

# Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and Music

Presented by Center for Jewish History,  
Mannes College The New School for Music,  
and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

Lecture and Commentary by Donald Wagner  
Performances by Students of Mannes College  
The New School for Music

## **Andante with strings in C sharp major**

*(from Op. 13 Trois Andantes romantiques)*

Piano- Mina Koike  
Violins- Yuti Chang, Yada Lee  
Viola- Melanie Tomsy  
Cello- Alina Lim  
Bass- Gil Goldin

## **Le Vent** *The Wind*

*(from Op. 15 Trois Morceaux dans le genre pathétique)*

Reed Tetzloff, piano

## **Grand Duo Concertant (1st mvmt) Op. 21**

Yuti Chang, violin  
Haodong Wu, piano

## **2e Verset du 41me Psaume**

Allison Lonstein, soprano  
Haodong Wu, piano

## **Sonate de Concert (1st mvmt) Op. 47**

Alina Lim, cello  
Azamat Sydykov, piano

## BRIEF INTERMISSION

### **Le Temps qui n'est plus**

*The times that are no more (from 25 Preludes Op. 31)*

### **Les Cloches** *The Bells*

### **Les Initiés** *The Initiated*

### **Les Soupirs** *The Sighs*

### **Barcarollette**

### **L'Homme aux sabots** *The Man in Clogs*

*(from 48 Esquisses Op. 63)*

Annie Wong, piano

### **Promenade sur l'eau**

*Walk by the water (from Les Mois Op. 74)*

### **Scherzettino**

### **Notturnino-Innamorato**

### **En Songe** *In a Dream*

*(from 48 Esquisses Op. 63)*

Zheng Wang, piano

## **Sonatine (1st mvmt) Op. 61**

Evgenia Rabinovich, piano

## **Le Festin d'Esop** *Aesop's Feast*

*(from Op. 39 Douze Etudes dans tous les tons mineurs)*

Diyi Tang, piano

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## BIOGRAPHIES

**DONALD WAGNER** is a Managing Director of Access Industries, a holding company with investments across multiple industries. He is responsible for the North American investment portfolio, including overseeing current holdings and sourcing new investment opportunities. Previously, Mr. Wagner was a Senior Managing Director at Ripplewood Holdings, a private equity firm, and prior to that he was a Managing Director of Lazard Frères, where he had a 15-year career spanning New York and London. He is currently a board member of Access portfolio companies Warner Music Group, EP Energy, and Boomerang Tube.

Mr. Wagner graduated summa cum laude with an A.B. in physics from Harvard College. He has served on the Mannes College Board of Governors since 2006. He lives in New York City with his wife Diana and their 2 children.

**MINA KOIKE** (BA, Toho Gakuen School of Music, Japan; PDPL, Mannes 2013; MM, Mannes 2015), Japanese pianist, student of Victor Rosenbaum

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### **Antoine François Marmontel, Alkan's rival - excerpt from "Les Pianistes Célèbres" (1878)**

"If there is any unique and fascinating artist who commands our attention among all others, it is Charles Valentin Alkan, whose importance is accompanied by a somewhat mysterious and enigmatic aura which we must first penetrate. This distinguished master has almost always lived a solitary existence, amid the turbulence of Paris and its artistic circles, shunning the attention and fame so keenly sought by others. Valentin Alkan was Zimmerman's favorite pupil and he would hold him up to us as an example of the hard-working and enquiring artist, with a love of great art, sacrificing nothing to short-lived success, with a horror of the commonplace, pursuing his own path with no concern for popularity. The lofty circle of writers that made up Chopin's retinue admitted Valentin Alkan as a brother poet. This coterie, whose mutual admiration was somehow instinctive, exercised great and direct influence on the literary and artistic taste of the time. The names Hugo, Lamennais, Dumas, Jules Sandeau, George Sand, Ary Scheffer and Delacroix show that this illustrious group belonged to the Romantic school, seeking a new path and a break with traditional patterns. Alkan's passion for original forms and unusual procedures reflected these trends and must have made him welcome to this school. Chopin, who did not spread his affections widely and who granted few artists the favor of being able to call themselves his friends, held Alkan in high esteem as both virtuoso and composer. We will not describe Valentin Alkan's appearance from behind, as some photographers have portrayed him. His intelligent and uncommon features deserve to be seen in profile or full-face. He has the ample brow of the thinker; his gaze is shrewd and somewhat sardonic. Alkan is now 64 years old; his leaning gait and his puritanical attire give him the appearance of an Anglican minister or a rabbi, whose knowledge he shares. A studious man of cultivated mind and an indefatigable hard worker, Alkan is one of the most highly intelligent and broad-cultured representatives of the group of eminent artists at the forefront of the French piano school. We are particularly pleased to pay public tribute to our illustrious colleague in as much as in 1848 a regrettable misunderstanding drew us apart, without however affecting our mutual esteem and without diminishing my sincere admiration for this artist and my keen affection for this industrious scholar and powerful creator."

