

# THE ALKAN SOCIETY

President: RONALD SMITH

Secretary: PETER J. GROVE  
21 Heronswood, SALISBURY, Wiltshire. SP28DH  
Tel. 01722-325771

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### Introduction

Every newspaper seems to Carry a daily National Lottery story, so here is mine. As secretary of a society and registered charity listed in several directories, I receive all kinds of "junk mail"; I expect the marketing men have a euphemism for it. The latest gem to head for the recycling plant is an invitation to a one-day course this November entitled "Making the most of the National Lottery as a funding source: A practical guide for applicants and their advisers". It includes a "Keynote Address" by Virginia Bottomley herself, Secretary of State for the Department of National Heritage (otherwise known as the Minister of Fun) and former Secretary of State for Health. Her predecessor in the job was Stephen Dorrell, and his interest in the arts was well demonstrated when he attended the Cannes Film Festival under the impression that Jeanne Moreau was a man! Virginia kept up the standard when the recent premiere of the "Requiem der Versöhnung" took place in Germany. It was a major event to mark fifty years of post-war reconciliation in Europe, with contributions from a dozen leading composers including our own Judith Weir. As reported in the Times, there was no official British representative in the audience: "Where were you, Mrs Bottomley?" - The cost of the one-day course is a snip at £350 + VAT, a total of £411.25 -it is good to know that the fee includes lunch. I have to tell you that no committee members from the Alkan Society will be attending. While the Royal Opera House or the Churchill family had little difficulty in obtaining millions of pounds, a small society often confused with the Aluminium Company of Canada is a different matter. I fear that any application we may make to the National - Lottery has a good chance of being turned down, and to spend almost a quarter of our current bank balance would not be a good use of resources!

Another subject which features daily in the press is the Internet, also known as the information superhighway. Its reputation is somewhat tarnished by the recent revelation that some 47% of its current use is represented by young males "surfing the Net" looking for pornography. While there are plenty of serious uses too, I fear the large telephone bills and have not joined these sad people so far. However, I am informed that the French edition of the Alkan Society discography can be found on the Internet by anyone equipped with the necessary electronic surfboard.

One piece of new technology has arrived in the house, and I hope our readers are enjoying the new legibility of the Bulletin, thanks to an.ink-jet printer. The address labels are still printed on the faithful (and noisy) daisywheel printer, which is a useful standby if the new machine breaks down, as it did after the summer holiday. Addresses suffer less than the Bulletin from the absence of punctuation marks and descenders (turning y's into v's, p's into o's

and losing cedillas) caused by a misalignment in the ribbon, and I apologise for the irritation it must have caused in the last few editions. Unfortunately the new printer is still driven by the same toy 32K computer (please don't laugh) with a word-processing program that is quite the reverse of "what you see is what you get". Therefore all spelling and syntax is still the responsibility of the Editor. A new computer is on the shopping list, but it is a big decision and for the moment our French colleagues continue to take the award for presentation.

### **Forthcoming events**

A poster is enclosed which gives details of an organ recital by Bridget Marshall, one of our newer members. It takes place on Wednesday 15th November at 7.30 p.m., in the Eglise Notre Dame de France, 5 Leicester Place, Leicester Square, London W.C.2 (nearest Underground stations, Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus). The programme contains Alkan's Onze Grands Preludes, Op. 66, as well as the Sonata by Milhaud, Festival Prelude Op. 37 No.2 by Lewandowski, and Mendelssohn's A major Sonata, Op. 65 No.3. Admission is £5 at the door. Several of the eleven Preludes remain unrecorded, and this is an excellent chance to hear the set in its entirety, in a conveniently central location. The recital is part of the B'nai B'rith festival of Jewish music.

Jack Gibbons, whose new CD is reviewed later, plans to include some Alkan in future recitals, and I hope to send details when they become available.

Marc-André Harnelin -whose new CD of Alkan's Grande Sonate is now available - is returning to Britain in the New Year. Plans so far do not include any Alkan, but his many supporters will be interested to know that he is giving a Wigmore Hall recital on Sunday 14th January 1996. The all-Liszt programme contains the Apparition no.1, Concert Studies nos. 1 and 3 (*Waldesrauschen* and *Un sospiro*), three Hungarian Rhapsodies (nos. 2, 10, and 13), the late pieces *Nuages gris*, *La lugubre gondola* and *En reve*, and the *Reminiscences de Don Juan* (based on Mozart's *Don Giovanni*). Hamelin returns for a BBC World Service "Celebrity Recital" at St George's, Brandon Hill, Bristol, on Sunday 18th February, where he will play the "Concord" Sonata of Charles Ives and three Scriabin sonatas. He has recently recorded the Scriabin sonatas for Hyperion and will be recording a disc of Percy Grainger in January. There will also be a lunchtime recital for the BBC at St. John's, Smith Square, London, on Monday 25 March, and a recital in the, Braithwaite Hall, Croydon Clocktower on Sunday 21 April. The programmes are to be 'announced, but the latter appears to include his wife, the soprano Jody Karin Applebaum, with whom he occasionally gives cabaret evenings and has recorded a splendid CD of cabaret songs by Brit ten, William Bolcom and Schonberg (believe it or not - the *Brettli-Lieder* of 1901), on the Music & Arts label (CD 729).

