



The Alkan Society

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Welcoming the Society's first Social Media Editor

Bradley Berg writes:

It is with great excitement that I continue to serve as The Alkan Society's Social Media Editor and, for those who may be unaware of my activities in this recently created role, I would like to share some of my background and upcoming plans as we expand our online presence.

As a native of Cincinnati, Ohio who has spent the last six years in the neighbouring state of Indiana, I can tell you that Alkan is still largely considered to be an "obscure" name in the midwestern United States. In 2015, when I began my piano studies at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music—the largest music school in the country, no less—I found that scarcely few of my pianistic colleagues knew much of Alkan nor his music. That being said, some Alkan adherents do number among the Jacobs School's current piano faculty. There is Edward Auer, who made the pioneering recording of Alkan's cello sonata in 1981 with Yehuda Hanani. Additionally, David Cartledge, who teaches the keyboard literature survey course for doctoral students, makes a point to include Alkan among a broader discussion of early Romantic pianists. My own teacher, Jean-Louis Haguenaer, was largely unfamiliar with Alkan's life and music until I presented him the Sonatine for a lesson one day. After studying this piece with him for some time, he generously offered me the opportunity to deliver a guest lecture for a doctoral piano class, one devoted exclusively to Alkan's life and works.

That lecture represented my first chance to personally make a case for Alkan, not for some unsuspecting coworker or innocent bystander like usual, but for a respectable group of some twenty young pianists in an academic setting. Upon entering the room for the lecture, to my surprise, I found Professor André Watts sitting at one of the desks and chatting with the other piano students. Watts, who at the time was battling a left hand injury, had apparently been intrigued by one of Alkan's rarities (the Op. 76 etude for right hand alone) and decided to join that day. The presentation consisted of biographical segments interspersed with musical excerpts, during which I witnessed these pianists' first impressions of Alkan's music. Their facial expressions said it all—I caught various glimpses of fascination and wonderment mixed with equal parts confusion and surprise. Watts approached me afterwards and, in good humor, explained why he had laughed during Jack Gibbons' YouTube performance of Allegro Barbaro (Op. 35, no. 5); the ferocity of Alkan's technical and musical demands gave him visions of some "witches dancing over a cauldron," an image that comically contrasted with Gibbons' casual appearance and demeanor. It was a real joy for me to see such positive reactions by musicians hearing Alkan for the first time.



I relate this story here because I feel it has much to do with my goal as Social Media Editor: to get people excited about Alkan and his music, to pique their interest with current research, and to engage them with new performances of his works. This I plan to do in a few key ways: members will have noticed an uptick in activity on our Facebook page, which has been consistently growing in numbers this year. The page is an excellent platform for general news, links to recordings, and also as a space for short historical accounts relating to Alkan's life. I have also sought to expand The Society's online content to other platforms such as YouTube, the site where I first encountered Alkan many years ago. While the Alkan Society YouTube channel is currently limited to "score+audio" videos of Alkan's music, I hope to expand it into more promotional, analytical, historical, and otherwise informational content about Alkan and the Society's activities.

In sum, greater online engagement has the power to promote activity in our community, bolster new projects, and attract more members to be a part of our stated mission. In the medium to long term, this course will afford us greater resources that can be utilized to, say, revitalize our website into a cleaner and more accessible tool for Alkan enthusiasts around the globe. While our social media presence accounts for just one part of that goal, I can testify that—even in the midwestern United States—there is a real hunger to gain more knowledge about Alkan's life and works. The more we tap into that interest, the better we can collectively achieve progress as a Society.

