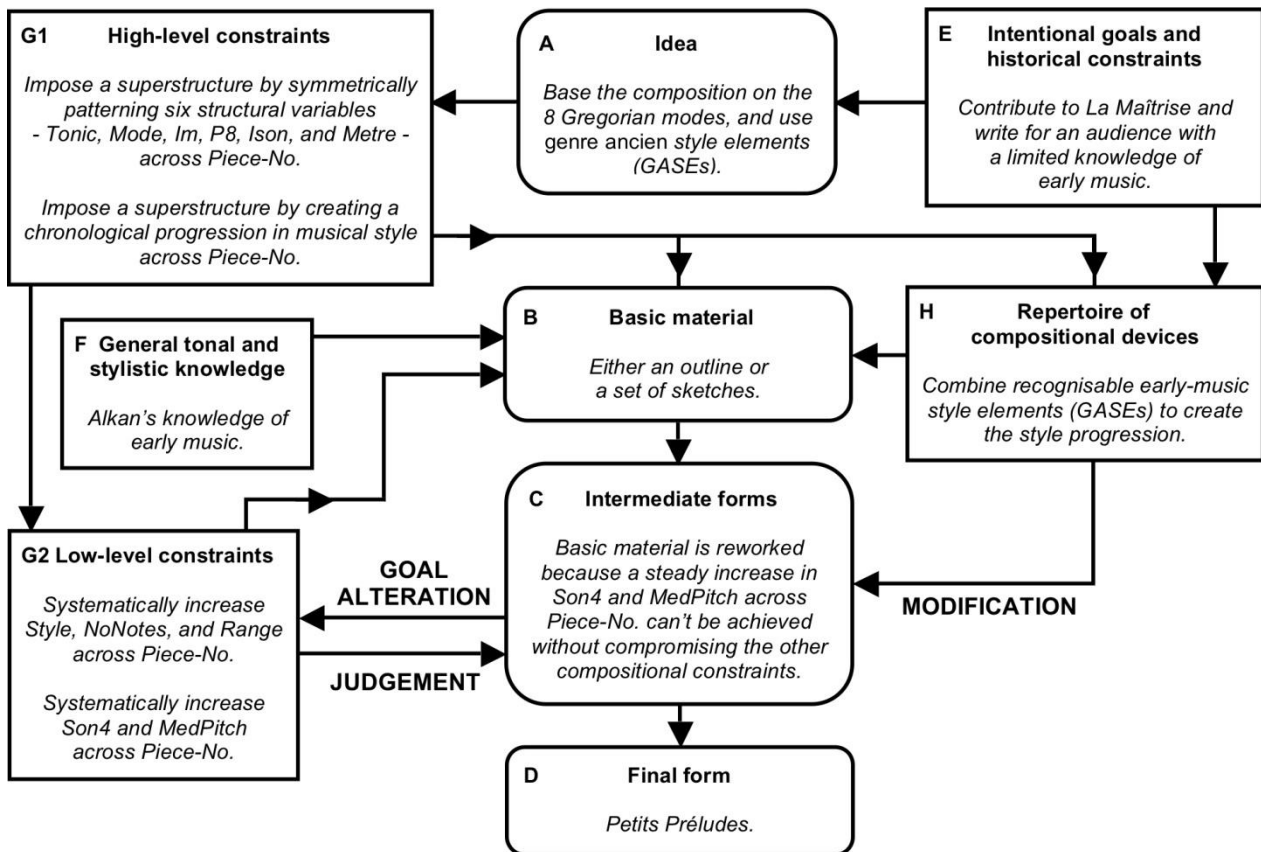


Figure 2. A flowchart summarising the compositional process Alkan employed in the creation of the *Petits Préludes*

In my *Music & Science* article, I remarked that Alkan's overloading of the *Petits Préludes* with self-imposed compositional constraints could possibly have been game-playing on his part. However, Ellis's description of the *Petits Préludes* as stylistically extreme and her other comments about them, along with a number of things described below, now make me think that game-playing is almost certainly the reason why Alkan wrote the *Petits Préludes* in the first place.

As is well-known, Alkan had a lifelong penchant for musical irony and parody; for example, *L'Opéra*, described by Schumann as “an excellent jest on operatic music,” and the *Impromptu sur le choral de Luther*, about which there is nothing “impromptu”, amongst many others. *Halelouyoh*, Alkan's 1857 contribution to the third volume of *Zemiroth Yisrael*, Samuel Naumbourg's compendium of choral music for the synagogue, shares passages of identical music¹¹ with his contemporaneous *Marcia funèbre sulla morte d'un Pappagallo* (published in 1859, but probably conceived around the time of the Parisian revival of Rossini's *La gazza ladra* in 1858). However, while the *Marcia funèbre* explicitly satirises *La gazza ladra*, the “music of *Zemiroth Yisrael* is broadly conventional, in conformity with Halévy's middle-of-the-road operatic style” and *Halelouyoh* is one of “the most conventional pieces he [Alkan] ever wrote in his maturity.”¹² Given Alkan's individualistic take¹³ on religion (committed, robust and confident, bordering on the playful and the sardonic, and strong enough to joke about), this strongly suggests that the reason for the shared material is that Alkan's choral offering to Naumbourg, while sincerely made, had a playful edge to it, being stylistically tailored for *Zemiroth Yisrael* in the spirit of “You want middle-of-the-road operatic style? You've got it.” Therefore, as *Halelouyoh*, the *Marcia funèbre*, and the *Petits Préludes* are contemporaneous, and Alkan intended the latter to appear, like *Halelouyoh*, in a publication

look after those same music supplements), comprising Thomas, Benoist, and Gounod – again, no mention of Niedermeyer. D'Ortigue is still on the masthead as director and editor in 1859, but with the musical commission in place there seems to be some separation between the journal's text and supplement. That's a very long-winded way of saying that I'm not sure D'Ortigue or Niedermeyer would have had very close oversight of Alkan's work before publication – especially since there's no commentary on these pieces in the main body of the journal.” (K. Ellis, personal communication, March 23, 2018).

¹¹ *Halelouyoh*, bars 9–13; *Marcia funèbre*, pp.12–13.

¹² Conway (2012, p.220).

¹³ Conway (2003, p.6; 2014, p.27).

dedicated to religious music, it is not too much of an extrapolation to assume that his offering to Niedermeyer *et al.* was also sincerely made with a playful edge, but this time stylistically tailored for *La Maîtrise* in the spirit of “You want early music? You’ve got it.” Moreover, this playful edge to the *Petits Préludes* is sharpened by their stylistic extremity as, due to their “repetitive stasis”, the elusiveness of their “musical logic”, and their highly experimental nature, there were few, if any, musical contexts in 1859 where they would have fitted in – i.e. they were effectively unusable as preludes. This, and the fact that the pieces have to be played consecutively in order for the progression in chronological style to be perceived, along with Ronald Smith’s description of the sequence as being “indivisible” and “homogenous”, therefore strongly suggests that the only thing the *Petits Préludes* were designed to be preludes for...were each other! Finally, while the playful aspect of the *Petits Préludes* proposed here is speculative, it not only fits in with what we know of Alkan’s personality, but also provides an explanation (game-playing) for why they were written, thereby adding yet another layer of meaning to them which, given the number of compositional constraints and the super-saturation of symmetry and patterning already present, means that the *Petits Préludes* now seem to have almost as many layers as an onion.¹⁴