For any members who happen to be in Vienna on Thursday 25th April, Hamelin will be playing Alkan's *Concerto for Solo Piano* Op. 39 Nos. 8-10, together with Liszt's *Etude en 12 Exercices*, Op. 1, in the Mozartsaal of the Konzerthaus. [The Op. 1 studies, published in 1826, when Liszt was in his mid-teens, bear some relation to the twelve *Grandes Etudes* of 1837, the first -and even more difficult -version of the Transcendental Studies of 1851, but

they are on a much smaller scale and more like the studies of Liszt's teacher Czerny, to whom he dedicated the two sets of larger studies.]

I have to apologise sincerely to our President for failing to complete this Bulletin in time to give advance publicity to some of his recent recitals which included some items by Alkan. The concerts on 16th September in Horsham and 20th October in Uckfield were mentioned in the last Bulletin. There have also been recitals in St. Peter's School, York, on 13th October, Sedburgh in Cumbria on the 14th, and Worthing on the 19th. I hope some keen-eyed members managed to spot these in the local press and I would be interested to hear about any of them, particularly the response of the audiences to the Alkan pieces. A report of Ronald Smith's recital at the Husum "Festival of Rarities" appears later.

### **Record reviews**

Stephanie McCallum's CD of the twelve major-key Etudes, Op. 35, (Tall Poppies TPO55) has been receiving some good reviews around the world. An Australian critic wrote: "Here is a recital of fascinating (if not always terribly good) music, by an eccentric French composer of the 19th century, played with such bravura technique and understanding that it makes me wonder why McCallum is not sitting in front of our symphony orchestras playing concertos on a regular basis." Of her CD of contemporary music ("Notations", Tall Poppies TPO37, containing works by Boulez, Butterley, Dench, Henderson, Humble and Xenakis) the same writer says: "The simultaneous appearance of a disc of contemporary works from the same pianist confirms her credentials in a broad range of styles, the playing always characterised by brilliant, steely finger technique and an unswerving and intelligent dedication to the music in front of her. Anyone who plays Alkan and Xenakis with equal mastery deserves all the accolades we can throw her way. Brava!"

A reviewer in "American Hi-Fi" describes the record as "irresistible" and says that he listened to it many more times than usual for a review. He finds the etudes to "represent Alkan at his best and most accessible. For the newly-initiated this would be a great place to begin. They are reminiscent of Liszt's contributions to the genre and are nearly as good...these pieces are far more straightforward than the labyrinthine minor-key etudes." He says later: "Stephanie McCallum is a thoroughly convincing champion of this music. Not only are her fingers up to the quite formidable technical task, but she has the right kind of temperament. Her playing has real character and élan."

Stephanie has recently recorded Alkan's Symphonie as well as "Promenades", Op. 7, by Albéric Magnard, the two to be released probably later this year, again on Tall Poppies records. She performed both works earlier in Sydney. [Magnard (1865-1914) was among the French composers between Saint-Saens and Debussy, such as D'Indy and Dukas, who were influenced by Wagner. His early death was a tragic consequence of the Great War, when he was shot in his house by a German soldier, a mistake which recalls the similar death of Anton Webern at the hands of an American soldier in 1945. Marie-Catherine Girod played three of the Promenades, composed in 1895, at Husum this year.]

Hyperion has released Marc-André Hamelin's new CD (CDA 66794) which contains not only Alkan's Grande Sonate and Sonatine, as previewed in the

last Bulletin, but also the Barcarolle Op. 65 No.6 and "Le Festin d'Esopé" from Op. 39. This is one of the best Alkan discs you are ever likely to hear, and can be recommended without reservation. The performance of the Sonata recalls Hamelin's already excellent broadcast in a BBC recording, with the additional advantage of the ideal conditions and editing available in the modern studio. The first movement is very fast, as intended, and the gentler middle section maintains the tension, unlike some other performances which take it too slowly with no justification from the score. Ronald Smith's recording makes more of Alkan's accents on the first beat of the bar at the start; here it sounds more like 3-2 time without the 3-4 cross-rhythm. Otherwise I cannot fault the movement, which is cleanly played even in the most difficult passages. "Quasi-Faust" is likewise a staggering achievement: this, the longest and hardest movement, is again taken at a bold pace but always under control. He has large enough hands to stretch almost every chord without resorting to arpeggios, and some of Alkan's effects, like the "blind octaves-plus-thirds" just before the recapitulation, are achieved with great panache. I am not quite sure whether I can hear the famous triple-sharp in Faust's "ordeal by fugue" - the eight/nine/ten/eleven-part fugato, depending on who is counting. Perhaps the only way to make it clear is to record each part separately, as I once did as an experiment. Unfortunately I cannot play the rest of the movement!

The two slow movements are also beautifully played. with "Promethee enchainé" taken extremely slowly, as marked, but managing to sustain the momentum at the same time. lasting 9.10" .Pierre Reach and Alan Weiss sound hurried by comparison in this movement (as well as being considerably slower in "Quasi-Faust"). Only Ronald Smith's EMI recording. still the definitive performance of the Sonata - or perhaps now the other definitive performance, if that were possible - is slower. and moreover by two-and-a-half minutes, bringing one of the few criticisms at the time of its release, though not from me. (Would you expect otherwise from someone who enjoys Wagner operas or the half-hour slow movement in Bruckner's eighth symphony?)

The Sonatine is also given a very fine performance, much better than Hamelin's broadcast from St. John's. a rare disappointment for him. Any criticisms are minute: the lack of differentiation between similar semiquaver groups in the Scherzo and its reprise. where Alkan superimposes a dotted-quaver/semiquaver voice. though the notes are the same; and the ignoring of Alkan's *fp* at the start of the finale, an effect which can be achieved with some nimble pedalling just after releasing the chords. But everything else is superb, and, to borrow Ronald Smith's metaphor, the lemmings leap from the cliff at the end with complete abandon.