Alkan CD Review

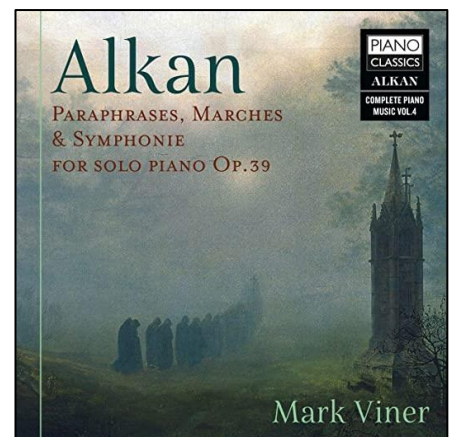
Laura Synderman

I am delighted to report on Mark Viner's new Alkan CD with Piano Classics of Charles-Valentin Alkan's "Paraphrases, Marches and Symphonie for Solo Piano Op. 39." This CD features paraphrases "Salut, cendre du pauvre!, Op. 45" and "Super flumina Babylonis, Op. 52," the lesser known "Trois Marches quasi da cavalleria, Op. 37," his "Alleluia, Op. 25, "Marche funèbre, Op. 26," "Marche triomphale, Op.27," and the most notable "Douze Études dans tous les tons mineurs, Op. 39, Nos. 4-7 "Symphonie."

Salut, cendre du pauvre!, Paraphrase, Op. 45 is one of two programmatic pieces Alkan composed. Viner writes in the CD liner notes, "its title is drawn from an elegy entitled *La Mélancolie* penned in 1800 by Gabriel-Marie Jean Baptiste Legouvé" (Viner, p. 5). In a Lelio-esque manner, the narrator self-reflects on the superiority of his depressed state while strolling through a cemetery in post-revolutionary France. A direct quotation of Legouvé's elegy is provided in Viner's insightful, detailed liner notes (p. 6). Viner's bass rolled chords engage a wholesome, deep tone, which contrasts well with the lighter, sensitive melodic sections of this funeral march.

Super flumina Babylonis, Op. 52 is another programmatic work, published by Richault in 1859. Op. 52 was dedicated to Abbé Auguste Latouche, a priest and Principle of Colmar College—he remains best remembered for writing dictionaries and etymological books on Asian and modern European languages, and particularly Aramaic and Greek (Viner, p. 8). The work is based on Psalm 137, which recounts the plight of the exiled Israelites sitting on the shores of the Babylonian rivers, reminiscing about Zion. The liner notes provide further analysis of the Psalm and music with verse interspersed (Viner, p. 9). Viner excels at the *dolcissimo* and *suavissimo* section, capturing a warm, sensitive tone with a harp-like effect, contrasting well with the finely played *vivacissimo* section. The *allegro feroce* carries a similar dynamic to the rest of the piece; nevertheless, it is an equally prime performance. Viner delivers the *con rabbi* and *furiosamente* boldly, completing the foreboding arpeggios and sharp chords with zest.

Trois Marches quasi da cavalleria, Op. 37 consists of three marches Richault published in 1857 which were dedicated to Gustave Olivier Lannes Comte de Montebello, a French soldier and politician. This is the first disc to present the full opus in its entirety, with the first ever recordings of the second and third marches.



No. 1 Molto allegro delivers a nice punch from the onset—Viner performs the ostinato audaciously, with a dexterous, sharp, and clear F major trio to follow. The melodic episode, unsurprisingly, carries a balmy, delicate tone coupled with meticulous voicing. The return of the fanfare drives forward with persistent energy, superseded by an adventurous flurry of thirds and sixth runs. A precise and speedy iteration of the ostinato concludes this sprightly march.

No. 2 Allegro vivace carries a pompous, militaristic personality—Viner's trio section is quite elegant and sentient. His sharp chords contrast well to the melodic, lighter parts of the trio section. Viner reintroduces the A minor theme with vitality, a vivid completion of this peculiar ternary form.

No. 3 Allegro is another ternary form; however, this charming march begins in C minor, with an exquisite trio section. Viner rightfully compares the work to the works of Schubert, perusing several different tonalities while maintaining a classical rhythmic continuity. Viner elegantly demonstrates a florid tonal palette, impeccable phrasing and pacing.

Alleluia Op. 25 was published in 1844 alongside Alkan's *Nocturne, Op. 22*, his *Saltarelle, Op. 23*, and *Gigue et air de ballet dans le style ancien, Op. 24* at the Bureau Central de Musique (Viner, p. 14). This work is Alkan's first specifically religious work, meaning "Praise be to God."

The sustained chords display excellent pedal work and careful dynamic consideration.

