



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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**Vice-Presidents: Nicholas King, Hugh Macdonald,
Wilfrid Mellers, Richard Shaw**

In Memoriam Ronald Smith 1922-2004

President of the Alkan Society 1977-2004

An anthology of tributes collected for members of the Society
Supplement to Bulletin no. 66, July 2004

Address given by Canon Roger Job at the funeral of Ronald Smith

Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Saltwood

7th June 2004

I should like to begin with a piece of advice which Ronald always heeded: advice coming from an unexpected quarter, St. Paul writing to Timothy. ‘Stir up the gift of God which is within you.’ (2 Tim. i 6)

Take swimming. My wife and I and two small sons were on the beach here at Hythe. It was the glorious summer of 1976. We knew that Ronald and Anne had taken a house for the summer holidays not far from the promenade; but at lunch-time, to our surprise, Ronald appeared on the beach, quickly undressed, laid down his glasses, and plunged into the water. He swam up and down for quite a long time most vigorously, using the crawl. We cannot imagine him just messing about in the water. If it was swimming, he would do it properly.

It was the same with walking. Ronald never ambled about, or took a stroll. He walked fast and purposefully, in the rain crowning himself with that sou'wester. His idea of a good walk was Herne Bay to Margate, and then Ramsgate to Dover, assisted by public transport to make a good round trip.

How much more did this apply to his music! Beginning with that spark of genius which he undoubtedly possessed, and a musical gift out of the ordinary, he bestirred himself to build a career on these sure foundations with incredible industry and powers of concentration, and also imagination and daring.

As to handwriting, he received no gift. There was therefore nothing to cultivate, no stirring to be done. His letters, usually written in the train, were a maze of hieroglyphics.

Ronald already had under his belt the famous recording of Bach's Triple Concerto with Edwin Fischer and Dennis Matthews, when he came to teach at the King's School in Canterbury. That was a happy thing for generations of boys, an association which lasted almost forty years. How could I forget the month or the year in which he arrived? It was May 1951. The school was enjoying its halcyon days under Dr. Shirley; and it was typical of Shirley that when Ronald came to meet him, the boy-prodigy violinist, Miles Baster, had been placed in an adjoining room playing Kreisler studies of incredible virtuosity, and hinting at a musical environment of awesome excellence. Ronald was hooked.

What was the secret of his teaching? He brought a seriousness to the subject, which we had not met before. We were expected to practise. Early on he said to me, looking quite fierce, 'Never miss an opportunity to practise for two hours!'. We soon learned that he practised far, far harder than that. Also, Ronald communicated a sense that he was in it for real. It was really stimulating to know that when our lessons were moved from Thursday to Tuesday he was going to be off somewhere to play a concerto, or give a recital.

Years later he told me a story, which we would never have believed as schoolboys, because he was obviously so zealous. He was in Switzerland on a sort of working holiday, presumably after the war, when he was in his twenties. He was supposed to be learning the Schumann Concerto, but he met a lovely girl. Days of exquisite dalliance followed. Schumann was forgotten. When he came home he had to work doubly hard. But I think he liked these challenges, enjoyed working against the clock. He rather encouraged us to do the same, putting us in for the Kent Festival to play pieces – memorized, of course – which we had had to learn at breakneck speed.

No small part of the secret of his teaching was the stimulus he provided to achieve goals, which we thought out of reach.

This is not the moment to attempt a review of his recitals and recordings, massive accomplishments though they were, achieved against the background of his perennial eye-trouble, a handicap, incidentally, which he shared with St. Paul.

For me his finest hour on the concert platform was the marvellous performance of the Moonlight Sonata in the Festival Hall, given on the day Rebecca was born.

Among his recordings a particular favourite of mine was, I believe, one of his most successful – it was a long-playing disc of lollipops, such as Liszt's Love Dream No. 3 and Chaminade's *L'Automne*. It was released shortly before Ronald's marriage.

Which brings me to that question in the Book of Proverbs, 'Who can find a virtuous woman?'. Ronald took his time, but found in Anne a wonderful example: a wife who would, for her husband, always go the second mile. To the formidable list of roles required of the good wife in Proverbs, chapter 31, Anne has added chauffeur, secretary, p.a., and, occasionally, I suspect, agent.