The Barcarolle is beautifully played and is obviously a favourite piece of the pianist. while "Le Festin d'Esopé" will also take some beating by any future performers. François Luguenot. my French counterpart, has provided the programme notes. which have the authority one would expect. For "Le Festin" he favours the rather disgusting story in Jean de la Fontaine of Aesop's feast of tongue cooked in a different way for each course, over the more homely suggestion of characters from the fables, but with impeccable reasons. I am sure. The review in the "Gramophone" is due in the December issue. although the disc has been out for some time. Jeremy Nicholas, in the September edition of "Classic CD", is very enthusiastic. hailing Hamelin as

"the nonpareil of Alkan pianists" among the new generation. Recalling his earlier CDs of the *Concerti da camera* and the Concerto for Solo Piano, he writes: "Hamelin's outstanding technical facility allows him to articulate the demonic writing with an accuracy and power I have yet to hear equalled, with an authentic dry Gallic touch and, not least, a dare-devilry which only the most sanguine could resist." Of the new recording, he adds that "both Alkan and Hamelin can respond to the lyric and wistful" in the "haunting Barcarolle. It goes without saying that all virtuoso fanciers will snap this up without delay." The Independent newspaper featured the disc in its weekly "Double Play" feature, in which one recording is chosen for parallel reviews by Edward Seckerson and Stephen Johnson. The former says: "Alkan could lay down more notes, at faster speeds and in more impossible permutations, than you could ever imagine...Consider the labyrinthine eight-part fugue, the sinister endgame of his turbulent précis of the Faust legend (30-something): can even Alkan's amazing fingers have illuminated each phantom voice as Marc-André Hamelin does here? It's the high definition of his playing, the dizzying articulation of the pyrotechnics (try the whirring *moto perpetuo* of the *Sonatine's* Scherzo for size), his ability to shape, colour, turn phrases on a sixpence. It all comes together in *Le Festin d'Esopé*, where the only thing more ludicrous than the theme itself is the pianistic gymnastics it's subjected to. Aspiring pianists will blanch, or dream on. The watery chromaticism of the little *Barcarolle*, Op. 65 (perhaps the single most durable creation on this disc), rejoices in the kind of touch you think you've imagined, not actually heard." He concludes: "This is not music I would choose to return to on a regular basis, but the pianism should take your breath away at least once." Stephen Johnson is somewhat dubious about the music itself - "astonishing for its fecundity and groundbreaking originality, and yet it's expressively opaque...[recalling] Chopin or other pioneer romantics (it was Schumann who compared him to Berlioz) but it's oddly un-self-revealing, even when it invites our sympathy -as in the bleak "Prometheus Bound" finale of the *Grande Sonate*. Still I've never heard any Alkan work played with such breathtaking assurance...obviously a superb technician. There are passages where one would swear that two pianists were playing, not just one frail human being with only two hands. And there's much more than technical skill on display. Hamelin is a fine stylist: the energy is never crude; the details are finely shaped, the textures balanced so that leading voices stand out clearly while reacting subtly to accompanying strands - the solo pianist as chamber musician. He's equally at home in the formalised world of the *Sonatine* and the grim humour of *Le Festin d'Esopé* -a vivid response to a strangely distasteful little fable. The whole disc is an outstanding achievement -the recordings give a vivid but natural sound-picture, intimate without being too close to the piano. There's no better introduction in the current record catalogue to this intriguing, paradoxical composer." Small wonder that Hamelin's disc appeared at no.1 in the Saturday edition's list of "Six Good Classical CDs" the following day - "Pianism to take your breath away".

The other, equally important, issue this summer was the complete set of the Op. 39 minor-key Etudes played by Jack Gibbons on ASV CD DCS 227. These are on two generously filled CDs in a sensible package the size of a single CD box. The first seven studies on the first disc are followed by a thirty-four-minute fill-up of twelve short pieces, while the other five Etudes occupy the second disc- total time, 155 minutes, which is not far off the maximum.

Jack played *Le Festin d'Esopé* and the *Concerto* for the Alkan Society while still in his teens, and therefore the music has been maturing in his mind while he became best known for his Gershwin and Chopin recitals. His performance of the other minor-key studies is very similar to his marathon evening in January, when he played all twelve in a single recital. Listening to him "in the cold" at home makes one slightly more critical of certain things. "Comme le vent" is extremely fast, as marked, but lacks the true pianissimo shown at several points in the score. Perhaps Alkan was asking the impossible. The two large works formed from several studies come off well in general, particularly the *Concerto*, but the *Symphonie* has great rhythmic drive *too* and the excitement compensates for a few blemishes in some passages. I am particularly impressed with the *Ouverture*, which is the least recorded of the Etudes and poses some of the hardest problems with its uncompromising look on paper. Hamelin has set a standard in *Le Festin d'Esopé* which is unlikely to be bettered in a long time, but the performance here is very acceptable.