Marche funèbre Op. 26, although written in 1844, was published in 1846 by Brandusand and dedicated to Maréchal Louise Antoinette Lannes, Duchesse de Montebello and Empress Marie Louise of France's *dame à l'honneur* (Viner, p. 14). This piece is one of two marches Alkan frequently programmed in the 1840s and again in 1876, the latter being the *Marche triomphale, Op. 27* to follow. Most interestingly, Sergei Rachmaninoff programmed this succinct work in 1919 and 1920 in his New York recitals (Viner, p. 15). Viner offers a moving passage in his liner notes (p. 16-17) from a review by François-Joseph Fétis. The somber, snare drum figure in the bass contrasts splendidly with the heart-rendering, prayer-like episode. Viner plays the E-flat section with control and exemplary dynamic contrast. Viner's finale imparts with a wistful decay, much like his performance of the *Grande Sonate* finale.

Marche triomphale, Op. 27 was also published in 1846 and dedicated to Eleanor Josephine Marie Jenkinson, Duchesse de Montebello, wife of the elder son of the Maréchal Duchesse, Louis Napoléon Lannes, Duc de Montebello (Viner, p. 15). When initially programmed in 1844, the marche was referred to as *Marche héroïque*. The later title change may have been partially influenced by Berlioz *Grande Symphonie funèbre et triomphale, Op. 15*, written for a military band, considering both Alkan's marches display militaristic musical scoring. The performance carries a similar color in the initial B major section and the tonal shifts with the terse circular fifth cycle. However, Viner plays the challenging octave sections charmingly and clearly, concluding with an audacious coda.

Douze Études dans tous les tons mineurs, Op. 39, Nos. 4-7 'Symphonie' published by Richault in 1857, is one of Alkan's masterworks in this sublime opus, alongside his *Concerto* and *Ouverture*. This symphonic étude consists of four movements: *Allegro Moderato*, *Marche funèbre: Andantino*, *Menuet*, and *Finale: Presto*. The *Symphonie* is a study in orchestral playing, and befittingly contains denser composition than of his previous opus 35 études. Unlike a standard symphony, this work progresses in tonality with each movement rising in the key a fourth above (Smith, v. 2, p. 117).

Allegro Moderato commences in C minor with a Sonata form that derives most of the musical content from the opening theme. Viner carries the underlying rhythmic drive in this movement with polished triplet chords and stormy right-hand figures. The thinner accompaniment sections particularly thrive in this performance, with Viner delivering a tender and well-phrased melodic line. Viner presents immaculate articulations leading into the impassioned recapitulation and the following intrepid coda.

Marche funèbre: Andantino begins in F minor with a ternary form, opening with staccato accompaniment to the somber melody. The march initially read *Marcia funèbre sulla morte d'un Uomo da bene*, which could be connected to the death of Alkan's father in 1855, two years prior to the *Symphonie's* publication. Viner conveys a somber opening and a befittingly lustrous trio section, which returns to

the grim initial theme. Viner extricates a sensitive tonal switch with the final plagal cadence, employing deliberate dynamic development.

Menuet is a B flat minor ternary form, a work described by Raymond Lewenthal as “full of whirring broomsticks and boiling cauldrons ... [and] may make you think of Mussorgsky” (Viner, p. 22). This performance provides a feverish energy to this scherzo-like opening and return of the theme. Unsurprisingly, Viner’s central melodic trio shines with untarnished voicing, coupled with expressive phrasing.

Finale: Presto is a technically demanding Presto in E flat minor, featuring relentless octave passagework “all aglitter with green sparks and flames” (Viner, p. 23). Viner renders this relentless movement with ease, approaching great leaps with remarkable deftness.

In short, Viner’s performance is a grand achievement, and certainly a must-have for Alkan enthusiasts.