It was an honour to officiate at their marriage on a brilliant late summer day nearly thirty-five years ago. It is the only wedding I've ever done without a rehearsal. Never mind! It has worked. Ronald and Anne were made for each other.

Alkan was the lucky break in Ronald's career. The revival of interest in Alkan's life and compositions is largely down to him. Alkan suited Ronald well. The pieces are mostly of extraordinary difficulty – giving him the challenge to do the impossible, such as he liked best. He certainly had to stir up the gift to get the required results with Alkan. And only a man of Ronald's limitless energy and industry could have fitted two volumes on Alkan's life and works round the demands of concerts and records.

Not all Alkan's music is easy on the ear. I went to the Royal Academy of Music years ago to hear Ronald play the Concerto for solo piano. It lasts fifty-five minutes. It is a mind-blowing work for the performer, without considering its effect on an audience. Maybe a very elderly friend of his was thinking of the Concerto, when she confided that she worried sometimes if

practising Alkan could cause brain damage. Certainly not in Ronald's case! Weaker heads should beware.

Music was Ronald's religion, and there is a verse in one of the Psalms (Ps. 71) specially for him:-

I will praise thee and thy faithfulness, O God, playing upon an instrument of musick.

But he also found time for church-going. He preferred the early service. Later in the day he might be forced to suffer hymns. He loathed hymns, and I never heard him praise a sermon. Once I drove him from South Kensington to Crewe Station. All the way up the M1/M6 he questioned me – not altogether sympathetically – on my vocation and matters of scriptural interpretation. As to funerals, he liked the words of our Lord, 'Let the dead bury their dead'.

In bereavement we lose part of ourselves. I've just been given the historian A.L. Rowse's *Diaries*, newly out. One of his greatest friends dies, and he says, 'So much of *my* life has gone'. Bereavement is the sudden stopping of a conversation. It takes us a long time to realize that this break in transmission has really happened. Whenever I sat down at the piano in retirement – on a good day about three hours later than Ronald habitually used to – he was there with me, talking to me:-

- a good singing tone
- thumbs off the keyboard
- in heavy octaves a straight fifth
- play every technical exercise as though it were great music.

I hope I shall still hear his voice: criticizing, yes, warning, but much more than both of those, encouraging; as though he were even now sending one of us out from a lesson, buoyed up, and determined to go away and climb new peaks.

Our hearts go out to Anne and Rebecca and the other members of the family. Their loss is so much greater than ours, their knowledge so much deeper.

I hope they will agree that it was rather inspired of the BBC *In Tune* programme to play Alkan's *Allegro barbaro* as a tribute ten days ago.

They knew their man.

Obituary – The Independent, 1st June 2004

The pianist Ronald Smith - known as "The Amazing Mr Smith" or "the Alkan man" - was proof that while artisans may retire, artists never do.

In the Indian summer of his life, with more than half-a- century of music-making behind him, Smith was as energetic and enterprising as ever. He was still teaching and still recording with all the enthusiasm, mental staying-power and physical prowess of players generations younger. The older he got, the fresher his responses seemed to become. There was no pulling back of tempo for him, no shortening of programmes, no safety nets.

Smith will be remembered for his concentrated, toughly symphonic view of the classics, for his big-boned concertos and for his poetic way with the reflective side of Romanticism. His lasting memorial, however, will be his championship of the French pianist and composer Alkan. Smith put Chopin's misanthropic Parisian friend on the map, through pioneering BBC broadcasts and recordings (on both modern and period instruments), his trail-blazing book *Alkan*, published in two volumes in 1976 and 1987, and his presidency of the Alkan Society, tirelessly supporting new initiatives, including the society's Piano Scholarship inaugurated in 2001 in collaboration with Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge.