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¹⁴ Here, it should be noted that Ellis also observed that, like some of Satie’s output, the *Petits Préludes* “seem like exercises in musical abstraction and expressionlessness, or perhaps even serious play,” a remark which complements the game-playing origin of the *Petits Préludes* proposed here. Furthermore, it could also be argued that there is yet another layer to the *Petits Préludes*, a didactic one, with each piece incorporating a technical issue, as follows (bar numbers in brackets): No.1, the articulation of rests in an imitative texture; No.2, thirds in the left-hand (with fingerings provided by Alkan) in the *Fauxbourdon* sections (1-4 and 9-12); No.3, thirds in the left-hand (6-10) and the articulation of rests in an imitative texture (14-21); No.4, effectively a study in octaves; No.5, overlapping hands (3, 5, and 7), thirds (2-9), grace notes (2-10); No.6, hand-crossing (5-9), thirds and sixths (9-11); No.7, internal right-hand pedal-points (6-9 and 11-12), thirds (10-11 and 14-20); No.8, internal right-hand pedal-points (10-13). Again, we can see Alkan broadly organising his musical material as: No.3 combines the technical issues of Nos 1 and 2; Nos 5 and 6 have the technical issues of thirds and hand positions in common; Nos 5, 6, and 7 have the technical issue of thirds in common; and Nos 7 and 8 have the technical issue of internal right-hand pedal-points in common.

Spotlight on motifs: A closer look at *Pièce No. 6, Op. 72*

Edward Holden, Maynooth University, Ireland

Alkan's last creative period gave rise to three significant sets of keyboard works: the Op. 64 *Prières*, Op. 66 *Grands Préludes* and Op. 72 *Onze Pièces*. Alkan suggests playing these works on either the organ, pedal-piano or piano three-hands, with the exception of the Op. 72 *Pièces* which are scored for piano or harmonium. Considering the different playing techniques required for each instrument this appears a little odd, but it would have increased their appeal to a wide variety of keyboard-instrument players of the era.

This short article takes a closer look at the dominant rhythmic motifs present in *Pièce No. 6, Op. 72*, and highlights some interesting elements regarding musical perception. The main ideas, regarding the labelling of rhythmic motifs, their interactions and tonal considerations, can be applied to other works in the composer's output.

If we fragment the music into rhythmic motifs, and examine how these motifs interact (both rhythmically and tonally), there emerges four distinct rhythmic groups which can be labelled Dynamic, Static, Latently-Dynamic or Latently-Static. Dynamic rhythmic motifs contain various note values, including dotted notes, and tend to form the structure of the perceptible melody. Dynamic rhythmic motifs then can be said to have a dynamic *Tonal Expression*¹. Static rhythmic motifs contain the same repeated note values, or have limited rhythmic variation, and tend to be used in a more supportive role tonally. Static rhythms tend to have a static *Tonal Expression*.

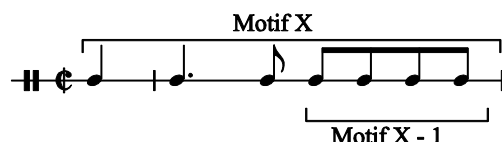
The remaining two motivic classifications are dependent on how the rhythmic motif is used within the composition. A rhythmic motif that is fundamentally static but has a dynamic *Tonal Expression* (for example, homophonic music) is said to be Latently-Dynamic. A rhythmic motif that is fundamentally dynamic but has a static *Tonal Expression* (for example, a repeated note or repeated chord etc.) is said to be Latently-Static.

The almost-perpetual quaver movement that dominates *Pièce No. 6, Op. 72* is perhaps the most obvious feature, rhythmically, that is presented. The creative ways in which Alkan treats this static rhythmic motif is testament to his ability to develop small motivic material. The mock-fugato style, which is suggested at the beginning of the piece, being Alkan's passing nod to baroque idioms.

The sixth *Pièce* starts off tonally unambiguously, and the tonic of B-flat major is established explicitly within the opening eight bars. However, this only serves as the constant against which the tonal distortion that follows can be compared: as the composition unfolds, the harmony becomes more chromatic.

Example 1 on the next page shows the opening six bars of the composition.

The double barline in Alkan's music often signifies the end of a section. In Example 1, it would suggest that these six bars are an introduction to the rest of the piece. This characteristic can be seen in other pieces from this set (for example, *Pièce No. 5*) and, similarly, the rhythmic and tonal content presented in the introduction forms the basis of the dominant rhythmic and tonal thematic/motivic material. From the example above, the following can be determined as motif X:



It is, in essence, a dynamic rhythm, with the sub-motif X-1 being a static rhythm. Another similarity with *Pièce No. 5* is that elements of motif X form the basis of an accompanying feature (in this case motif X-1). The opening six bars present the tonic key, B-flat major, and it is from bar seven onwards that Alkan introduces chromatic notes which begin to destabilise the diatonic harmonies.

¹ *Tonal Expression* refers to how a rhythmic motif is expressed tonally within a composition. An individual rhythmic motif can have many tonal expressions.

Example 1: Alkan 11 Pièces Op. 72 No. 6, bars 1–6

Majestueusement

The level of dissonance (both harmonic and chromatic) also intensifies as the composition progresses. It is in the accompanying quaver part, however, that the chromaticism is most prevalent. As a result of this, there is almost a suggestion of polytonality. It's worth noting, at this point, that musical perception plays an important role in understanding Alkan's music. There is a dichotomous relationship between the *visual* and the *aural* present in his compositions, particularly the later keyboard music. If we consider the second bar of Example 2, the G-sharps are perceived aurally as A-flats given the prevailing flat harmony.

Example 2: Alkan 11 Pièces Op. 72 No. 6, bars 13–15

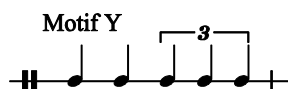
Example 2, additionally, shows the sub-motif X-1 in an accompanying role. The false relation also helps in hinting that the two parts are pulling away from each other tonally. Although in this instance, the note name is restated at the same register so its aural rendering is not strictly false relation, but rather it is presented to the ear as a succession of notes perceived to be in the same voice as follows: E-Natural – F – E-Flat.

This type of tonal and compositional ambiguity is very common in this set of works and in Alkan's music in general. In *Pièce* No. 6, the dichotomous relationship that is witnessed between diatonic tonalities and chromatic tonalities (occurring together) also adds to the perception of motion on the rhythmic plane. The sub-motif X-1, although it is a static rhythm, has a dynamic tonal expression; this dynamism is the result of a constantly changing tonality. Example 3 helps to put this in to context:

Example 3: Alkan 11 Pièces Op. 72 No. 6, bars 10–12

The two-part texture is both tonally and rhythmically exposed and the presence of linear augmented intervals in the bass part cannot be disguised. The rising chromatic bass part clashes with the diatonic treble part and it is this type of writing that fuels the perception of polytonality.

The second identifiable motif, the triplet motion, is already presented in Example 2. Here, the triplet movement can be referred to as being anticipatory in nature as it does not become a dominant feature until bar 28. The following illustrates motif Y:



The rhythmic configuration that is presented in motif Y can be seen tonally in the following example:

Example 4: Alkan 11 Pièces Op. 72 No. 6, bars 28–30

The score for Example 4 shows three measures. The upper voice (treble clef) features Motif Y, which is a triplet of eighth notes. The lower voice (bass clef) provides a chromatic accompaniment. The first measure is marked with a dynamic of *mf*. The key signature has two flats.