Report on Premio Alkan per il virtuosissimo pianistico 2021

Mark Viner

Your Chairman had the privilege of being invited, for a second year running, to sit for the jury of the international piano competition, Premio Alkan. Fellow jury members included the French pianist, Jean Marc Luisada, and three Italian pianists, Luca Ciannarughi, Alessandro Deljavan, and Vincenzo Maltempo, the Artistic Director of the competition and Chairman of the jury. This was the fifth issue of the competition and, like the previous year and due to the ongoing pandemic, the jury had to judge remotely. The difference this year was that the pre-selected candidates were professionally filmed playing their programmes at the Teatro Ristori in Verona; the same instrument and venue rendering the arena a level playing field (pun intended!) as opposed to the previous year where candidates were required to submit their programmes in a single, unedited take, with what technology they had. That year’s competition also featured pianos howling to be tuned in the wake of a pandemic which caught us all unawares and which reduced many careful months of planning to improvisation or, in other cases, cancellation. A total of six different nationalities were represented by eleven candidates between the ages of 17 and 27 and, I am pleased to report, a goodly amount of Alkan’s music was offered and, to the best of my knowledge, more than any previous years of the competition. Works presented were: *Variations sur “La tremenda ultrice spade” d’I Capuletti ed i Montecchi de Bellini*, op.16 no.5; 25 *Préludes dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs*, op.31 nos.8 “*La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer*” & no.12 “*Le temps qui n’est plus*”; *Douze Etudes dans tous les tons mineurs*, op.39 no.7 *Finale: Presto* (the fourth movement of the *Symphonie*) & nos.8-10 *Concerto*. As might be expected, the standard was exceptionally high with many of the candidates having already won prizes in international competitions. The prize was awarded to twenty-year-old Giacomo Menegardi who presented a programme of Bach, Rachmaninoff, Ravel and Mendelssohn and whose bracing reading of the latter’s *Fantasia*, op.28 lingers in the memory still. Alongside many other exceptional candidates we heard during the competition, he is destined for a distinguished career and is certainly one to watch.

Encyclopedic Études: Alkan's Op. 39 Studies and the French Pianist-Composer Archetype

Bradley Berg

In October 1857, Alkan shattered nearly a decade of compositional silence with the publication of his magnum opus, *Douze études dans tous les tons mineurs*, Op. 39. Much of Alkan's notorious reputation among pianists can be summarized by the contents of these monumental studies, which present a series of unrivalled technical and conceptual challenges for the performer. Surely the most striking aspect of Op. 39's design is its extraordinarily broad sampling of genres, topics, and styles (most notably the inclusion of a *Symphonie*, *Concerto*, and *Ouverture*) all packaged under the unassuming title *Études*, a label whose pedagogical undertones are often overlooked. By taking Alkan at his word and interpreting Op. 39 as music meant to be studied (*étudier*), the nineteenth-century etude genre comes into focus as a much more nuanced concept than previously thought—one that Alkan manipulated on an unprecedented scale.

Despite its diverse contents and enlarged dimensions, Op. 39 can indeed be classified as a set of etudes through an understanding of French piano pedagogy and genre systems in the nineteenth century. The design of these etudes stems from the pianist-composer archetype promulgated by the Paris Conservatoire's curriculum, which emphasized both a compositional and performance-based approach to pianism. I contend that, as one of the most distinguished pianist-composers to emerge from this school, Alkan created the Op. 39 etudes to fulfill two related functions: 1) to drill the *player* in advanced technical maneuvers and 2) to demonstrate to the aspiring *artist* several standard compositional forms, styles, and genres. In this way, Op. 39 functions as an example of what I call the *conceptual etude*, a type of nineteenth-century study that could take the form of several simultaneous genres. My concluding analysis of the *Symphonie* aims to show the encyclopedic breadth of Op. 39's contents across five distinct genre-levels, detailing the rich performative and compositional value in these studies ranging from micro-level mechanical devices to macro-level rhetorical strategies.

The French Pianist-Composer Archetype

Pianists who trained at the Paris Conservatoire in the early nineteenth century quickly learned to approach their musical studies through the lens of the keyboard. Regarding the Conservatoire's first official piano method, published by Professor Louis Adam c. 1800, Rebecca Geoffrey-Schwinden observes that he “portrays the piano as a means to conceptualize and compose music, a technology . . . that when mastered provides a utilitarian replica of the entire orchestra.”¹ Adam's method became standardized in French piano courses until Pierre Joseph Zimmerman, who taught at the Conservatoire from 1816 to 1848, replaced it with his own method in 1840 titled *Encyclopédie du Pianiste Compositeur*. While Zimmerman retained the holistic design of his predecessor's piano method in the *Encyclopédie*, he updated much of the content and expanded its scope to serve the needs of the contemporary Parisian pianist. Zimmerman's use of the term *encyclopédie* refers to the comprehensive nature of his method, which covers everything from the fundamentals of music theory and articulation to more advanced contrapuntal techniques. Yet the most telling aspect of Zimmerman's title is the characterization of his students, whom he refers to as “pianist-composers.” The expectation for virtuosos to compose and perform their own works during this time effectuated the linking of these two terms. By incorporating both disciplines into a singular curriculum, Zimmerman trained his pupils to succeed in the competitive Parisian musical scene.