Although he never recorded the solo concertos in his repertory, Ronald Smith's studio legacy - from 1950 to 2002, mainly under the aegis of EMI, Nimbus and APR - otherwise embraced much he was passionate about: Alkan (the major piano and chamber works); Mily Balakirev; Beethoven (a notably powerful, cohesive *Waldstein* Sonata); Chopin (all the mazurkas including his published completion of the last one); Liszt; Mussorgsky; and Schubert.

Smith taught for over 40 years at the King's School, Canterbury, his home open-house to anyone in need of musical immersion. He enlightened and entertained many, through master-classes from the Purcell School to Australia, knowing when to say nothing and when to intervene. A demanding but kindly mentor, nurturing, expanding and overseeing the minds of his young charges, with an individual recipe for each, he gave people the belief that anything was possible and that there was always a solution to a tricky corner. British music could not have wished for a more distinguished statesman.

Winning the Sir Michael Costa Scholarship, Ronald Smith went in 1938, aged 16, to the Royal Academy of Music, where he attracted the attention of the conductor Sir Henry Wood. Wood later directed a student performance of Saint-Saëns' Fourth Concerto, conducted Smith's Symphonic Prelude for large orchestra, and invited him to make his Proms début at the Royal Albert Hall in August 1942. In the post-war period, Smith studied privately in Paris with Marguerite Long and Pyotr Kostanov.

Smith wanted to be a composer, even maybe an academic - and throughout his life thought like one. He took his external Bachelor of Music degree from Durham University in 1946, and the following year had a Violin Concerto broadcast by Martin Sauer with the BBC Northern Orchestra (the BBC Philharmonic as it then was) under Charles Groves. Piano playing, however, took over and at the Abbey Road Studios in 1950 Smith made a landmark recording of Bach's Triple Concerto with Edwin Fischer and Denis Matthews, consolidating his reputation as a Bach specialist.

During the Fifties Smith enjoyed a high-profile concerto schedule, working with Ernest Ansermet, Adrian Boult, Anatole Fistoulari, Hugo Rignold, Malcolm Sargent, Constantin Silvestri and William Steinberg (who declared that, unlike the composer, only Smith and Vladimir Horowitz played all the notes in Rachmaninov Three). When he wasn't on tour, he was busy teaching, broadcasting or recording. Always the professional, he got into the habit early on of turning up at halls and studios impeccably prepared. For him the philosophy of recording was about one take. He abhorred "patching" a performance together. Being ready for anything, having the security of a rigorously disciplined technique (however much, in his case, unorthodox and personally developed), knowing what needed to be said, was what mattered.

In his velvet jackets, Smith cut a flamboyant figure on the London scene - he was suave, attentive, precise and softly-spoken, needing no more than a decibel or two to lend a word persuasive emphasis. On stage, his pianism, like his choice of music, defied adjectives. His 80th birthday recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London in December 2002 was typical of the fearless programming he was renowned for.

Similarly his final appearance, at the Old Market, Hove, just over a week ago - juxtaposing Beethoven's *Waldstein* Sonata, Alkan (*The Song of the Mad Woman by the Seashore* that he had made so much his own over the years), Chopin's Op 25 Studies, Liszt (challengingly, the Sixth Hungarian Rhapsody), and, by way of last encore, the A minor Mazurka from Chopin's Op 17. His sight might almost have gone, but he had lost none of his musical faculties, nor his gift of "orchestrating" at the keyboard.

Off-stage, his knowledge amazed. I have memories of specifics, digressions and startling wisdoms over civilised meals; and of sitting on competition juries where his quietly firm logic and psychologically astute grasp of situations and people set unflinching standards.

Ates Orga

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Obituary – The Daily Telegraph, 17th June 2004

Ronald Smith, who has died aged 82, was a concert pianist best known for championing the fiendishly difficult music of the French composer Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-88).

For more than 40 years Smith gave recitals demonstrating the range of Alkan's repertoire, much of which had been unperformed for generations due to the exceptional difficulties placed upon the performer.

The story goes that a bus in Exeter once bore the graffiti: "I thought Alkan was just a kitchen foil until I discovered Ronald Smith." In many ways that summed up Smith's contribution to the musical public's understanding of Alkan's enigmatic genius.