The section of the composition, in which motif Y appears as the dominant motif, is actually quite small in comparison to the sections where motif X is predominantly active. Its inclusion here as a main motif is based on two things: firstly, rhythmic diversity – the triplet – and secondly, repetition. It is a dynamic rhythm that is latently static. Its use quasi-sequentially restricts it from gaining tonal independence and developing into a dominant melody. The dissonant chromatics that occur in the accompanying role distract from motif Y's potential dynamism.

Motif Y forms part of the wider opening section and the eight-bar sub-section where this motif is mainly used forms the basis of a transition to a developmental section: it is for this reason that these bars, along with the actual Y motif, can be called transitory. It is not heard again once this sub-section ends at bar 34.

The textural change that begins in the developmental section, starting at bar 35, sees a departure from the delicate two-part texture to a fuller chordal texture. The prevailing rhythmic motif is sub-motif X-1 and there is also a tonal shift to the subdominant via an augmented ninth chord². Example 5 shows the last bar of the opening section, where Alkan uses the augmented dominant ninth chord as the basis for an elided cadence into the developmental section.

Example 5: Alkan 11 Pièces Op. 72 No. 6, bars 34–36

The score for Example 5 shows three measures. The first measure (bar 34) is the last of the opening section, featuring Motif Y in the upper voice. The second measure (bar 35) is the first of the developmental section, marked with a dynamic of *ff* and featuring a chordal texture. The key signature changes to one flat. The score is labeled with 'Eb: Vaug9' and 'I' below the first two measures.

In the developmental section, Alkan takes the descending scalar passages, seen at the beginning of the composition, and reverses them to form ascending scalar passages that now support the chordal texture of the upper harmonies. There is a notable shift away from the chromaticism associated with sub-motif X-1 and the dynamism that was perceived in the opening section is now lessened here. This is due to the staticity and tonal predictability associated with scales.

The structure in the developmental section is based on sequential patterns and, motivically, no new material is introduced. Tonally, however, the scalar pattern is corrupted with the introduction of linear augmented intervals.

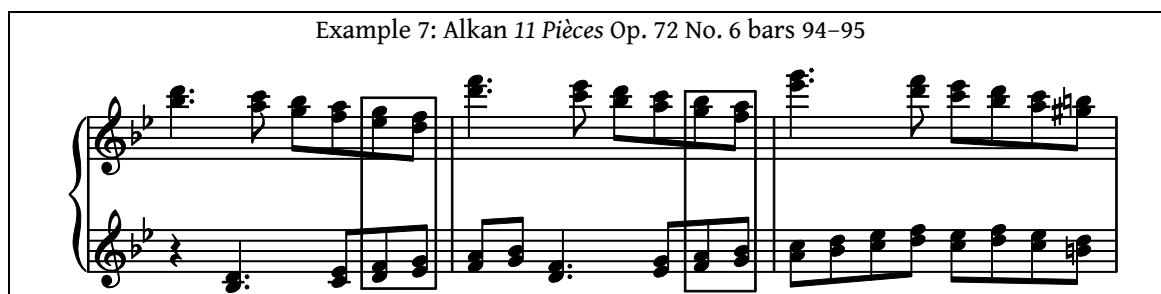
² Chopin uses this chord in some of his Nocturnes also.

As the section concludes, there is a return to the elements that were seen in the opening. The texture reverts back to a light two-part voicing, with the eventual reintroduction of motif X at bar 60 which is shown in example 6:



Motif X dominates the remainder of the composition and it is clear from this that repetition plays an important role in the overall structure of the sixth *Pièce*.

Before the final cadential pattern there are two further compositional episodes that stand out and merit discussion. The first, which begins at bar 89, focuses on the first portion of motif X. It is with the use of this portion of motif X that the first effort to distort the rhythmic flow is made. This is achieved by the use of a mock-fugato style, combined with the contrary motion between the upper and lower treble parts. The motion is dynamic, the tonal expression is dynamic, and partial macro repetition is at play, all combining to create a strong episodic departure from the compositional ‘norm’ of this piece. Consider example 7:



In the lower treble part, the crossing of the idiom across the barline serves to destabilise the prevailing Positive Metric Flow³. The tonal and harmonic consequence of the mock-fugato style combined with the contrary motion can be seen in the boxed notes above; the same four notes are struck in succession in an example of *voice exchange* which, in turn, creates an obvious dissonance each time (the boxed notes above). This type of tonal motion results in tonal and rhythmic staticity.

The second episodic section that merits mention sees rhythmic elements of motif X (and sub-motif X-1) used in a strictly static manner. The episode has an air of tonal agitation about it, with the bass line repeating the leading note (A) and tonic (B-flat) in succession as shown in Example 8 on the next page.

The first four bars of Example 8 show the opening rhythmic feature of motif X in the bass part. Here it is both rhythmically and tonally static as it is just continuous repetitions of the same notes, at the same pitch, adding an air of agitation to the music. The same is true for the sub-motif X-1. It too is now tonally and rhythmically static and, in contrast to its previous chromatic function, plays a diatonic role.

This chordal sub-section is brought to an abrupt end through the introduction of material from the opening bars (albeit now ascending): the unison harmony a direct textural contrast with the chordal writing. With the tonic now re-established in the final nine bars, and diatonic harmony prevailing, the tonal ambiguities that were present throughout the composition are firmly abolished. *Pièce* No. 6 ends as it started with a single/unison statement of the tonic note, B-flat.

³ Metric Flow refers to the succession of beats in a composition, or section thereof, and how they are accented in relation to the governing time signature. It may be Positive (enforcing the beat-stresses) or Negative (persistently emphasising the weaker beats).

Example 8: Alkan *11 Pièces* Op. 72 No. 6, bars 119–125

The dominant (rhythmic) motivic material presented in this *Pièce* might be concise but the individual motifs are prevented from turning musically stale through a combination of development and interaction. Motif X unifies the piece, with its reintroduction at bars 19 (without the preceding crotchet), 60, 89 (without the preceding crotchet) and 127. The shifting from melody-reliant homophony to strict (homorhythmic) homophony adds another layer of contrast to the composition both rhythmically and tonally. Overall, the musical ideas formed in *Pièce* No. 6, Op. 72 are cleverly structured, and the harmonic palette is truly identifiably as being of Alkan.

The main ideas presented in this article are expanded upon in the PhD thesis, *Charles Valentin Alkan: Interpreting the Composer's use of Rhythm as Identified in the Dominant Motifs present in the Music for Organ, Pedal-piano and Harmonium*⁴. In it, the fundamental rhythmic motifs found in the three sets of keyboard works, Op. 64 *Prières*, Op. 66 *Grands Préludes* and Op. 72 *Onze Pièces* are identified, examined and categorised using the classifications mentioned above.

⁴ PhD thesis available online at the following link: <http://eprints.maynoothuniversity.ie/5443/>

Le Chemin de Fer

Nick Hammond, York (UK) and Frederik Keygnaert, Leiden (The Netherlands)

On 20th October 1844, the weekly journal *La France Musicale* (7th year, no 42, p300) reported: “This week we have heard three new compositions of Alkan, la *Marche héroïque*, le *Preux*, étude, and le *Chemin de fer*, étude.”¹ Alkan evidently performed the works in October 1844, although whether at a public concert or to a more selected audience is not clear. We have found no announcements for a public recital in either *La France Musicale* or elsewhere.