More than just understanding non-pianistic genres in theory, Zimmerman wanted his students to engage with various styles by playing the piano in an orchestral manner. When describing the nature of instrumental music, Zimmerman declared, “a sonata is a chamber symphony in the same way that a symphony is an orchestral sonata,” a remark that encourages the student to think and play symphonically even in abstract pianistic genres with no written instrumental cues.² As the piano

¹ Rebecca Dowd Geoffrey-Schwinden, “Politics, the French Revolution, and Performance: Parisian Musicians as an Emergent Professional Class, 1749–1802” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2015), 214.

² Joseph Zimmerman, *Encyclopédie du Pianiste Compositeur*, vol. 3 (Paris: Zimmerman, 1840), 48.

developed in size and range during the early nineteenth century, musicians increasingly utilized it as a device to approximate various instrumental sounds. In 1829, Fétis hailed the piano as “a most valuable instrument that offers all the harmonic resources of a collection of differing instruments, that enjoys over the orchestra the advantage of uniformity and spontaneity of intention, and which can often rival its effect.”³ Zimmerman’s Conservatoire curriculum reflects this atmosphere in which pianists increasingly engaged with instrumental and vocal musics of all types.

Alkan himself contributed to his former teacher’s *Encyclopédie* (his *Étude in A minor* forms a part of the supplemental third volume), the influence of which can be observed in an 1847 collection of piano transcriptions titled *Souvenirs des concerts du Conservatoire*. Alkan, who was beginning to assume the role of the *maître*, wrote an explanatory preface for the publication; in it, he proclaimed that the art of transcription, “lies in making everything heard [on the piano], knowing which parts to bring out and how to do it.”⁴ He added that such a collection of orchestral transcriptions, “should satisfy both those who like to remember and reproduce the beautiful pieces they have heard in the theatre or at a concert . . . and also those who wish to find in one piece material for study with a certain difficulty to overcome.”⁵ Here, Alkan acknowledges the piano transcription genre as both a form of entertainment and a valuable study (*étude*) in orchestral playing, a subset of pianism that became widespread in this period. Given this context, it is easier to understand why orchestral forms like the *Symphonie*, *Concerto*, and *Ouverture* could form such a large part of Alkan’s Op. 39 studies. The etude, after all, is a pedagogical genre, and the subjects that Alkan chose to “teach” in his studies do well to illustrate his own values as a pianist-composer.

While Alkan’s motivation for composing Op. 39 was never explicitly recorded, it is all but certain that Conservatoire students were his target audience. Alkan was a product of the Conservatoire himself, and he very publicly campaigned for a teaching position in the late 1840s when Zimmerman was set to retire. An 1847 letter to Fétis indicates that Alkan had already been working on “an overture for piano and studies, some of which are fashioned on a rather large scale.”⁶ There is no telling whether these large-scale studies were indeed the same ones eventually published as Op. 39 in 1857 or not, nor whether Alkan partially abandoned—or otherwise revamped—the project after losing the Conservatoire professorship to Marmontel in 1848. Nevertheless, Alkan lamented to George Sand after the ordeal that he had felt “disposed to educate a whole generation in musical matters,” before the opportunity was swiped from him, and his determination to compose etudes of such grand stature even without an official position certainly reflects his pedagogical ambition.⁷ The most direct evidence of Op. 39 being used in an institutional setting comes from 1874 when the jurors of the annual *Concours du Conservatoire* selected the *Concerto* as the women’s set piece—implying, as Hammond and Keygnaert have noted, the level of familiarity and respect that the work had gained by then.⁸ Although Alkan never went on to succeed his teacher’s former post nor furnish his own piano method, he did leave behind a comprehensive didactic treatise of another kind in the Op. 39 studies. I contend that these studies blend the concept of the etude with several other instrumental genres in ways that demonstrate the musical values of the archetypal pianist-composer in Alkan’s day, thereby fortifying their practicality as pedagogical works.

