

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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Many thanks to all the members who have renewed their subscriptions after the last Bulletin. For those who have not renewed, this will have to be the last Bulletin you receive unless I hear from you. Printing and postage costs make this necessary.

All paid-up members and UK people on the mailing-list will have by now received the programme for the Alkan Day on 19th October. Many thanks to Eliot Levin and Nicholas King for arranging a very attractive programme of talks and music. I hope the day will be very well supported.

Concerts

Marc-André Hamelin's recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall was well attended and judged to be a great success. He changed the Schumann work from *Fantasiestücke* to the C major Fantasy, but the rest of the programme went ahead as planned. The Alkan Symphony went down well with the audience and with the critic in the Guardian, Andrew Clements. "It is not so much the raw material itself but the sheer energy and generosity of the music that gives it credibility, and it's his enthusiasm for those qualities that Hamelin conveys so well, together with his command of the most fiendish technical challenges." Barry Millington in the Evening Standard was less enthusiastic, and rather puzzling. "The first three of its movements are virtually sight-readable by a competent pianist, while the Presto finale would not daunt any executant capable of playing, say, Chopin's Etudes, let alone Rachmaninoff's Second Sonata." He must know some good sight-readers!

The recital was broadcast live by Radio 3 and there was an interval talk about Alkan by Jack Gibbons which put the work in context. One of his examples - the "barking dogs" variation in "Le festin d'Esopo" - was illustrated by the wrong excerpt, but in general it was an illuminating and enthusiastic talk.

The pianist and composer Simon Ballard included two pieces by Alkan in his recital at the Palm Court Hotel, Eastbourne, on 17 April: *Les regrets de la nonnette* and the Barcarolle from Op. 65.

Ronald Smith's recital in Bristol received very good reports, including one in the Guardian. He continues with his 80th birthday year series of concerts and there are two for the diary later in the year: firstly, a return to Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge connected with the next award of the piano scholarship. This is on Friday 25th October at 8 p.m.: tickets are £10 from the Porter's Lodge and on 01223-332000. The programme is Schubert's Wanderer Fantasy, the Op. 10 Chopin Studies, Liszt's 2nd Hungarian Rhapsody and a group of pieces by Alkan.

Then there is a celebratory concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, on Monday 16th December at 7.45 p.m. The programme is Schubert's Wanderer Fantasy, the Op. 25 Studies by Chopin, Beethoven's Sonata in C minor, Op. 111 and a group of Alkan pieces: the Chant Op. 38 book I no. 1, the Song of the Mad Woman and the Octave Study Op. 35 no. 12. Tickets are from £12.50 to £17 and available from the South Bank Centre Box Office, tel. 020-7960 4242 or online from www.rfh.org.uk This will be a great occasion and I hope members will support it in large numbers. I hope to enclose a leaflet about it with the next Bulletin.

Recordings

APR has released a live recording of the Concerto for solo piano by Mark Latimer on APR 5600. It was recorded at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester in November 1999. The disc also includes Balakirev's "Islamey". I have heard one good report of the recording from a member but have not listened to it myself. Ronald Smith's account on the same label remains the benchmark for this work, but Latimer should provide a contrast. The pianist has also provided a "thought-provoking" programme note. APR recordings are obtainable from PO Box 1, Wark, Hexham, Northumberland NE48 3EW, tel. 01434-220627, fax 01434-220628 and e-mail orders@aprrecordings.co.uk

I have been told that Steven Osborne has recorded the Esquisses for Hyperion, but have no further details of this so far. Osborne will be playing Book 4 of the Esquisses in his recital for the Husum festival of piano rarities in Germany this August. It will be the first Alkan heard there since Ronald Smith's recital in 1995.

From "Les pianistes célèbres" by A. Marmontel (continued from Bulletin 58)

The elite group of literati and artists who gathered around Chopin had opened its ranks to V. Alkan as to a brother in poetry. This inner circle, where the mutual admiration was instinctive, exercised a wide influence, a direct action on the literary and artistic taste of the times. To name Hugo, Lamennais, Dumas, Jules Sandeau, George Sand, Ary Scheffer, Delacroix, is to say that this luminous centre belonged to the romantic school, searched for a new way, wished to break with classical transgressions. The passion of V. Alkan for ingenious forms, uncommon procedures, responded to these tendencies and were to make him very welcome into the school. Chopin, who was not prodigal with his affection and accorded to only a very small number of artists the favour of calling themselves his friends, held Alkan in very high esteem as virtuoso and composer. A mutual regard, taking its source in the culture of a beauty superior to the conventional and classical, unified these two elite souls. After the death of Chopin, several of his favourite pupils were to choose Alkan to continue the late master's traditions.

There were, however, intimate and profound differences between the temperaments of these two masters; their mutual aspiration for the ideal showed itself in very distinct forms. Certainly Valentin Alkan has the physiognomy of an absolutely original and personal artist. To appreciate this eminent nature, one should not proceed by comparison. For all his attachment to the brilliant school of Chopin, Heller, Liszt and Thalberg, he does not reflect at all directly these models: he is himself and himself only in his qualities and in his defects: he thinks and speaks a language which is his own, his distinguished ideas have accent and relief, and often the musical inspiration shows a profound dramatic sentiment: the rich and colourful harmonies never offer anything bizarre; the characteristics have a great variety of forms; their contours are ingenious and skilfully traced.