For anyone who is less familiar with Alkan's music, the real gems in this set must be the twelve shorter pieces, which Jack plays with great sensitivity in such pieces as the Nocturne in B, Op. 22 and *Chanson de la folle* from the Preludes. The selection principally shows the gentler side of Alkan in three of the *Esquisses* (*Les cloches*, *Les soupirs* and *En songe*), *Le temps qui n'est plus* and "*J'étais endormie. .*" from the Preludes, *Gros temps* from *Les Mois* and the Op. 65 *Barcarolle*. There is also some fine technique shown in the faster pieces, *Le staccatissimo* from the *Esquisses*, the *Allegro barbaro* from the major-key Etudes and the first *Chant*, Op. 38 No.1. So this issue is to be greatly welcomed, though with Ronald Smith's great recording of 1978 in mind, perhaps with two-and-a-half rather than three cheers.

The ASV recording was recently featured on "Record Review" on Radio 3, when Bryce Morrison gave it a sympathetic and well-considered review, as one would expect from a former pupil of Ronald Smith. He played two extracts from the *Ouverture*, remarking on its "spine-chilling austerity" and "hyperactive minimalism" in the opening passage as well as a "hypnotic moment" in the lyrical section. He also acknowledged Alkan as a "miniaturist of extraordinary inventiveness", citing the Debussian *Les Soupirs*, as well as *Le staccatissimo*, which "*looks back to Scarlatti and forward to Prokofiev*". On the minus side, he did think that the player's "*control hardly matches his exuberance in the Symphonie and Concerto*", but in general welcomed it as a "courageous and ambitious issue", recommended to anyone wishing to investigate "Chopin's Paris next-door neighbour". Later, the third Etude, *En rythme molossique* (with three misspellings in the *Radio Times*), was played in full, to illustrate in particular the remark in Jack Gibbons's own programme notes regarding "Alkan's superb sense of rhythm commented on by his contemporaries".

Reaction in the music press has also been favourable. In "Classic CD", Jeremy Nicholas reminded us that "Jack Gibbons was playing Alkan long before sparkling Gershwin transcriptions. The results on his two generously filled discs are a spectacular triumph and also provide the only currently available recording of the complete 12 *Studies in the minor keys*. This titanic volume of some of the greatest and most adventurous piano music ever written takes over two hours to play and Gibbons turns it into a thrilling experience. If he is technically a notch below Marc-André Hamelin in this repertoire and less rhythmically secure, he equals and occasionally surpasses

him in colour and expression (the baying hounds, for instance, in *Le Festin d'Esopo* are wonderfully done) and fairly hurls himself into performances that have all the electricity of live performance (Gibbons, admirably, has produced the disc himself). For good measure he adds eleven (*sic*) shorter works which demonstrate the extraordinary range of Alkan's music, from pieces inspired by Mendelssohn and Chopin (try the lovely B major Nocturne, Op. 22) to harmonic prophecies of Bartok and Debussy."

In the same review Nicholas also covers Stephanie McCallum's recording of the major-key studies: He finds "little to choose between her and Bernard Ringeissen (on Marco Polo 8223351)" but remarks: "McCallum has a formidable pianistic armoury. ..it's a most impressive recital. In particular, I urge you to hear her beautiful account of Etude No.10 -'Chant d'amour'."

The November edition of the "Gramophone" has a most enthusiastic review of Jack Gibbons's recording from Michael Stewart. He remarks that the catalogue is "bursting at the seams with superlative Alkan recordings", mentioning Hamelin's recordings as well as "Marco Polo's ongoing commitment, which has produced several fine recordings from Laurent Martin and Bernard Ringeissen." He says that *Comme le vent* is "a real baptism of fire", calculating Alkan's *prestissimamente* timing at 4'30". "Ringeissen's recording on Marco Polo, whilst still astonishing, sounds positively pedestrian next to Jack Gibbons, who throws caution to the winds and completes the whirlwind in a staggering 4' 38". Despite the odd occasion when he comes perilously close to tumbling into the abyss I can safely say that this ranks among the most exhilarating feats of pianism I've heard on disc. If Gibbons's credentials as an Alkan pianist are not sealed in his performance of the first *Etude* then his reading of the following two *Etudes*, "En rythme molossique" and "Scherzo diabolico", surely confirm him as an Alkan interpreter of exceptional authority. Listening to these commanding and exceedingly sure-footed performances one is left with the feeling that Gibbons has grown with and nurtured these pieces for some time. The following four *Etudes* make up the Symphony for Solo Piano, and if anything Gibbons is even more impressive in his reading of this striking work. Once again direct comparison with Ringeissen reveals a closer adherence to Alkan's tempo and metronome markings and thus gives the Symphony a much greater sense of impetus and rhythmic drive compared with Ringeissen's more spacious, airy account. With the absence of Ronald Smith's recordings from the catalogues (Unicorn 1970 and EMI 1978), Gibbons's account becomes the top recommendation here.

"Moving on to the Concerto for Solo Piano (*Etudes* Nos. 8-10) Gibbons faces daunting competition from Marc-André Hamelin. Technically I find Hamelin crisper and more classical in approach compared with Gibbons's more wildly romantic reading, which to my mind is close in spirit to John Ogdon's 1970 RCA recording (never released in the UK). The fact that Gibbons's account is contained within a complete recording of the *Etudes* makes it unfair to give preference to one or the other, though I suspect that Alkan enthusiasts will want both recordings anyway.