The purpose of this brief article is to sketch the cultural and musical context of *le Chemin de fer* and reflect on some of the reactions to the work. Ronald Smith (1987) gives us a compelling introduction:

“*Le Chemin de fer*, which depicts a railway journey, is probably the first ever example of ‘mechanised’ music. It is a brilliant concert study of the toccata genre. A fuliginous stream of semiquavers flickers and surges above the hypnotic beat of wheel-upon-track. From time to time a confident song springs up to confront the danger and anxiety of rail travel in the 1840s. There is even a strident, stylised realisation of the locomotive’s whistle. Clusters of acciaccaturas, Alkan’s speciality, add extra thrust to the relentless pace which never slackens until a final deceleration brings the momentum to a controlled standstill.”

Returning to the report in *La France Musicale*, under the general title *Petite Chronique Musicale* and written by “Escudier”, the article continues in a complimentary manner:

“Since Weber, probably nothing more beautiful or more original has been produced. Alkan is not only a composer of the first rank, but he is also a splendid performer who astonishes you with his elegance, his ease of playing, his passion and his unbelievable verve. We will hear this great pianist and his magnificent works this winter, and the public will receive them with wonder.”

The following February, *La France Musicale* (9 Feb 1845, 8th year, no 6, p45) reviewed the two studies, *le Chemin de fer* and *le Preux*. Both works had been published in 1844 in Paris by the *Bureau Central de Musique*, under the control of the Escudier brothers (one whom, presumably, was the author of the 1844 report of Alkan’s performance). The review, under the pseudonym “Nicolo”, is quite detailed and worth reporting in full.

“Since the composer of the two études which we will analyse has thought he should give them particular names, it must be that, in his mind, there was a certain analogy between his compositions and the objects to which each title refers. We can, therefore, upon opening the first score, imagine ourselves sitting down, not at the piano, but in some carriage ready for departure. Can you hear the heavy, regular drumming of the steam train yet? Or, if you prefer, the persistent repetition of the regular figuration in the bass imitating the sound so well? The signal has been given and everything starts moving. You find yourself hurled in an uninterrupted succession of runs of semiquavers in the right hand. At this supreme moment, whoever you are, virtuoso, performer, do guard against wrong notes! The speed of the movement may derail you and you will not fail to realise the extent to which an accident might risk your reputation. But your expertise and long experience reassure us, and while the landscape unrolls before our eyes – or at least, the wonderland of sounds captivates our enraptured ears – we will savour the delicacies of a sensual and seductive reverie: this *cantabile*, suddenly appearing amid a pattern of semiquavers so ingeniously divided between the two hands, invites us so gracefully to let our gaze roam from left to right, especially if the pianist is beautiful, her skin white, her fingers long and slender! Then, ending our musing, we plunge again into the fervent whirlwind that carries us – perhaps the turmoil of our passions! Indeed, what a joyful idea to devise thus a little romance on a trip: what better way to free ourselves from the limitations of space and time. The *smorzando* and the *rallentando* announce, eventually, the end of our route and our étude.

“And so we have introduced our readers to the concept of imitative music. For the second piece, we shall give them the pleasure of imagining a knight in shining armour who plunges into a series of tournaments, gains victory after victory and conquers the fairest of the fair. But we must let go of our fantasies and consider the purely prosaic aspects. This second piece of M. Alkan is more difficult than the first, particularly towards page 7 where we find an explosion of chords progressing *prestissimo* from one hand to the other, and elsewhere there are octave runs which demand a wrist made supple through practice. Whilst the first étude is intended to develop the agility of the fingers in particular, the second

¹ Translations from French by Frederik Keygnaert

encourages the player to acquire terrific strength and power of execution. In other words, *le Preux* is an *étude di Bravura*. But one way or another, both are thoroughly brilliant, with immense impact and full of variety – despite their modesty in essentially offering only two main motifs each – and they are put together with an art that is truly classical. Harmony with so much colour and distinction, even without any eccentric or bizarre modulations, can only increase the merit of these cultured masterpieces that are, in sum, worthy of the remarkable talent of the composer. It goes without saying that these pieces are perfectly fingered for the instrument and that both, despite their subtitles, will contribute just as convincingly to the enjoyment of the public in our salons and our concerts as they will to the educational improvement of our students.”

Disregarding some of the stylistic conventions of mid-19th Century reviewing, we can conclude that both Alkan’s performance and the music itself were highly regarded. The reviewer “Nicolo” interestingly uses the term *la musique imitative* (imitative music) in relation to *le Chemin de Fer*. In so far as Alkan is attempting to mimic the sound of the train, this may be appropriate. There are other examples of sound imitation in Alkan’s output: *Le Vent* (op. 15/2) is an obvious instance, and others include the chirruping crickets in *le Grillon* (op. 60 bis) and various chiming bells (such as in *les Cloches*, op. 63/4, or the third movement of the *Grande Sonate*, op. 33). While there are undoubtedly imitative aspects (including, as Smith points out, the locomotive’s whistle), it might be more accurate to characterise *le Chemin de Fer* as programme music, with the intention of capturing the perception or spirit of the experience of a rail journey rather than the actual soundscape. In much the same way, J. M. W. Turner’s famous train painting *Rain, Steam and Speed*² (first exhibited in 1844, the same year as the publication of *le Chemin de Fer*) embodies the spirit of the rushing, steaming locomotive on a static canvas.

Alkan had already published pieces in the toccata style, including *Le Vent* (op. 15/2) in 1837 and the third of the *Grandes Études pour les deux mains séparées et réunies*, published in 1840 but later given the confusingly high opus number of 76. To come were the two Toccatinas (op. 63/36 and op. 75). So being “hurled in an uninterrupted succession of runs of semiquavers” (or equivalent) was already part of Alkan’s language.

The opening of railways from Paris would have had great social and cultural significance in the 1830s and 1840s. It was only in 1837 that the first line for passenger traffic, and the first to serve the capital, was opened from Paris to Le Pecq. Le Pecq is in the St Germain district north-west of central Paris, and the line was extended to Rouen in 1843. Significantly, the terminal station in Paris was at *Embarcadère des Batignolles* (also known as *Place de l’Europe*), about 200 metres north-west of the current St Lazare station and within walking distance of Alkan’s residence at that time in rue Saint Lazare. It therefore seems likely that Alkan’s first experience of the railway was from this station. The other possibility is the *Gare d’Austerlitz* (originally called the *Gare d’Orléans*) which was built in 1840 to serve the Paris to Corbeil line and extended to Orléans in 1843. However this is some distance from Alkan’s residence.

The station at *Embarcadère des Batignolles* was opened on 24 August 1837 by Queen Marie-Amélie, wife of King Louis-Philippe, which must have been quite an auspicious occasion. The first public run was on the following day: “On the 25th August 1837, the first passenger train ran between Paris (Place de l’Europe) and Le Pecq. A journey of 26 minutes for ten leagues with a locomotive of Stephenson³.” The travel experience was not universally admired, however. A journalist for *La Presse* (26 Aug 1837, p1) reports:

“But alas, every fine invention has its bad side: immediately upon arrival, a terrible cloud of smoke engulfs you; you’ve just travelled ten leagues, and indeed you have the appetite of someone who just travelled ten leagues. Your stomach feels like the railway: an iron road produces an iron stomach.”

In these quotes we have translated the French “lieue” as “league”. The league, a traditional measure of distance, was about 4 km: this cannot be the meaning here as ten leagues in 26 minutes would give an absurd average speed of 92 km/h. The French writer Jules Janin states the length of the line to be 18.43 km⁴. Dourtscher⁵ noted in 1840 that *lieue* is sometimes confused with another old measure, *mille*, about 1.8 km; ten *milles* would be approximately the correct distance. Other reports record duration of the journey as between 20 and 29 minutes, giving average speeds of between 38 and 55 km/h (24 to 34 mph).

