

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

BULLETIN NO. 32 : APRIL 1987

Registered Charity No. 2761991

President: Ronald Smith
Secretary: Brian Doyle, 146 Brocks Drive, Cheam, Surrey SM3 9UT
(Tel: 01-641 1763)
Membership Secretary: Eliot Levin, 110 Derwent Avenue, East Barnet
Herts. EN4 8LZ

ALKAN VOLUME II-THE MUSIC BY RONALD SMITH

Our President's long awaited second book, dealing with Alkan's music, is now available and can be ordered through the Society. The book is in hardcover and runs to 288 pages with illustrations and many music examples. The first three chapters trace the emergence of Alkan's unique and powerful voice. The following chapters deal with the various aspects of his far ranging style, from the miniatures, such as the Preludes op. 31 and Esquisses op. 63, to the monumental works like the Grande Sonate op. 33 and the Studies in the Minor Keys op. 39. Later chapters include analysis of the three chamber works and a discussion of the large output for pedal-piano or organ, with an insert by Roger Smalley on two of the works he has transcribed for two-piano duo. Other chapters deal with the transcriptions and cadenzas and the music without piano. The final chapter probes the essence and origin of Alkan's style. The Appendices include a comprehensive discography and a detailed catalogue of Alkan's output according to the most recent scholarship.

The book will retail at £14.95. Morris Kahn, the publisher, is generously giving the Society the full discount, so that we are able to offer the book to members for £12.50 plus postage and packing. The Society will still make a profit which will go towards the Festival Fund. Copies of Volume I are still available at £5 plus p&p. An order form is enclosed with the bulletin. Copies will be available at our meeting on May 29th.

REPORT ON JANUARY MEETING by Patrick Lee.

On 25th January, 1987 at the City of London School, Mark Coughlan, a pupil of Ronald Smith from Perth, Western Australia, gave a recital which included virtuoso performances of some rarely-heard Alkan works (only two of them, the op. 35 studies nos. 10 and 11, have been played before at a Society meeting - in November 1979 by Jean Bartholomew).

The first half of the recital consisted of authoritative accounts of the Bach-Busoni 'Chaconne', Beethoven's Sonata op. 90 and Studies no. 6 and 10 from Chopin's op. 25.

During the interval, Ronald Smith read the jaundiced criticism (by one W.R. Anderson) of Egon Petris 1938 broadcast on BBC radio of Alkan's Concerto for Solo Piano.

Mark Coughlan prefaced the second half of the recital with an illuminating talk on each of the pieces to be played, they were:-

'Super Flumina Babylonis', paraphrase of Psalm 137, op. 52 - This extraordinary piece closely follows the changing moods of the text of the Psalm, depicting the anguish of the Hebrews in captivity, evoking the sound of their harps with left hand arpeggios and finally culminating in a ferocious outburst reflecting the infanticidal sentiments of the Psalms last lines. Although the piece is highly sectionalised it is, at the same time, constructed in a well-controlled and integrated style.

This was followed by performances of the last three of Alkan's Studies in all the Major Keys op. 35.

No. 10 in G Flat - This is entitled 'Chant d'Amour, Chant de Mort' and also has a Latin subtitle meaning 'When expected light becomes darkness'. It starts with quite a simple love-song which becomes progressively more animated and passionate but eventually gives way to the gruff, pessimistic 'Song of Death' in the bass. Mark pointed out that here Alkan sardonically uses the same tune as in the opening love-song, but transposed to the minor.

No. 11 in B - This piece was described by Mark as having a hidden melody and having been held in high regard by von Bulow. Its rhythmic pulse continues throughout, while the harmonies intensify with long bass notes which Alkan probably played on the pedal-board of his pedaller. As played by Mark the piece conveyed unalloyed happiness leading to a series of ecstatic climaxes.

No. 12 in E - Mark described this as a 'no-nonsense octave study' and very taxing, both physically and in terms of concentration, as each repetition varies considerably in both melodic and harmonic construction. It is said to have been played by Busoni and Petri who both held it in high regard. Its most interesting feature is that it is written in 10/16 time (two groups of five semiquavers). About the time he wrote this, Alkan became fascinated by a Spanish dance called the 'Zorcicio', which has a similar rhythmic construction, and wrote several pieces based on it. It is clearly of ferocious difficulty and requires a technique of the highest order which was demonstrated in Mark's playing.

The Society is very fortunate in having among its members pianists of this calibre, capable of doing justice to works such as these. Apart from our President, other names which spring to mind are Jack Gibbons, Stephanie McCallum and Thomas Wakefield. All of them have given memorable performances of rare Alkan works to the Society.

It is a great pity that no recordings of these unique performances have been available to members.

May we hope that the situation will be rectified and that recordings of future virtuoso performances of this unique music will be made for sale to members. Mark will be giving a recital at the Holy Trinity Church, Folkestone on Saturday May 9th at 7.30 p.m. This programme will include the Alkan works that he played at our meeting on January 29th, plus the Bach/Busoni Chaconne, Beethoven's 'Appassionata' and Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2.