### **Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, composer and essayist - excerpt from "Around Music" (1932)**

"Few remarkable and outstanding figures in music have been the subject of such persistent misunderstanding, denigration and belittlement as Alkan. The extraordinary ignorance of his work that exists among pianists is only explicable by the fact that pianists are the most timid and unenterprising of human beings, and that the extremely individual and original quality of Alkan's work, which makes it impossible to label it or pigeon-hole it here or there in the customary and conventional groupings, disconcerts and repels them. Side by side with and contemporary of Liszt, who greatly admired him, his pianistic technique and keyboard style developed completely independently of that great master, and in its own very original and peculiar way reached equally great heights. Studying these extraordinary works, one does not know at first at which to marvel most, the extraordinary original appearance of the music, as of an entirely novel and unfamiliar system of decorative design, or on investigating more closely, the amazing fertility of invention, the harmonic individuality, the boldnesses, the new and unexpected twists. The Op. 39 set ends with one of the most original and remarkable of all this very original and remarkable composer's work, the set of variations entitled *Le Festin d'Esope*. Full of astonishing harmonic quirks and twists, supremely masterly and ingenious treatment and a pianistic layout worthy of the composer himself, all informed with that verve and vitality that make this master's work so irresistible and fascinating."

### Bernard van Dieren, composer and essayist - excerpt from "Down Among the Dead Men" (1935)

"Any musician who will trouble to go through some of Alkan's work is sure to experience one of those rare thrills that come with the discovery of new, strange and unexpected beauty. A player who knows what most piano music is, and what may be expected of the average French composer, could seldom meet greater revelations than are to be found on every page of Alkan. How is it that a man of this imaginative power and this striking technical perfection was unknown outside a limited circle of personal friends, and of archaizing specialists? The total absence of picturesque biographical information is presumably to some extent responsible. If one could tell something about his life beyond the bare facts of birth, appointments and death, there might be some romantic lure to draw musicians to the works. Unfortunately, there is no material. The best one could do in an attempt to make something of his life would be to suggest that it was wrapped in mystery. Certainly, most of it must have been spent in the same fabulous prison where Paganini learnt to perform on a single string. He is one of those lonely figures, and one of those peculiarly individual artists that cannot be actually compared to anyone, but about whom one must speak in terms of constant reference to familiar names, simply because there is no other means of suggesting anything of character and achievement. Another danger, by no means negligible, is that the sympathetic praises of a few insistent lovers of so recondite a figure may be themselves dangerous. They seldom serve any good purpose, however worthy the intentions, and they raise the suspicion of unfriendly critics who happen to be ignorant of the music."

### Aesop's Feast

One day, after a quarrel, Xanthus' wife left him. Aesop promised his master that he would have her back before many days. Going to the market he bought meat, fish, cake, flowers, wine, the best of everything. At each shop and to each acquaintance he said that the reason for the purchases was that his master was going to get married. The news soon reached the ears of the recalcitrant wife, who came running back. "Don't you ever flatter yourself with the hope of having another wife while I am alive," she screamed.

To celebrate her return Xanthus decided to give a feast and invited the leading philosophers of Greece. Aesop was entrusted with its preparation. When the guests sat down to eat, however, each dish was found to be tongue of some sort. When Xanthus angrily demanded an explanation, Aesop replied with assumed naïveté. "You ordered me to make the best provision that I could think of for the entertainment of these excellent persons. As the tongue is the great channel of learning and philosophy, what could be more suitable than a feast of tongues for philosophers?"

Xanthus, mollified by the laughter of his guests, said, "I invite you all to dine with me tomorrow. Since my slave seems set on contradictions, I am ordering him to prepare a feast of the worst. We shall see what that shall be."

But again only tongue was served. "How, sir," said Xanthus, "can tongues be the best of meat one day, and the worst another?" To the angry Xanthus Aesop explained, "What can be worse than the tongue? Was it not an evil tongue that caused a break in your family? What wickedness is there under the sun that it has not a part in? Treasons, violence, injustice and fraud are debated and resolved upon by the tongue. It is the ruin of empires, of cities, and of private friendships. The tongue is at once the best and the worst entertainment."

## MANNES COLLEGE THE NEW SCHOOL FOR MUSIC

As it nears its 100th anniversary, **Mannes College The New School for Music** is one of the world's leading conservatories, internationally recognized for its musical and pedagogical excellence while deeply committed to supporting the role of artists as citizens. Central to its uniqueness is its small size, which provides students optimal individual attention through small classes and an unusually deep and rigorous musical curriculum, all taught in a nurturing atmosphere difficult to replicate in larger schools of music. Mannes's distinguished alumni include the 20th century song writing legend Burt Bacharach, the great pianists Richard Goode and Murray Perahia; acclaimed conductors Yves Abel, Semyon Bychkov, Myung Whun Chung, JoAnn Falletta, and Julius Rudel; the iconic mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade; Metropolitan Opera company members, Patricia Risley, Yonghoon Lee, and Danielle de Niese; and Doug McLennan, the founder and editor of ArtsJournal.com.

## CENTER FOR JEWISH HISTORY



**The Center for Jewish History** is home to five partner organizations – American Jewish Historical Society, American Sephardi Federation, Leo Baeck Institute, Yeshiva University Museum and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. The collections of our partners span 700 years of history and comprise the largest archive of modern Jewish history in the world.

Founded in Vilna, Poland, in 1925 and relocated to New York City in 1940, **YIVO** is committed to deepening our knowledge of the thousand years of Jewish life in Eastern Europe and Russia. Our educational and public outreach programs concentrate on all aspects of this history and its continuing influence in America, and our world-acclaimed archival collections and library constitute the single greatest resource for such study, including approximately 24 million letters, manuscripts, photographs, films, sound recordings, art works, and artifacts; as well as the largest collection of Yiddish-language materials in the world.