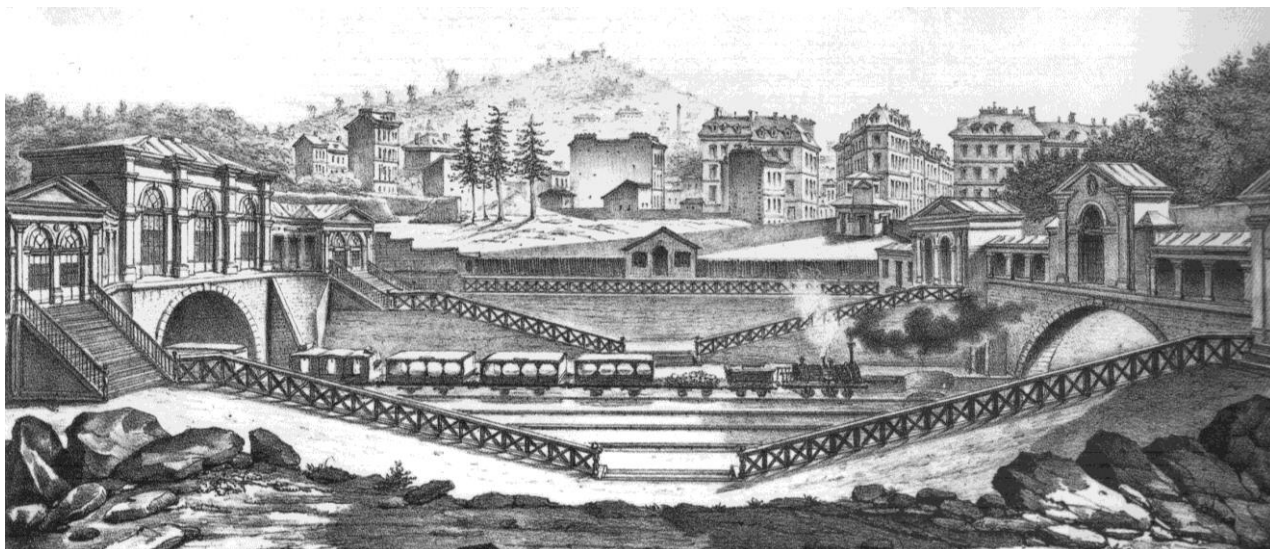
² A reproduction of Turner’s painting can be seen at www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/joseph-mallord-william-turner-rain-steam-and-speed-the-great-western-railway

³ See: www.didierfavre.com/ParcBatignolles28.php

⁴ Jules Janin, *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 25 Aug 1947

⁵ Dourtscher, H. (1840), *Dictionnaire universel des poids et mesures anciens et modernes*. Bruxelles, pp 209-211

A lithograph of the station, by Victor Hubert in 1837, is shown below.



A point to note in the lithograph is the fairly even and close spacing of the wheels under the wagons. This, combined with the short length of the rails at that time (up to the 1850s, rails were of wrought iron and limited to about 15 feet, about 4.5 metres, in length⁶), would have made for a rapid and even “clickety-clack” as the wheels passed over the joints between the rails: perhaps somewhat akin to the repeated bass line in *le Chemin de Fer*. Even though the speed of the train would have been modest by today’s standards, the noise and vibration at the speeds suggested above would no doubt have been fearsome. Compared to travelling in horse-drawn transport, the speed must have been awe-inspiring. In this context, Alkan’s marking of *Vivacissimamente* (*minim=112*) doesn’t perhaps seem so unreasonable.

Le Chemin de Fer was one of the few Alkan’s works that remained in the repertoire into the 20th Century, albeit with only occasional performances. The Swiss-born pianist, conductor and composer Rudolph Ganz⁷ (1877-1972) played the piece in the early part of the century (see Bellamann quote below) and recorded it on piano roll (Hupfeld 14744 & 51330). Interestingly, Ganz studied with Ferruccio Busoni from 1899 to 1900, who perhaps introduced Ganz to Alkan’s music. One of Ganz’s pupils was Joseph Bloch who was something of an Alkan expert⁸. *Le Chemin de Fer* featured in Egon Petri’s series of Alkan performances on the BBC Third Programme in the 1930s. His fourth Alkan recital, on 22 January 1938, included not only *Le Chemin de Fer* but also *Le tambour bat aux champs* and *Le Festin d’Ésope*.

We have located only one further review of the work, by H H Bellamann in 1924⁹. We include his views on some of Alkan’s other works from the same period for general interest.

“There follows *Les Preux* and the first *Nocturne*. The former is a good study, the latter is of slight interest. But in Op. 23 we have a thoroughly delightful *Saltarelle* abounding in skips of really difficult character. Op. 24, *Gigue et Air de Ballet dans le style ancien*, is an investiture of old forms with considerable richness and fulness and a pleasing tartness of harmonic novelty. Alkan began early to go his own way harmonically. Not a little of the difficulty of playing him well is due to the unusual harmonic vocabulary. It gives his work an added teaching value — the fingers learn some new key-paths. Op. 25, *Alleluia* in F major: massive and not exactly of the genius of the keyboard. Op. 27 is the startling bit of realism, *Le Chemin de Fer*, an etude played here years ago by Rudolph Ganz. It is too much in the taste of its time. It is amusing — that is the best that may be said of it: it makes no technical contribution of note.”

We encourage readers to listen to the work – there are a number of fine performances on YouTube – and decide whether they consider it mere amusement or closer to the thorough brilliance claimed by “Nicolo” or the brilliant concert study advocated by Ronald Smith.

⁶ See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permanent_way_\(history\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permanent_way_(history))

⁷ There is a story that Ganz wished to play Alkan’s *Bombardo-Carillon* (for four feet) with a female student, but had to abandon the plan because he felt he was not on sufficiently intimate terms with her (see Bulletin no 88, p 17).

⁸ Some of Bloch’s Alkan performances, recorded on tape, are linked from the Society’s youtube links page (www.alkansociety.org/join-us/Members--news/Member-Youtube-links/member-youtube-links.html). These include *Le Festin d’Ésope*, *Le tambour bat aux champs*, and a selection from *Esquisses*, but not *Le Chemin de Fer*.

⁹ Bellamann, H. H. (1924). The piano works of C. V. Alkan. *The Musical Quarterly*, vol X(4), 251-262.

Letters to the editor

Sir,

The March 2017 issue of the *Bulletin* (no 94) describes the inaugural meeting of the Society back in 1977. I just wanted to add to what others have said, that I vividly remember that meeting in the Waterloo Room of the Royal Festival Hall in May 1977.

I was sitting in the front row, and remember every detail of the occasion (even down to Ronald Smith having to play the trio of the Symphony's 3rd movement again because he felt he could play it better, and how he commented that he really loved that section, as do I!). I'm so pleased that Frank Lioni took pictures that evening, blurred though they are they are amazing to have. This is the first time I've ever seen them! I was so excited about Ronald Smith's forthcoming concert and recording of the Opus 39 and was excited to be a present that evening for the formation of the Alkan Society. I remember collecting a large number of posters for Ronald Smith's forthcoming Queen Elizabeth Hall concert before I left which I proceeded to put up all over my home town of Oxford! I would never have believed back then that I would also one day play the whole Opus 39 in the very same hall 19 years later!! Even though we were few in numbers back then in 1977 we were really witnessing history that evening and I'll never forget it.