It is therefore necessary to recognise in V. Alkan a high musical value, an artist's temperament formed by reading and thought in the grand traditions, but relating only to himself and not to a school. He has looked for solitary paths and preferred to climb steep ways rather than follow those traced by his predecessors. Heroic conscience, constant and virile efforts, which assure him of admiration and recognition by artists accustomed to judging the merit of a work not by acquired popularity but by this intimate analysis, always fertile, when it concerns a composer like Alkan.

It is useful, however, we have said, to open a parenthesis for criticism, and to state frankly that one can pick up in several important compositions of Valentin Alkan the abnormal development given to several pieces, sonatas and concertos, where the master took pleasure in drowning his thought in long improvisations. We confess, in spite of all their ingenuity, to not understanding these abnormal proportions, given to incidental ideas, nor those superimposed periods which prolong the perorations without bringing any new effects. With these reservations which only concern a lack of concision and only aim at the harmonic equilibrium of certain works, Alkan remains a master in the best meaning of the word.

We are not going to give a catalogue of the entire works of Valentin Alkan, but we should point out among his most important works, the 25 preludes, Op. 31; 12 studies in the major keys, Op. 35; 12 studies in the minor keys, Op. 39; *l'Amitié*, study; 3 large studies for separate and reunited hands; 3 andantes romantiques and 3 pièces poétiques, op. 18 and 15; 3 scherzi, op. 16. - Op. 26, marche funèbre; op. 27, marche triomphale; saltarelle, op. 23. - Gigue, air de ballet; op. 29, bourrée d'Auvergne, *Mimetto alla tedesca*; op. 32, 4 impromptus; op. 33, grande sonata, a veritable poem of life; op. 40, three marches for four hands; first and second Concerti da camera; concerto and symphony, crucial works, where the artist sums up in a suite of twelve characteristic pieces his high qualities of style, his energetic and original individuality. - *Les Mois*, twelve poetic pieces, charming pieces accessible to pianists of moderate ability; variations on a theme by Steibelt; sonatina for solo piano; sonata for piano and cello, op. 47; Souvenirs of concerts of the Conservatoire, scores reduced for solo piano; Souvenirs of chamber music; concerto of Beethoven and concerto of Mozart, solo piano with cadenzas; a large number of pieces for organ and piano with pedal-board.

This brief summary gives a glimpse of the importance of the compositions which class Alkan among the eminent masters of the modern school. He has equally obtained, during his youth and maturity, great success as an interpreter, despite keeping himself separate from the public as such. His admirers belong to the privileged class of artists and amateurs who do not allow themselves to be dazzled by the effects produced by concert virtuosi. In spite of his sixty-four years, the great artist has maintained a magisterial command of playing; sworn enemy of bad taste, his firm touch, precise, measured, has the authority and austerity which suits his puritan and staunch nature; he carefully avoids the noisy formulae, but can apply himself to an art of nuances as different in style as the composers he interprets; an exceptional result which shows a profound and perpetual study of the qualities of each master. Couperin and Rameau may not be interpreted in their naïve grace like Field and Chopin in their tender and feverish poetry; the bravura of Scarlatti and Clementi is not that of Moscheles and Weber. Mozart, Hummel, Beethoven, Mendelssohn have very distinct qualities, which only a great master in the art can possess and translate.

Rigorous observer of the metronomic beat, Alkan never makes the music suffer from the frequent alterations of the speed so commonly in use in the contemporary school. He uses the pedal-board with a transcendental bravura which his followers recognise and admire, masters also in this genre, Saint-Saëns, Widor, Fissot, Guilman, Delaborde, organists and celebrated pianists; all have followed the example of their strong doyen and placed in honour the pieces of Bach, Handel and Mendelssohn where the pedal-board takes an active part in the musical dialogue and completes the harmonies of the piano and organ.

We shall not consider the portrait of Valentin Alkan seen from the back, as certain photographers have presented it to us. His intelligent and original physiognomy merits being seen in profile or face-on. The head is strong; the developed forehead is that of a thinker; the mouth is large and smiling, the nose regular; the years have whitened the beard and hair, furrowed the characteristics of several wrinkles and underlined the ensemble. The glance is fine, a little mocking. Alkan is now sixty-four years old; his stooped walk, his puritan look, give him the aspect of an Anglican minister or of a rabbi - of which he has the knowledge.

Man of study, cultivated spirit, indefatigable worker, Alkan is one of the highest intelligences and one of the most universal spirits of the group of eminent artists who hold the head of the French piano school. We are all the more happy to make public this homage to our illustrious colleague, from whom at one point in our career, in 1848, a regrettable misunderstanding, due to the heat of the competition for the vacancy in the class of Zimmermann, divided us, without at all altering our mutual regard and without diminishing my sincere admiration for the artist, the keen sympathy for the hard-working searcher and the powerful creator.

PETER GROVE