Alkan is said to have died under an avalanche of books dislodged when he stretched to reach a top shelf in his Paris studio; the 74-year-old, who was a neighbour of Chopin, was reputedly still clutching his Talmud when he was found. Sacheverell Sitwell embroidered the story still further in his book on Liszt: he wrote of Alkan "falling from a ladder in his library while looking for a rabbinical volume".

Whatever the circumstances, Alkan's reputation lay buried until Smith - a man who rarely resisted a challenge - came along to exhume it. "At first sight it seemed unplayable," Smith recalled in an interview in 1983. "But it was absolutely arresting music." He had been sent a score by the BBC producer Humphrey Searle, who asked him to give a broadcast.

Soon he was being asked to play more. He made a series of recordings of Alkan's music for EMI, wrote a biography of the composer and founded the Alkan Society in tribute to the recluse who once wrote a Funeral March for a dead parrot and, in one of what Smith called his "less reclusive moments", fathered an illegitimate son.

Smith had already made a recording of Bach's Triple Concerto for EMI with Edwin Fischer and Denis Matthews. The first Alkan recording - the composer's concerto for solo piano - was made for another company. But before it could be released, the firm went bankrupt. Fortunately, the recording engineer had kept a copy of the master and Smith passed it to EMI, which rushed out a release just ahead of a rival recording of the same work by Smith's contemporary, John Ogden.

In his two-volume study of Alkan (1976), Smith noted that until the late 1960s "the musical public had no means of testing the validity of Busoni's claim that Alkan, alongside Chopin, Liszt, Schumann and Brahms, was one of the five greatest composers for the piano since Beethoven".

So enthusiastic was Smith for the music of Alkan that he frequently talked about works from the platform, giving quick demonstrations at the keyboard, and telling the audience what to listen out for during the performance. His powerful playing was quite the match for Alkan's finger-busting textures, which typically have more parts than a pianist has fingers.

Ronald Bertram Smith was born in London on January 3 1922. His mother was an amateur pianist and his father an insurance agent. When his father was appointed to be a regional executive for Pearl Insurance, the family moved to Lewes, where Ronald attended Lewes County Grammar School. His former headmaster once described him as "the naughtiest boy in the school". John Christie showed an interest in his talent and allowed the young Ronald to practise on the pianos at Glyndebourne.

He won the Sir Michael Costa Scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music, and had initially intended to become a composer. He studied there with Theodore Holland, but also pursued the piano with Percy Waller. For a short time he took lessons in Paris.

After the Royal Academy, Smith taught briefly at Harrow before accepting an invitation from Canon Shirley, the headmaster of the King's School, Canterbury, to join the music staff. He

remained there for 40 years, turning down frequent invitations to join the various London music colleges.

He made his London debut playing Bach at the Proms in 1948 under the baton of Sir Henry Wood.

Smith was frequently heard in recital, and even a series of mixed reviews - "frequently guilty of excessive speeding" (1956), "too hasty to be clear" (1959), "what should have been thrilling became at last deplorably dull" (1961) - failed to dent his sense of musical adventure and tremendous vitality.

He toured extensively, in Australia, Russia and Canada. His eightieth birthday was marked by an electrifying and lengthy concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. On the concert platform he cut a curious figure, once described as "sitting low at the keyboard, face impassive but the long fingers leaping everywhere, agile and animated, his hands mesmerising".

Smith loved working with young people. He coached a special class for musically gifted children at the Kent Music School and taught at the Purcell School. His books on Alkan were brought together in a single volume four years ago, 'Alkan: the man and the music', published by Kahn & Averill.

Away from the keyboard, Smith was a keen gardener. But he refused to grow flowers; only vegetables were any use, he said, because they could be eaten. He regularly walked his Jack Russell across the South Downs, and until last year swam in the Channel. He was interested in astronomy, but joked that even through the most powerful telescope he could see nothing.

Smith died suddenly on May 27, four days after giving his last recital, a performance at Hove that naturally included music by Alkan.

He married, in 1969, Anne Norman. At the house of a mutual friend, he wooed her by launching into a thundering performance of Alkan's *Allegro Barbaro*. She survives him, with their daughter.