Best wishes,

Jack Gibbons, Oxford



Book review

Charles Valentin Alkan (Musik-Konzepte) Taschenbuch

Edited by Ulrich Tadday

Publisher: Boichard Boorberg Verlag GmbH KG (Edition text+kritik), Munich.

Issued in the series *Musik-Konzepte*, Heft 178.

Publication details: September 2017; 135 pages; ISBN: 978-3869166001

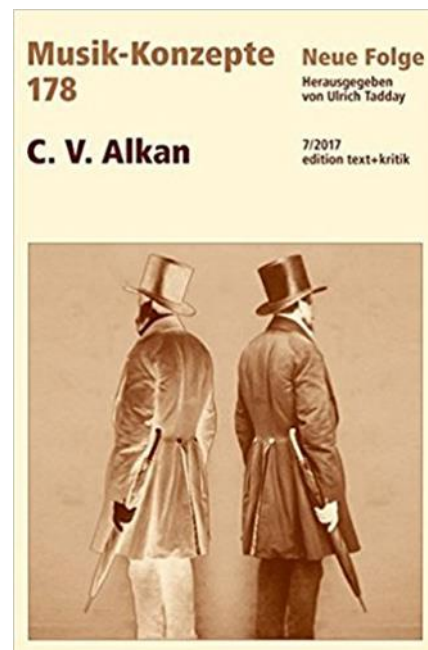
Language: German

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Reviewed by François Luguenot, La Société Alkan, Paris

Published in the *Musik-Konzepte* series, C. V. Alkan is a collective work in German. As usual, this kind of book is a mixed bag, including some very good articles bringing interesting new points of view. Let us start with the general remarks.



Bibliographic references are disastrous: both in the final – and rather substantial – bibliography and in the footnotes there is never any publisher name, only towns mentioned! If this method can be suitable for 15th century or even 16th century books, subsequently it is totally inappropriate and one can wonder if the publisher has even conducted research in a catalogue! For more than two centuries, publishers often have branches in many locations, so mentioning only a single location is completely useless: how many publishers are there in London or in Paris?

Lastly, one can greatly regret that almost all the authors extensively quote William Alexander Eddie's *Charles Valentin Alkan, his life and his music* and seldom Ronald Smith's books. Eddie's book is amazingly full of mistakes – not to speak of the disastrous typography. To Ronald Smith's errors – understandable at the time – Eddie adds his own numerous ones. An expensive and useless book.

Whereas Jascha Nemtsov and Arnfried Edler seem to have no idea of what was happening in France in the 18th and 19th centuries, other authors show a wide and sharp knowledge of Alkan's time. Another good point: there are no mistakes in any of the quoted French texts.

Let us have a look by chapter.

The Lost Profile: on Charles-Valentin Alkan, by Wolfgang Rathert

The author starts in a very original way by elaborating on Alkan's photographs, which are so different from those of other romantic composers. He underlines the striking contrast between the young man and the old man, which offers such a different image from that of the old Liszt. Regarding the two daguerreotypes, he makes interesting comments on the image Alkan gives of himself and wonders if they were not hoaxes.

He stresses how the second part of the French 19th century is complex, mixing for instance Courbet's realism with Hervé's and Offenbach's operettas and the École Niedermeyer cult of old sacred music. He emphasizes that Alkan takes full part in these contrasting waves, quoting the *Impromptu sur le Choral de Luther*, op. 69, the cadenza for the Beethoven's 3rd piano concerto, the *Sonatine*, op. 61, and the conflict between free virtuosity and classical forms – and also the discrepancies between the conservative as he appears to be in his letters and the original paths he follows in his music.

In Schumann's harmful critique of *Souvenirs, trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique*, op. 15, he sees mainly a chauvinistic reaction against a supposed second-rate composer and underlines how today we are not only struck by the deep emotion of this music but also by the narrative strategy of the composer.

Naming Ravel, it is a pity he does not mention the strong relationships between *Morte*, op. 15 no. 3, and "Le Gibet" from *Gaspard de la nuit*.

He also compares the different attitudes towards Alkan in different countries: whereas any interest vanished in France and Germany after 1918, British and American musicians show an increasing interest from the same time. And he also underlines how little place there is for Alkan between Chopin and Liszt.

A chapter full of original and inspiring insights, with only a few mistakes: Alkan did not get a first prize in violin and there is no evidence that he owned a parrot.

Charles Valentin Alkan: a Jewish musician in the Age of Emancipation, by Jascha Nemtsov

This is one of the most disappointing chapters of the book, especially since Alkan's Jewish culture is such an important parameter. Nemtsov's basic idea is that emancipation of the Jews was achieved at the price of a denial of their own culture. The writer goes as far as quoting an outrageous text by Winfried Martini who compares Enlightenment with... Hitler!! This kind of vile talk can only reflect on the author of the quotation.

On wonders if the author has ever studied French history, which slightly differs from German history. He starts by quoting the famous Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre speech at the French National Assembly on 23rd December 1789: "One must refuse anything to the Jews as a nation and grant everything to the Jews as individuals", but he does not understand anything relating to French specificities. For better or for worse, France has been a highly centralised country for centuries, where cultural idiosyncrasies and any kind of federalism have generally been considered as centripetal forces and fought against. The same kind of phenomenon has occurred in Great Britain, against Scotland or

Ireland, with different grounds of course. From this standpoint, any nation – or the hint of it – inside the French one had to be banished and the attitude towards Breton-speaking populations was not different from the one towards Jews – an explanation that is, of course, not a justification!

In addition, the 17th and 18th centuries are a period in France when we witness a growing opposition to the Church and, fortunately, a strong calling into question of religious superstitions. The deep-seated grounds of these leanings are numerous and cannot be extrapolated to other European countries. Secularization (in France, one says “*laïcisation*”, a typical French word, without exact translation in many other languages) poured out in the whole society and this eventually resulted in the separation of the Church and the State in 1905. What does it mean? That, even before French Revolution, Church and religions did lose ground, with discrepancies amongst social and regional populations of course, and that religious practices were more and more restricted to private life. The author ignores this significant evolution, and the fact that, before the time Jews did get undivided citizenship, their communities were still too often ruled by archaic civil and religious Jewish authorities. For Jews, the sudden transition between this kind of obscurantism and a new way of life had certainly been very difficult, even impossible for some of them – but also for other parts of the population. One can read the biography of Moses Mendelssohn¹ as a good illustration of this situation and the uncommon strength one had to have to in order to escape and overcome the obstacles.

One also has to remember that one aim of such a policy was to fight against ignorance and superstitions with education – which is, taking everything into consideration, not a bad purpose and remains a rather good one!

Another irritating point in the chapter is the fact the author never makes any clear split between cultural traditions and religious superstitions. Fortunately, one can speak about Basque or Scottish cultural traditions, such as music, dance or literature, without putting constantly forward their religious practices!

Eventually, the author moves on, studying the influences of Jewish tradition on Alkan’s music but adding nothing new to the much more illuminating analyses of Anny Kessous and David Conway². Very frustrating...