RONALD SMITH

Our President's concert tour of the U.S.A. and Canada was very successful. He gave the first performance of Alkan's *Trois Grandes Etudes op. 76* in Minneapolis. One critic, Rodney Shewan, headlines his review 'Pianist tames musical monster'. He continues 'if virtuosos still were trumpeted like circus performers, as they used to be in the good (or bad) old days, there surely would have been banner headlines above the World Theatre's elegant lobby announcing "Intrepid pianist unleashes musical monster after 150 years" or words to that effect. The occasion was the visit of pianist Ronald Smith, leading exponent of the French Romantic piano giant, Charles-Valentin Alkan. The monster in question was Alkan's "*Trois Grandes Etudes op. 76*" published in the 1830's but here receiving its U.S. premiere. As recently as 10 years ago no evidence could be found of any complete performances anywhere of these Studies. This is hardly surprising. Amounting to half an hour or more of music, the work consists of a Fantasy for left-hand solo and an Introduction, Variations and Finale for right-hand solo. Both bristle with huge leaps, multiple-part writing and a whole array of other exceptional challenges. Then, after successfully making each hand alone sound like two - if not three - hands, Alkan reunites them in a perpetual motion toccata in which right and left hands play identical notes two octaves apart, a device that is not only unexpected and ingenious but also extremely effective. Smith also gave us Alkan's 'Le Festin d'Esopé', a set of brilliant and highly inventive variations. These he played in quite scintillating fashion. Both here and in the Studies, the discipline, strength and pungent clarity of Smith's style recalled contemporary accounts of Alkan's own playing, which was evidently marked by rigorous discipline and classical purity and was notably uncompromising in matters of tempo.

The same stylistic vigour, yielding at times to delicate, unsentimental lyricism, pervaded the remainder of Smith's programme:- Schubert's Sonata in A minor D 784, Scriabin's 'Black Mass' Sonata, Liszt's Sixth Hungarian Rhapsody and three Chopin Mazurkas'.

How many pianists nowadays would have the courage and stamina to tackle such a large and demanding programme? Members will have the opportunity to hear Ronald introduce and play the *Trois Grandes Etudes* and the *Trois Etudes de Bravoure* (Scherzi) op. 16 at our meeting on the 29th May (see forthcoming meetings).

ALKAN FESTIVAL

The Israeli and French Ambassadors have been invited to become Patrons of the Festival. The Israeli Ambassador, Mr. Yehuda Avner, has kindly agreed. The French Ambassador, M. Luc de la Barre de Nanteuill is very interested in our plans but will give his reply when we have finalised the details.

Mr. Lawrence Jenkins of Prima Artists Management has agreed to help plan and promote the Festival on behalf of the Society. Mr. Jenkins has given many helpful suggestions and ideas in his meetings with Ronald Smith and the Committee, and has been in touch with Malcolm Young of the South Bank on our behalf.

THOMAS WAKEFIELD

Our meeting on March 11th, a recital by Thomas Wakefield, had to be cancelled at the last minute due to illness. We are pleased to say that Thomas has now fully recovered. The new date for his recital is Wednesday May 6th (see forthcoming meetings). Thomas's recital promises to be a memorable one. His programme gives us the opportunity to hear some rarely performed works:- The Sarabande and Chaconne from 'Almira' (concert arrangement) - Handel/Liszt, Minuetto alla tedesca op. 46 - Alkan, Les Mois op. 74 (1st Suite):- Une Nuit d'hiver, Carnaval, La retraite - Alkan, Album d'un voyageur (no. 1 Lyon) - Liszt, Romance - Liszt, Marche Héroïque (dans le style Hongrois) - Liszt, Larghetto from Concerto in F minor op. 16 - Henselt, Scherzo Focoso op. 34 - Alkan, Nocturne in B flat major op. 16 no. 4 - Paderewski, and the Fantasia on themes from Moniuszko's opera 'Halka" - Tausig.

RECORDING PLANS

Ronald Smith is to record the *Trois Grandes Etudes* op. 76 and the *Trois Etudes de Bravoure (scherzi)* op. 16 for E.M.I. in June.

Gillian Weir, the distinguished organist, is to record some of Alkan's organ works on the organ in Westminster Abbey in September, for Nimbus Records.

ROGER SMALLEY ARRANGEMENTS

Roger Smalley's very effective arrangement of eight of Alkan's *Esquisses* were broadcast on Radio 3 on March 4th. The pieces were described as 'Characteristic pieces' and were played by Equale Brass.

OBITUARY

It is with great sadness that we report the death on January 29th of Monica, the devoted wife of our founder member John White. They celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary in 1985. Monica gave John much help and encouragement in the early days of the Society and rarely missed a meeting until ill health made it impossible for her to attend. Committee members will always remember her culinary gifts at the many meetings hosted by John and Monica at their home when John was Secretary. A memorial service was held at the Savoy Chapel on March 26th.

We also report the death of M. Gerard Billaudot, an Honorary member of our Society, on August 10th 1986 at the age of 74. M. Billaudot was the publisher of many of Alkan's works and did much to help promote interest in his music.

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

Wednesday May 6th at 7.00 p.m. - a recital by Thomas Wakefield in the Music Recital Room, Room 201 at the City of London School, Queen Victoria Street, London EC4. Nearest underground Blackfriars. The school is situated about half way down Queen Victoria Street, opposite Godliman Street next to the Salvation Army. The entrance is at the front of the building overlooking the river.

Friday, May 29th at 7.00 p.m. - A recital by Ronald Smith in the Lecture/Recital Room at the Guildhall School of Music, Silk Street, Barbican. Nearest underground - Moorgate.

Wednesday July 15th at 7.00 p.m. - The Annual General Meeting in the Music Room at the Abbey Community Centre, 29 Marsham Street, London SW1.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

£6.00 for London members.
£4.00 for members out-of-London and students.
£7.00 for overseas members (payable in sterling).

All rates cover husband and wife membership.

.....

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

ORDER FORM

To:- Brian Doyle,
146 Brocks Drive,
Cheam, Surrey SM3 9UT

Please send (copy/copies) of Volume I @ £5.00 plus 50p p&p
*(80p overseas)

..... (copy/copies) of Volume II @ £12.50 plus £1 p&p
*(£1.50 overseas)

*postage overseas by surface mail

I enclose a cheque (payable to the Alkan Society) for

(overseas members payable in sterling)

From

Address

.....

.....