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Obituary – The Guardian 8th July 2004

Ronald Smith

Heroic pianist and champion of the music of Alkan

Though the pianist Ronald Smith, who has died aged 82, performed a wide range of music with great distinction, he was particularly associated with the music of the French composer-pianist Charles-Valentin Alkan, a contemporary of Chopin and Liszt. When Humphrey Searle asked Smith to record Alkan's *Concerto For Solo Piano* for the BBC in the late 1940s, the composer was largely unknown, and it was Smith who remedied the situation.

His many subsequent Alkan broadcasts included a fine 1968 series of illustrated BBC Radio 3 talks. He gave concert performances, made recordings and wrote a pioneering two-volume study of the composer, *Alkan: The Man, The Music* (1976, extensively revised in 2000).

The other composers whose music he recorded for EMI from the late 1960s to the 1980s included Balakirev, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt and Schubert, and he went on to record for the Nimbus and Appian labels. He always recorded as if on the concert platform, preferring not to sacrifice the inner logic and spontaneity of the live performance with needless cuts and artificial editing.

Born in London, the son of an insurance agent, he was given early piano lessons by his mother. He then won scholarships to the Brighton School of Music, Lewes County grammar

school and, in 1938, to the Royal Academy of Music, where he studied composition with Theodore Holland (a pupil of Joseph Joachim and Max Bruch) and piano with Percy Waller.

There is a BBC recording of Smith's charming and very polished Scherzetto for piano (1939), while his Violin Concerto of 1941 unfolds with great individuality and flair. Other works were also broadcast by the BBC, but piano playing soon took over. His compositional perspective – a finely tuned orchestral ear, broad architectural vision, and awareness of compositional processes at work – was to remain a powerful and guiding force in all his performances.

After the war, Smith went on to study with Marguerite Long and the great Russian teacher Pierre Kostanoff in Paris. Last year, Smith observed that he learnt the most about music from listening to the violinist Adolf Busch, cellist Pablo Casals, the conductors Wilhelm Furtwängler and Arturo Toscanini, and to three pianists – Sergei Rachmaninov, Josef Hofmann and Edwin Fischer.

Fischer was on the jury for the 1949 Geneva international competition at which Smith won second prize, and when Fischer came to London to record Bach's Triple Concerto in C major the following year, he asked Smith and Denis Matthews (obituary, December 27 1988) to play the second and third piano parts. Smith recalled that in four days of working with Fischer he learned more than during all the previous years of study.

He singled out the beauty of sound Fischer made at the piano, his control of every musical phrase, his profound knowledge of every work he played, and his emphasis on the importance of spontaneity. All these were to be salient features of Smith's own performances.

Early in his career, Smith was associated with the music of Bach and the classical period. His 1942 Prom debut was in a Bach concerto conducted by Sir Henry Wood, and he was soon performing the standard concertos with other leading conductors.

Smith was committed to helping young pianists – and many a seasoned one, too. He taught at Harrow school from 1943, then at the King's school, Canterbury from the late 1950s until 1990. More recently he enjoyed close links with Kent music school and Canterbury Christ Church University College, in addition to teaching pianists from the Purcell school. He declined invitations to teach at the British conservatories, preferring the freedom of his own studio. For those who had the fortune to study with him he was extraordinarily generous, treating us all as potential budding concert artists. He remained a friend and an inspiring mentor.

His characteristically heroic recitals continued to the end of his life: the last, given in Hove as part of the Brighton Festival on May 23 was typical, including Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata, Chopin's complete Études Op 25, Liszt's Sixth Hungarian Rhapsody and Alkan's notoriously demanding set of variations *Le Festin d'Ésope* (Aesop's Feast). He received a standing ovation from the capacity audience.

He is survived by his wife, the cellist Anne Norman, whom he married in 1969, and their daughter, the painter and designer Beka.