Charles Valentin Alkan and the pedal piano, by Arnfried Edler

Here we reach the dullest chapter – everything will go much better afterwards! The first seven pages are devoted to Germany and Robert Schumann, which is not at all the point! The author seems to consider that the pedal piano totally originates from Schumann and constantly refers to him! He writes a lot about Alkan’s religious behaviour and about the state of his finances, which are not the point either. It takes twelve pages to get to Alkan! Then, nothing is mentioned about the French instrument history, the specificities of the pedal keyboard mechanism and playing, what are the different existing systems – Pleyel, on whose instruments Alkan did play, is not even cited – and what are the differences with organ playing – and what César Franck has done to adapt Alkan’s works. The fact that until the 20th century any organist had first been a pianist is nowhere mentioned even though it explains many things, especially the fact that many works apparently written for the organ show pianistic textures – cf. Mendelssohn, Liszt and Franck amongst others. There is no overview of the wide range of compositions for pedal piano from other composers and to what extent Alkan’s ones differ from them. And when the author mentions Bądarzewska’s *Prière d’une vierge* as a precedent for Alkan’s *13 Prières*, op. 64, one wonders if it is a joke...

Alkan’s Piano Trio, by Christoph Flamm

Fortunately, we have now a fine and interesting analysis of Alkan’s *Piano Trio*, which is usually overshadowed by the *Duo for piano and violin*, op. 21, and the *Sonate de concert for piano and violoncello*, op. 47. It starts with a wide review of the trio genre in France before going into details about Alkan’s trio structure. Then, Flamm stresses the classicism of the work and puts it into the perspective of

¹ Bourel, D. (2004). *Moses Mendelssohn: la naissance du judaïsme moderne*. Paris: Gallimard (ISBN 2-07-072998-2)

² See: Kessous-Dreyfuss, A. (2013). *Le passant du pont de l’Europe: Charles Valentin Alkan entre tradition et modernité*. Massoreth Editions: Aix-en-Provence (ISBN 2911942175); Conway, D. (2011). *Jewry in Music: Entry to the Profession from the Enlightenment to Richard Wagner*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge (ISBN 9781107015388)

Beethoven's trios, whereas it is usually compared with Mendelssohn's ones. He eventually questions the influence of this piece on the compositional debut of Franck a couple of years later.

Alkan's « pièces à titre »: poetics of the vague and the commonplace, by Jacqueline Waeber

Here, we get the finest piece of the collection, which is not surprising with this author. It is obvious she has viewed the subject in detail and has something new to say. Waeber starts by stressing how the French Romantic Movement is deep-rooted in the 18th century: music remains highly dependent on texts and words – and when Stephen Heller edited Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*, he added titles to each of them, as Cortot did with Chopin's *Préludes* in the 20th century. In France, good taste conflicts with Italian instrumental virtuosity (cf. Rousseau and d'Alembert). Then she distinguishes rhematic and thematic titles, which Alkan often amalgamates: *Rigaudon* or *Tutti de concerto dans le genre ancien* infer both a generic form and ancient music.

Waeber elaborates on the meaning of initial “sketches” and intermediate “rough shapes”, and proves Alkan's use of words has to be considered in the 18th-century point of view, that is a musical description can never exceed a sketch. She mentions the strong impact of *Petit air: genre ancien*, “*Fais dodo*” and *Fa* which nevertheless have a taste of incompleteness and fragmentation. With pieces bearing a title, Alkan does not try to show everything, as too many details would kill the sense. Listing Alkan's compositional processes does not help us better understand his music: one has to seek elsewhere. By using extreme simpleness and trivial material, Alkan aims to create something unheard-of by a kind of anamorphosis. In *Gros Temps* for instance, where both hands are playing in the very low register, the author stresses the destruction of an accompanied melody. She underlines also how the countless double bars do not have the usual aim of indicating a change of key or tempo or texture, but instead they are conceived to explain the title.

About the 48 *Motifs*, op. 63, she remarks that the word “motif” had been widely used since the 1820s but with the meaning of something taken from other works (variations or fantasias on well-known opera motifs for instance). In contrast, any of Alkan's *Motifs* is totally original: one has to recognize something which is beyond the musical commonplace. Following Delacroix, Alkan plays with the conventions and turns them into extraordinary things.

As a matter of fact, everything in this illuminating chapter would be worth quoting!

Humour, irony and theatrical roles, by Hartmut Lück

This final chapter adds to the previous one in a way. In literature, the difference between the author and the narrator can be of significant importance. It can go as far as the narrator expressing convictions alien to those of the author himself. Some of Alkan's works suggest this kind of split, especially in his short works, whereas Schumann remains always himself harmonically and rhythmically speaking. As with Jacqueline Waeber, Hartmut Lück stresses Alkan's frequent use of diminutives like *Barcarollette* or *Toccatina*, which is not necessarily ironic but can also refer to affectionate remembrances. By the way, he underlines how “*Héraclite et Démocrite*” from the 48 *Motifs* op. 63 seems premonitory of Mussorgsky's “Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle” from *Pictures at an exhibition*.

He also compares Alkan to Brahms both of whom were often considered as traditionalists in their time and eventually prove to be surprisingly modern. In addition, both did write many short piano pieces at the end of their life.

Eventually, the author focuses on the *Toccatina* (which was NOT originally published as opus 75) which seems to be a supreme self-irony: the stunning end does not end everything but retains the strong feeling that many other things could have been done and tried!

Of course one cannot expect a whole picture of Alkan as a man and as a musician in such a collected edition of about one hundred pages. But, for those able to read German, there is plenty to learn and a lot of profound remarks to meditate upon.

CD review

Alkan: Piano works

Yury Favorin, piano

Muso MU022D, released November 2017, length 67 minutes

Super flumina Babylonis Paraphrase pour piano, op. 52	6'48
Symphonie pour piano seul, op. 39, nos 4-7	26'10
I Allegro	9'38
II Marche funèbre	6'02
III Menuet	6'04
IV Finale	4'23
Grande Sonate pour piano, op. 33	34'01
I 20 ans: Très vite	6'09
II 30 ans: Quasi-Faust	11'23
III 40 ans: Un heureux ménage	10'24
IV 50 ans: Prométhée enchaîné	6'05



Review by Mark Viner

It is still refreshing to hear new readings of what is, relatively speaking, well-trodden ground. This disk, comprising the *Super Flumina Babylonis, paraphrase*, op.52, the *Symphonie* from the *Douze Etudes dans tous les tons mineurs*, op.39, and the *Grande Sonate*, op.33, is the latest recording from the young Russian pianist, Yuri Favorin, who is steadily gaining a considerable reputation. He is clearly an artist who approaches Alkan's music with diligence and respect. The playing is full of fresh insights into the music and makes a powerful case for things being done quite differently to what one is used to and even what is written. That being said, the benchmarks have been set and we all know how these pieces go so why not simply enjoy what's on offer here?

Super Flumina Babylonis, paraphrase, op.52, opens the disk and contains some of the most subtly nuanced playing in the programme. While the musicianship, not to mention piano playing, here is of an extremely high order, the main reservation (out of the very few to be had) is not so much a lack of allowing the music to breathe at times – something which can still be done within Favorin's admirable *style sévère* – but a lack of differentiation between the macro and the micro, in both a structural and a textural sense. This was most keenly felt during the first movement of the *Symphonie*; a structure which demands an especially focussed organisation of events in order to fulfil its full promise. The *Marche funèbre*, while subtly characterised, was marred by the emasculation of its dotted rhythm into a triplet. The *Menuet* and *Finale*, however, contain some of the finest, nay exemplary, playing on the disk and in the discography. Favorin's reading of the *Grande Sonate*, op.33 immediately suggests a more dynamic approach – indeed, much of the piano playing is exhilarating. It is also perhaps the shortest account we have so far encountered, lasting just over thirty-four minutes, but a concentrated reading of an illusive epic, nonetheless. All in all, an excellent release from an engaging young artist and an important addition to the ever-burgeoning discography.