"More extraordinary feats of virtuosity await the listener in the twelfth *Etude* ("*Le festin d'Esopo*") and the *Allegro barbaro* from the Op. 35 *Etudes*, but the delightful selection of miscellaneous pieces with which Gibbons fills the remainder of the set shows not only the more introverted side of Alkan's creativity but also allows Gibbons to display a less

ostentatious and more directly poetic aspect of his playing. The simple *Nocturne* in B major, with its Chopinesque heartbeat, is beautifully rendered, as are the "Les soupirs" and "En songe" from the *Esquisses*, Op. 63 and the *Barcarolle*, Op. 65 No.6. However, the highlight of these miniatures comes with Gibbons's sensitive and effective delivery of the potently atmospheric "La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer" ("Song of the mad woman on the sea shore"), surely one of the most curious piano pieces to emerge from the nineteenth century.

"All in all, an exceptionally impressive issue that can be highly recommended to both Alkan devotees and newcomers alike. The recorded sound is excellent. More Alkan from this pianist please!"

Another Alkan disc has been released in France and ought to be equally welcome, containing the last three *Recueils de Chants* (Op. 65, 67 and 70) played by Jacqueline Méfano on 2e2m number 1002. The release was delayed from 1992 by the difficulties of the firm Adda, which issued the earlier disc in the Ensemble 2e2m collection. The third book of *Chants* is otherwise unrecorded, apart from at least six versions of the *Barcarolle*, and the fourth only by Osamu Nakamura, of whom enough has been said in earlier Bulletins. *Hélas*, reports of this disc are so unfavourable that I have not bothered to buy it. Our French colleagues find her tempi laborious and her technique unsound, an opinion confirmed by our committee member Averil Kovacs. In the fifth book, for example, the *Scherzo-Coro* lasts more than ten minutes, compared with 5'21" in Stephanie McCallum's recording. M. Luguenot concludes that it would be best to stay with Stephanie's recording for the fifth book and await a better interpreter for the other two.

One other disc can be added to the discography for the sake of completeness, although it contains only one item of Alkan. This is the latest CD of highlights from the Husum festival "Rarities of Piano Music" compiled from the eight recitals given in 1994. The number is Danacord DACOCD 429. The Alkan piece is the ubiquitous *Barcarolle*, Op. 65 No.6, played as an encore by Marc-André Hamelin and already on his latest studio recording from Hyperion. However, the disc can be recommended for some other very fine performances of repertoire hard to find elsewhere. The disc opens with Igor Shukov, playing his own transcription of Franck's organ piece, *Prelude, Fugue et Variation*. Oleg Marshev then plays four of Myaskovsky's atmospheric pieces called "Yellowed Pages". More Russian music comes next: Hamish Milne plays a Fairy Tale (*Skazka*) by Medtner, as well as a Percy Grainger arrangement of the "Sussex Mummers' Christmas Carol". The young contemporary composer Stephen Reynolds is heard in two "Poems in Homage to Delius", beautifully played by Stephen Hough. Spanish music is represented by two encores from Enrique Perez de Guzman: Falla's "Ritual Fire Dance", a favourite of Artur Rubinstein, and a humorous movement from Xavier Montsalvatge's "Sonatine pour Yvette" incorporating the nursery rhyme used for variations by Mozart. Continuing the Spanish theme, Paul Badura-Skoda plays Frank Martin's "Fantaisie sur des rythmes flamenco" by the Swiss composer Frank Martin, a piece dedicated to him. Last comes Hamelin in Thalberg's "Don Pasquale" Fantasy, the Alkan piece, and Walter Gieseking's Foxtrot "Schorsch-Batschi". The Thalberg piece, temptingly described in Harold Schonberg's "The Great Pianists", was recorded by Earl Wild in the 1960's on a great collection of virtuoso pieces reissued both on LP and CD. Hamelin played it



in his Wigmore Hall series last year, and his performance from Husum compares very well with Wild's, even outdoing him in some passages. The Giesekeing foxtrot was spotted by Hamelin in the exhibition of memorabilia on the morning of his concert and he played it, wittily and immaculately, from a photocopy as his first encore that evening. It is a fairly silly piece with frequent glissandi more reminiscent of the great Chico Marx than any serious pianist, but delightful all the same if one is in the mood for something entertaining.

The Husum collections, of which this is the sixth, have been criticised as a "hotchpotch" like some of the other classical "samplers" which have become all too common in the "hit parade" promoted by Classic FM, but they do present some fascinating repertoire in very good performances approved by the pianists concerned. Despite their diversity it is possible to follow certain themes through each programme. In addition, unlike some live recordings the background noise is minimal because the audiences are always so quiet. Other discs in the series from this Danish company have been slow to arrive in Britain, but they are worth seeking out by anyone interested in the unusual.

One other disc originating from Husum contains a complete recital given in 1993 by Roberto Cappello. Previously unknown to most of the audience, he created quite a sensation in a programme mostly of Liszt and his rivals. The music is as follows: Hummel's Little Fantasia, Pixis's Fantasia sur la "Derniere Pensée" de Weber, Liszt's Great Concert Fantasia on Spanish Airs (a horrendously difficult piece, composed in 1844 and published posthumously, and less well known than the *Rhapsodie espagnole* of 1863), and Thalberg's Fantasia on Themes from Rossini's "Moses in Egypt". Then come two Strauss waltzes: the "Emperor" Waltz arranged by Alfred Grünfeld, and the "Blue Danube", not in the usual "Arabesques" of Schulz-Evler, but arranged by Max Reger, both further adapted by Cappello (the latter incorporating part of the cadenza from the Tchaikovsky B flat minor concerto!). The encores are Grieg's Lullaby from Op. 38, the Villanesca from Granados's *Danzas Españolas* and waltzes from Strauss's "Die Fledermaus" arranged by Dohnanyi (and Cappello).