Ronald Bertram Smith, pianist, born January 3 1922; died May 27 2004

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Obituary – The Times, 9th July 2004

Ronald Smith

Teacher and researcher who championed the works of the French composer Alkan

As a performer with a 60-year career, the pianist Ronald Smith had no fear of the toughest technical challenges, and was always finding new nuances of musicality. As a researcher he was tireless in unearthing and championing the works of the enigmatic French composer Alkan. And as a teacher he knew how to instil the best in his pupils by example rather than diktat. He was a steadfast friend and mentor to generations of musicians, professional and amateur.

Smith's early career pointed towards composition. He entered the Royal Academy of Music at the precocious age of 16 with the Sir Michael Costa Scholarship for composition, and his Symphonic Prelude was conducted there by Sir Henry Wood. A violin concerto was among other products of this period.

The piano, however, soon came to the fore, and after leaving the academy he studied privately in Paris with Marguerite Long, meanwhile tucking in an external BMus degree from the University of Durham. Having made his debut in the promenade concerts, his break came in 1950 through a recording of the Bach Triple Concerto with Edwin Fischer and Dennis Matthews. His recording career was to continue into the present century.

His continental debut was with Ansermet and the Swiss Romande Orchestra in Geneva in 1951. Subsequently he developed an international career which included many tours of America, Canada, Australia and the Far East, as well as prolific appearances within the United Kingdom and radio broadcasts. At his death he was preparing for a punishing schedule in Singapore.

Smith was appointed to the teaching staff of King's School, Canterbury, in 1952. There for 40 years he nurtured many of the country's finest musicians, providing them with musical insight as well as technical ability. His lessons often exceeded their allotted span, and he was selfless in giving extra time. Later in his career, private pupils would enjoy the residential hospitality of his home for protracted periods of coaching. He was a perceptive adjudicator in competitions, often preferring candidates who showed insight to arid technicians, sometimes to the surprise of onlookers.

During the 1960s Smith became intrigued by the neglected output of Charles-Valentin Alkan, and initiated a campaign to bring this composer to wider public attention. His recordings of many of these works remain in the catalogue, and his biography, which appeared as *The Man in 1976 and The Music* in 1987 was reissued as a single updated volume in 2000. He was president of the Alkan Society from its formation in 1977 until his death.

It is easy to categorise Smith as "the Alkan man", but this and his modesty perhaps too readily concealed his musical insight in many other repertoires, particularly of the 19th century. It is a matter for lasting regret that no recordings were made of his impressive range of more than 40 different concertos.

Ronald Stevenson remarked that a pianist who is also a composer performs differently. Smith showed the truth of that, and lived by his own advice to his pupils never to play the same thing in the same way twice, but always finding a new aspect of pianistic orchestration.

His programming was dauntless. In his later years he was still compiling programmes which would have challenged a pianist of half his years. His 80th birthday concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall comprised Schubert's "Wanderer" Fantasia, Chopin's Op 25 Etudes, Beethoven's last sonata and a group of Alkan pieces. The three encores concluded with Alkan's fearsome E major 10/16 study. Few present at this concert knew that the prolonged interval masked illness which he defied to complete the event. His final concert in the

Brighton Festival, four days before his death, was no less demanding, finishing with Chopin's A minor Mazurka from Op.17 and a standing ovation.

Smith married the cellist Anna Norman in 1969. It was to be a happy union. Those who had previously judged him to be a lifelong bachelor were gratified to see how each supported the other, and were grateful for their generously open hospitality.

Smith's relaxation was in the large garden of his home at Hythe, particularly among the vegetables and herbs, which he would always proudly display to visitors. He died suddenly but peacefully, having mown a good acre of lawn.

Ronald Smith, pianist, teacher and composer, was born on January 3, 1922. He died on May 27, 2004, aged 82.

© The Times, London 9th July 2004

Letters section, The ISM Journal, July 2004

Dear Neil,

I am sure that ISM members will be sorry to hear of the recent death of the noted pianist, teacher and scholar Ronald Smith, a member of the Society's Kent Centre and Performers & Composers Section, who passed away suddenly but peacefully on 27th May aged 82. He had given a typically fearless concert only the previous Sunday as part of the Brighton Festival; his landmark recording of the Chopin Mazurkas, one of which was his last encore in that concert, had just been re-issued.