Distractions and diversions

Alkan in popular literature

The distinguished pianist and honorary member of the Society, Marc-André Hamelin, contacted the Bulletin to report:

“I just found out that a novel called *The Forgotten Room*³ by Lincoln Child has some Alkan references. Also, his novel *The Book of the Dead*⁴, written in tandem with Douglas Preston (and part of an ongoing series) contains an episode which specifically mentions my recording of the *Grande Sonate*...!”

Some readers may also be familiar with a detective novel called *The Alkan Murder* by Julius Falconer (ISBN 9781782281832), in which “the wealthy and reclusive Harry Quirke, misanthropist and student of the piano works of Alkan, is stabbed to death in his country house outside Tadcaster.” None of our North Yorkshire members admit to any connection with the book!

Readers are encouraged to contact the editor with other references to Alkan in literature, whether melodramatic or in a more serious vein.



Solution to Prize Crossword number 2 (in Bulletin 95)

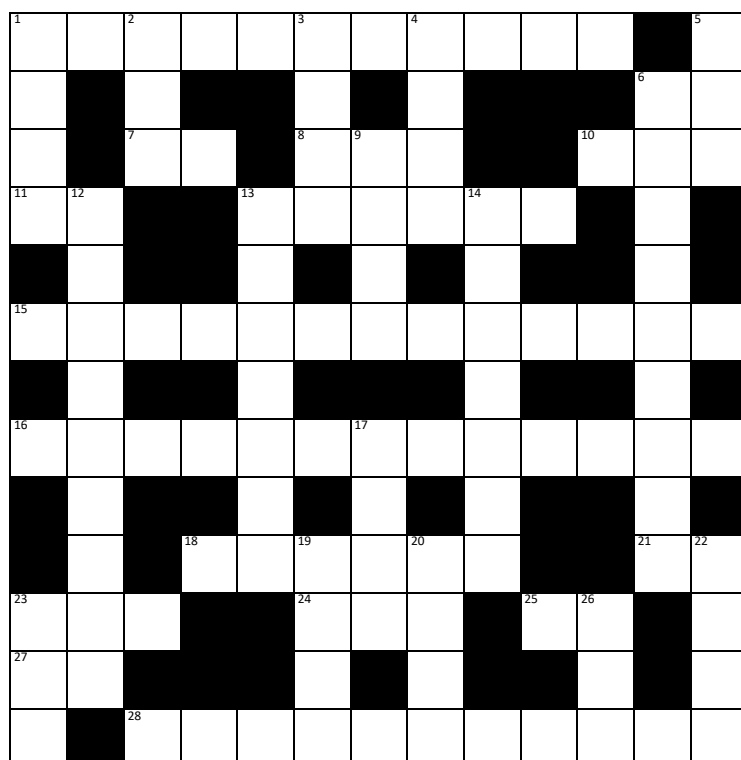
P	S	E	U	D	O	N	A	I	V	E	T	E
O				O		O	U	R		P	A	S
D	O	D	O		S	I	X	T	H	S		Q
		E		A		S				O		U
L	H	O	M	M	E		W	H	I	M		I
I			E		X		I		N			S
L	E	S	D	I	A	B	L	O	T	I	N	S
A			I		M		T		U			E
C		L	A	U	S		S	A	B	O	T	S
C		O				S		D		N		
R		V	I	S	I	O	N		F	A	I	S
A	L	E		E	E	L		F				E
B	A	R	C	A	R	O	L	L	E	T	T	E

Congratulations to all members who sent in correct solutions. Richard Murphy's name was the first drawn from the hat.

³ ISBN 978030747352

⁴ ISBN 9781455582938

Prize Crossword number 3 (Set by En Songe)



Notes:

- Several clues relate to Alkan's studies, whilst some others relate to more general matters Alkanian.
- All of the clues are cryptic, making use of double meanings, anagrams, follow-ons or other such ploys.

Solutions should be sent to the editor* to arrive by Friday 29th June 2018. The first correct solution (drawn randomly from a hat) will win a choice of either Volume 1 or Volume 2 of Kevin Bowyer's collection of Alkan's organ works. Prize kindly donated by *Toccata Classics*.

* treasurer@alkansociety.org

Post:

Nick Hammond, The Alkan Society,
Woodend House, High Stittenham,
York YO60 7TW, UK

Across

- Study note about decapitated French pupil (5, 2, 4)
- 6, 7 Happening party from decapitated finale of 1^{er} *Concerto da Camera* (2, 2)
- See 6 across
- Everything in *Air de ballet* (3)
- 10, 22 **down** Misconstrued a rubato inside CVA's final place of residence (3, 4)
- Short plug, or common era (2)
- Quietly vends outside for incantations (6)
- Crazily munch free bear for study (second part) (6, 7)
- Study from Nicaraguan rebels outside, cropped on time (13)
- See 28 across
- Brief proofreader of French reversal (2)
- See 5 down
- French briny, with translation to English we hear clemency (3)
- Obsessive chant, famously truncated (2)
- Reverse work, mouth near Venice (2)
- 28, 4, 26, 18 Study in averting total community disaster, perhaps (1'8, 2, 7, 6)

Down

- Beginnings of *Caprice*, *Omnibus*, *Morte* and *Aime-moi* result in oblivion (4)
- State of songstress beside 24 (3)
- Turn pale at what left hand has to do in study (fourth part) (4)
- See 28 across
- 5, 23 **across** Inside phone activated? How CVA's lost opera is usually listed (3, 3)
- Revue tour makes for introductory study (9)
- Browse, or turn over a new one? (4)
- See 13 down
- 13, 12 Study from muddled schizoid cobra, olé (7, 9)
- Felon enunciates inside, solo in a convent (4, 3)
- Affectation, from half sent poem study (4)
- I'm a computer to start with, an Apple one (4)
- Road material (English) of transport study (4)
- See 10 across
- Mimic one of reputed son's reputed flatmates? (3)
- See 28 across



The Alkan Society

*aiming to promote the education of the public in the knowledge,
understanding and appreciation of the life and work of Alkan*

Registered Charity
no. 276199



The **Alkan Society**, founded in 1977, is an organization with members from across the globe. It is based in the UK and registered as an official Charity.

The Society promotes the life and work of the French composer and pianist Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888). It supports regular recitals, produces publications (including a regular Bulletin) and is the definitive source of information on Alkan's life and works.



About Alkan

Alkan was recognised by Liszt and Chopin as one of the outstanding musicians of their day. His music has been championed by such eminent performers as Claudio Arrau, Ferruccio Busoni, Jack Gibbons, Marc-André Hamelin, Raymond Lewenthal, John Ogdon, Egon Petri and Ronald Smith.

His works cover a vast gamut of forms, moods and techniques, combining rigorous classicism with bold modernity. His individual use of harmony and rhythm, extraordinary imagination, and uncompromising keyboard writing guarantee his music a unique place in the repertoire, making him one of the great figures of the Romantic era.

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Annual membership fee: £20; Students £10

As a member you:

- ✓ Contribute to the aims of the Society
- ✓ Can purchase discounted tickets for our recitals
- ✓ Receive regular bulletins and other news
- ✓ Can contribute announcements and promotions to our website
- ✓ Can benefit from our expert query service on the life and music of Alkan

Join at:

www.alkansociety.org

Or contact: membership@alkansociety.org

Who we are

President: Leslie Howard; **Vice-presidents:** Anne Smith, Hugh Macdonald, Nicholas King, Richard Shaw
Chairman: Mark Viner; **Secretary:** Coady Green; **Treasurer:** Nick Hammond

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