The whole recital appears on a new label called "Artist Memory Club" (AMC-CD 93002-2), on two CDs sold at the price of one full-price disc: total duration 105 minutes. The presentation is slightly odd, including several minutes of applause and background noise, but this appears on the "countdown" to each track and is eliminated when the programming is used on the CD player. The booklet has notes by Gottfried Eberle, who often contributes to the Husum programmes, translated into English and Italian, as well as copious technical details of the recording. The discs will probably appeal most to people who were at the concert, but other "pianophiles" may well find it worthwhile. Details may be obtained from P.O. Box 161, DX-6100-Haderslev, Denmark.

Cappello was naturally invited back to Husum and gave another stunning recital this year: a brief account appears later in the Bulletin.

### **Concerts and broadcasts**

Bernard Ringeissen's recital in the Wigmore Hall on 21st May, arranged by the Chopin Society, was enjoyed by several members, though the total

audience was on the small side. His programme was shorter than we have expected from such as Ronald Smith in the past, but was well played and well chosen to appeal to both the Chopin and Alkan "camps". The first half contained Alkan's Sonatine, the Zorcico and Scherzo diabolico. He has restored the correct clef to a couple of bars in the Sonatine since his performance in Husum, and played the piece well, if somewhat cautiously at the end of the finale, and his tempo for the second movement is considerably slower than marked. The Zorcico, a curiosity in 5-4 time which appears in Georges Beck's album, was played very slowly, and with all repeats observed, turned into quite an epic for an essentially rather slight piece. The Scherzo diabolico was accurately played, if less excitingly than we have heard from Jack Gibbons this year, a little static in the Trio section and not daring enough with the pedal in the quiet return of the Scherzo. The Chopin works were very well played: the Barcarolle, three Mazurkas and the B minor Sonata. Our unexpected bonus was a single encore of Alkan's *Comme le vent*: there were a couple of minor memory lapses, but it was an exciting and provocative choice, and longer than most encores.

Jack Gibbons gave a series of seven recitals in the Holywell Music Room in Oxford during the summer. Three were devoted to Chopin, two to Gershwin and the first and last contained several composers including Alkan: he played the Concerto on 11th July and the Symphony on 29th August. The final recital was entitled "Composers in Paris" and also contained pieces by Chopin, Ravel's Sonatine and Gershwin's "American in Paris", adapted by Jack from the transcription by the composer's friend William Daly. Averil Kovacs reports that Jack was unsure what to play as an encore to please everybody, so he gave them a very clever sequence of eight pieces by Chopin, Alkan and Gershwin, ending with "Auld lang syne" and part of the Rhapsody in Blue. It looks tasteless, but must have been hilarious at the time!

Finding Alkan broadcasts is becoming a frustrating business because of the gradual transformation of Radio 3 into a clone of Classic FM, with more and more programmes introduced by friendly, chatty presenters, with the emphasis on accessibility and attracting a new audience. Increasing numbers of programmes are listed by a general title, with no clear running order of pieces and times. Unfortunately it is losing much of its old audience at the same time. The last straw for this listener has been the arrival of Paul Gambaccini, a former Radio 1 disc-jockey and presenter of the "Classic Countdown" hit parade on Classic FM, whose irritating, hushed tones and ingratiating manner - one anecdote per piece - have attracted a storm of protest in the national press and the radio programme "Feedback". So far Nicholas Kenyon, the Controller of Radio 3, is unrepentant. Life is too short to listen to a long programme hoping to hear something interesting, and my record collection is being explored as never before.

However, some good programmes have survived, and I have noticed several broadcasts in recent months. Hamish Milne's studio performance of the Symphony has been repeated. Marc-André Hamelin's new recording of the Sonatine has been heard twice already, both early in the morning: once in "Record Release", when Anthony Burton remarked on its dissimilarity to the sonatinas he learned as a piano student (presumably the little pieces by Clementi), and once in "On Air", when Andrew McGregor proved to be quite an admirer of Alkan. He commented on the "blistering piano playing...one of

those composers few pianists have in their repertoire...concentrated, refined and very easy to enjoy but, as usual, very demanding for the performer."

On the maligned Classic FM, Prof. Stanley Glasser, prompted by a letter from Averil Kovacs, compared Preludes by Chopin and Alkan in his "A-Z of Classical Music" on 24 July. He mentioned that they were friends and played the B flat minor, E flat major and D minor preludes of Chopin in the recording by Ivo Pogorelich, following these with Alkan's "J'étais endormie.." and "Un petit rien", played by Laurent Martin. He said that Alkan's music had suffered "not a little neglect over the decades", but that it is "happily..experiencing something of a revival. There's even an Alkan Society active in this country." Another small victory for Averil, our most vigorous campaigner.

A few Alkanians' hearts missed a beat when they saw listed a performance of his "Variations de concert, Op. 11" in Radio Times. There is no Op. 11 listed among Alkan's works: was this a recent discovery, or a misprint for his Op. 1 Variations on a theme of Steibelt? Unfortunately it was neither: only the work of a careless compiler writing Alkan's name instead of Henselt's. It was Hamelin's recording of the piece for piano and orchestra which is on the disc with Alkan's two *Concerti da camera*. Jeremy Nicholas recently included the Henselt F minor concerto in his early evening programme "In Tune", so we only need the second *Concerto da camera* for the whole of that disc to have been broadcast. The "Gramophone" recently shortlisted Hamelin's "scintillating" recording, "Live at the Wigmore Hall" (Hyperion CDA 66765), which includes Alkan's Op. 76 Etudes, for its annual awards, though the prize in its section eventually went to Murray Perahia's disc of Chopin's Ballades and other pieces.