Ronald's performing career spanned more than sixty years, from his debut at the Promenade Concerts in 1942. He had entered the Royal Academy of Music at the tender age of 16 as a composition scholar under Theodore Holland, and his *Comedy Overture* was conducted there by Sir Henry Wood; but piano soon came to the fore under the tuition of Percy Waller. Subsequently he studied privately in Paris with Marguerite Long, and began to develop his own solutions to technical challenges, forging an individual and in some respects unorthodox technique which he subsequently taught to generations of pupils.

He made his Continental debut with Ansermet and the Swiss Romande Orchestra in Geneva in 1951. Over the next fifty years he undertook multiple tours of America, Canada, Australia and the Far East, as well as prolific appearances within the United Kingdom and radio broadcasts. At his death he was preparing for a punishing schedule in Singapore.

To the end, his programming was dauntless, with challenges that few of half his years would have contemplated. His last major London appearance, his 80th birthday concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in December 2002, will be remembered by all who were there: Schubert's "Wanderer" Fantasia, Chopin's Op.25 Etudes, Beethoven's last sonata, a group of Alkan pieces, and three encores finishing with Alkan's fearsome E major 10/16 study. Few knew that he defied illness during the interval to complete this tour de force. Nor should one forget Smith's impressive repertoire of more than forty solo concertos. It remains a matter for regret that none of these ever reached the recording studio.

Ronald's first recording was a 1950 performance of the Bach Triple Concerto with Edwin Fischer and Dennis Matthews. His studio work was always marked by immaculate preparation and an abhorrence of editing, preferring a single take in which overall musical quality would outweigh any minor technical slips. To the end, the insight of a composer was always evident in his performances, with an understanding of orchestral colouring at the piano and something

new to say, however often he might have played the same piece before. One of his firmest dicta to his pupils was "never play the same thing twice in the same way".

During the 1960s, Ronald became fascinated by the French composer and pianist Alkan. His indefatigable research into these enigmatic and neglected works will stand as a major part of his memorial. He showed that what had previously been considered unplayable was indeed playable; more than that, he demonstrated the deep musical qualities of these pieces, which the profession had hitherto found it fashionable to dismiss as self-serving technical artifice. To his public performances and recordings of this output he added a detailed biography and commentary on the oeuvre, re-published in 2000. He became President of The Alkan Society when it was formed in 1977; and in March this year he delivered a characteristically engaging *tour d'horizon* of his life and career to the Society, an occasion which will now have added piquancy for those who were there.

Ronald was also an inspirational teacher. The centre of his work was at The King's School, Canterbury from 1951 to 1990, where numerous pupils who now occupy leading positions in the profession were imbued with professional and personal skills which they may not have realised fully at the time. In accepting private pupils, Smith would always ask himself "what can I do for this person?", setting a higher value on musical potential rather than outright technical facility (or its absence) at the point of first hearing. He could transform an apt pupil into a fine pianist and all-round musician, and all who passed through his hands will look back on his influence with affection and gratitude. He eschewed any appointment at the conservatoires, regarding them as "factories", but would occasionally accept invitations to give master classes or to adjudicate major competitions, at which he would often award the highest marks to performers whose musical presence commanded their technical facility rather than being subservient to it. To the end, he maintained a busy private practice, including pupils from The Purcell School who would visit his house for a one-hour lesson and find themselves there all afternoon.

To many of his colleagues and past pupils, Ronald remained a lifetime mentor, colleague and friend. His generous hospitality at his home with his devoted wife Anne will be remembered not just for the musical content, but also for stimulating conversation and raconterie. Publicly modest and, some might say, unduly self-effacing, the off-stage man was possessed of a powerfully vast intellect. His reactions were always instinctive, immediate and sure-footed, his opinions open and fair. He expected of others those same high professional standards which he set for himself, and was never one to let time slip wasted through his hands.

His influence will live on not just in his recordings, but in the musical and personal qualities he generated in his pupils, and they in turn in theirs. With him has passed a gentleman and a nobleman of the profession.

Nicholas King

Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire.