### Husum 1995

The festival of rarities had particular interest this year with the return of Ronald Smith, who had left a lasting impression after his first appearance in 1989. This time Alkan occupied just the second half of his programme. His playing of Balakirev's Sonata and eight Chopin Mazurkas was greatly admired, but as Michael Struck of the *Kieler Nachrichten* wrote, he "played his trump-card after the interval. He is one of the few specialists in the music of Alkan, the classical-experimentally-minded, often a little crazy, at times sheerly unplayable' Frenchman. Here Smith played 'at his best' (an expression now apparently part of the German language). "With dry wit, emphasis, virtuosity and tonal sensitivity he demonstrated what explosive is packed in Alkan's work - this futuristic experiment-casket of the 19th century! Well may a Briton have a special sympathy for the inimitable mixture of imperial pride and irony, the constructive and the destructive, the naive and the refined - for example, in the *Marche funèbre* Op. 26 and *Two Caprices* Op. 50, in whose march rhythms is fermenting the style to be found again in Mahler. And in the madly finger-breaking, but somehow also elegant *octave-Etude* Op. 35/12, the reckless composer and the fearless pianist combined to convince the listeners that its 10-16 rhythm is quite the most normal thing in the piano-world."

Other writers were equally enthusiastic. Georg Borchardt devoted his entire review in *Die Welt* to the recital, comparing Alkan's octave study to the appallingly difficult Etudes of Ligeti, and the "Song of the mad woman", Ronald's first encore, to a mixture of late Liszt and Satie. "The *Capriccio alla Soldatesca* recalled the pungency of Berlioz -a subtle satire on the pomp and

emptiness of the Second Empire." And "in the music..were mixed the contemporary and futuristic, the significant and the trivial, in whimsical style." Isabel Herzfeld, in the Berlin *Tagesspiegel*, remarked on the "somehow Britishly ludicrous nature" of his interpretation...Two Capriccii Op. 50 seem unproductive and empty, with their relentless drumfire of repetition and chordal artillery, but dissect the emptiness of war slogans more precisely than many an artistically touching lament", though she thought that to see an anticipation of Mahler seemed exaggerated, bearing in mind the latter's complexity. Hedwig Schroder, in the local *Husumer Nachrichten*, also saw "einen Gentleman" of piano-playing, possibly amused, like the rest of the audience, by Ronald's extremely polite request to remove his jacket! "His disciplined manner, his dry humour, but above all his pianistic charisma, ensured him the sympathy and great admiration of the listeners."

It was indeed very hot for most of the week, particularly with the need to keep windows closed for the recording, to keep the sound of ducks and crows at bay. Everything else about the festival is ideal -a first-rate Steinway, a renowned technician (Thomas Hübsch) on call, and an informed audience which comes to hear programmes which are quite beyond the scope of most piano recitals. As Michael Struck put it, "Husum's summer piano recitals are different...normal concert organisers turn pale" at such programmes. "But then the audience of the *Rarities* week is different...it is not numbered among the species of gourmet listeners who unflinchingly scrutinize whether this or that pianist distils as yet unknown aromas from Beethoven's sonatas or Schumann's character-pieces, or at the least sets new records in speed, slowness or expressiveness. No, Husum's listening public, a good part of which travels here from afar, explores the landscape of piano music "in natura", in which the masterpiece, the well-crafted piece and the iridescent marsh-blossom grow thickly side by side". (At least, I think that is what he wrote.)

It was good to see Mark Morrison, our member from New York, once again in the audience. A "supporters' club" has been formed this year to give a little more financial security to the festival, which depends on sponsorship for its survival, like all arts festivals. So far the seat prices have remained quite low compared with the better-known Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival, from which it remains proudly separate. The minister of culture for S-H paid a visit this year and things look set for a special tenth year. There should be several favourite pianists from previous years and a strong programme is expected.

The other recitals were also full of interest. Daniel Berman, an old friend of Husum, gave a mixed programme including a Bach transcription by Lev Revutsky, a Medtner sonata, pieces by Granados and Manuel Infante, and the Horowitz version of Liszt's 19th Hungarian Rhapsody, a tour de force of playing as well as musical dictation, transcribed from an old recording. Marie-Catherine Girod played some of the rarer Chopin, including the Op. 1 Rondo and Op. 16 Introduction and Rondo, three of Magnard's "Promenades", as mentioned earlier, and the large Sonata in E minor, Op. 63 (1907), by Franck's student Vincent d'Indy. It was only her third performance of the Sonata in ten years, but she played it magnificently, showing it to be a piece of great quality. Girod is indeed a player of rare repertoire - she has recorded the sonatas of Arnold Bax and is now showing an interest in York Bowen, composers almost forgotten in their own country, let alone France, though both have keen supporters.

Endre Hegedlis from Hungary was perhaps below his best in some of his programme, particularly in Myaskovsky's F sharp minor Sonata of 1912 and some of the Liszt arrangements. We have heard a much more fluent "Hexameron", that collaborative set of variations, from Leslie Howard or Marc-André Hamelin. However, he ended with an impressive performance of Wagner's "Tannhauser" overture in Liszt's transcription, and some generous encores including the fifteenth Hungarian Rhapsody (Rakoczy March) and, unexpectedly, the Myra Hess arrangement of Bach's "Jesu, joy of man's desiring".

Roberto Cappello gave another display of pulverising virtuosity in a fantasy on Rossini's "Semiramide" by Henri Herz, one of the six composers of "Hexameron", and some works by Carl Tausig based on Strauss waltzes and the opera "Halka" by Moniuszko, itself quite obscure even before Tausig's treatment. The eight Transcendental Studies by Liszt were less of a rarity, compared with the first - versions played by Janice Weber in an earlier year, but perhaps the pianist himself was that: his accuracy and power were remarkable. He gave us a ninth study as his first encore, followed it with the immense "Rigoletto" paraphrase, and if some rude people had not started to leave, we were quite sure he would have given us the other three studies before calling it a night.

Anton Kuerti, born in Vienna but now living in Canada, proved to be a very flexible artist in a varied programme including Beethoven's op. 77 Fantasy in B minor, Mendelssohn's Sonate Ecossaise, Op. 28, and some Schumann Novelettes as comparative rarities by well-known composers; and a Czerny Sonata in A flat, Op. 7, a Concert Waltz by Glazunov, and some short pieces by Lyadov in the more obscure areas. The Czerny was an excellent work, far from routine, and makes one wonder how many other fine pieces are hidden among the 861 opus numbers which include all those exercises which have tortured generations of students.

Philip Fowke is another British pianist who was making a second visit to Husum. They are doubly grateful to him for also recommending Hamish Milne, who has played there three times already with great success. Fowke was on excellent form, beginning with some early music by Daquin and Rameau, the latter transcribed by Leschetizky, the famous pianist and teacher of so many others. Then came the enormous Sonata in E flat minor by Paderewski, now only known for his Minuet in G and the fact that he became Prime Minister of Poland. Although perhaps not among the greatest works, it was given a full-blooded performance here. Yet another example of the uniqueness of Husum is the fact that Fowke had never played it in public before, and might never have another chance to use the considerable effort in learning it. Perhaps he might persuade the BBC to let him build a St John's lunchtime concert around it. I would certainly not back Mr Gambaccini's programme of popular classics as a likely home for it!

After the interval came ten Brahms Hungarian dances - familiar repertoire, but here transcribed by Moszkowski. Then we heard three Polkas by Smetana and the (fairly) well-known C major Rhapsody by Dohnányi. A generous sprinkling of encores followed - a Waltz by Levitzki (to be heard on Stephen Hough's first Piano Album, a gold-mine of virtuoso encores), his own transcription of two movements from Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker", Rubinstein's Melody in F and Gershwin's third Prelude.

Seta Tanyel, born in Turkey and now resident in London, had also put together a largely new programme especially for the occasion. Her playing was notable for its gentle and subtle expression allied to technical security: less spectacular than the keyboard lions like Cappello, but just as satisfying. She too began with some earlier music seen through the eyes of pianists: a Gavotte by Gluck arranged by Brahms and the Saint-Saens Caprice on ballet music from Gluck's "Alceste". Then came a Thalberg Ballade and a very fine Sonata in B major by Serge Bortkiewicz (1877-1952). She has recorded several albums of music by Xaver Scharwenka (1850-1924) and Moritz Moszkowski (1854-1925), and these two composers occupied the second half. Scharwenka's first Sonata was technically demanding and an impressive work too. (Stephen Hough has recently recorded his fourth Concerto and found it more difficult in parts than even Rachmaninov's third.) Two Polish Dances by Scharwenka followed. Moszkowski is known for a few salon pieces in Horowitz's repertoire, and he adapted his "Carmen" fantasy for his own use. Here we heard two other delightful pieces as well as the original "Carmen" transcription. A lovely Serenade by Moszkowski and a Scherzo by Scharwenka were added as encores.

The exhibition of records, photographs and other memorabilia, assembled as usual by the record dealer and collector Peter Seidle, and the matinee lecture were devoted this year to Nikolai Medtner. Most of the material about him is still only available in Russian. and Christoph Flamm has produced a dissertation of some 600 pages in German. He also provided a more manageable article for the exhibition catalogue. Thanks to Hamish Milne's pioneering work - he played Medtner to Russian audiences when even Russian pianists were ignoring him - Medtner is gradually becoming better known, and other pianists such as Nikolai Demidenko and Geoffrey Tozer have also made recent recordings. He is certainly much more than "Rachmaninov without the tunes". Flamm was an excellent speaker as well as capable of illustrating some as yet unrecorded pieces at the piano, including the excellent cadenza for Beethoven's fourth Concerto which Roger Smalley discussed in his article in "Music and Musicians" along with Alkan's cadenza for the third.

Details of the 1996 festival (17th-24th August) will be available from March or April: tickets are handled by Buchhandlung C.F. Delff, Kramerstrasse 8, 25813 Husum; telephone 04841/2163, fax 04841/81686. They should be able to give the address of the Husum tourist office, which publishes an annual list of accommodation. It is quite a popular holiday resort and advance booking is advisable. I apologise for such a lengthy account of music strictly outside the scope of an Alkan Bulletin - I am not an agent of the festival! - but hope that it may lead some members towards some interesting discoveries. Some music is rightly forgotten, but there is plenty of worthwhile repertoire which deserves the occasional hearing at least.

In the next Bulletin I hope to have news - at last - of the Nimbus recording of the chamber music. Kevin Bowyer tells me that there could be a second CD of organ pieces from him, and we are still hoping for a re-release of Ronald Smith's complete Op. 39 Etudes.

**PETER GROVE**