Genre and the Romantic Piano Etude

The Romantic etude is a difficult genre to pin down, as nineteenth-century composers freely interpreted the term in a staggering number of approaches. Charles Rosen defines the Romantic etude as a piece in which “a mechanical difficulty directly produces the music, its charm, and its pathos.”⁹ This type of etude originated in the early nineteenth-century as exemplified by Carl Czerny, who wrote hundreds of pedagogical studies intended for training pianists. Czerny’s etudes retained a simplicity in

³ François-Joseph Fétis, *Traité de l’accompagnement de la partition sur la piano ou l’orgue*, (Paris: Petit, 1829), 1.

⁴ Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2000), 176.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁷ Smith, *Alkan: The Man*, 45.

⁸ Nick Hammond and Frederik Keygnaert, “Marie Poitevin and Her Performance of Alkan in the 1870s,” *Alkan Society Bulletin* 98 (May 2019), 7.

⁹ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 363.

concept, almost always focusing on a single figuration with a title that indicated the exact problem to be solved. If one were to ask, “What is the etude (i.e., the concept being studied)” in any given Czerny exercise, then the answer would generally be a particular technical challenge: octaves, arpeggios, left-hand flexibility, right-hand velocity, etc. The implication is that, by repeating one of these elemental figurations in the context of a musical work (i.e. the etude), the player will develop particular skills and be able to apply them elsewhere.

However, the concept behind many other Romantic etudes was often more abstract than a single mechanical device. For instance, Schumann’s *Symphonic Etudes* are studies in a broader aspect of performance, that of producing “orchestral characters” on the piano through a series of variations.¹⁰ Likewise, Liszt’s 1851 *Transcendental Etudes* do not necessarily isolate specific techniques in the manner of Czerny but instead contain largely heterogeneous textures. Jim Samson has argued that the *Transcendental Etudes* are in fact studies in the spectacle of performance, moving from one special effect to another and thereby emphasizing the pianistic event over the musical material.¹¹ These kinds of studies might be better understood as what I term “conceptual etudes,” in that they focus on a concept of musicality (e.g. performance or symphonic playing) rather than a certain mechanical problem. By contrast, etudes that resemble the Czerny model as described by Rosen are “technical etudes” that drill narrower aspects of pianism such as scales and arpeggios.

Alkan’s Op. 39 features a series of unique technical and conceptual etudes in the form of orchestral genre-types. Thus in asking the question, “What is the etude?” in one of Alkan’s Op. 39 studies, the answer is more complicated than simply “scales” or “arpeggios.” The *Concerto*, for instance, contains an entire world of internal genres, styles, and technical feats (toccata, march, nocturne, impromptu, polonaise, etc.), and yet it is nonetheless a set of three etudes. Just as Schumann deftly blended the etude, variation, and orchestral genres together in his *Symphonic Etudes*, Alkan incorporated a variety of genres into Op. 39 using “etude” as a broadly unifying term. This complex genre structure calls for a multi-level analysis in order to reveal its pedagogical value for a nineteenth-century pianist-composer-in-training.

Alkan’s *Symphonie* as Etude

In “Speaking of Music in the Romantic Era,” Matthew Gelbart sketches a hierarchy of nineteenth-century genre-levels ranging from microgenre, subgenre, and mid-level genre, to governing genre and the broadest meta-genres (**fig. 1**).¹² I will apply a version of this organizational method to an analysis of Alkan’s *Symphonie* in order to identify how several genre-levels operate simultaneously as different types of applied etudes. Each level in my analysis represents a certain kind of etude operating in the *Symphonie* (**fig. 2**): the technical etude as microgenre, single-movement forms as subgenres, the multi-movement symphony as a mid-level genre, the conceptual etude and the piano transcription as governing genres “A” and “B” respectively, all under the umbrella of art music, the metagenre. In Alkan’s *Symphonie*, the superimposition of these five operative genre-levels creates multiple avenues for interpreting meaning, thereby expanding its musical function to encompass various pedagogical and artistic applications.

Level 1: Microgenre

To start with the narrowest definition of etude, each movement of Alkan’s *Symphonie* functions as a micro-level technical study. Yet the consistent repetition of mechanical figures that typically differentiates a technical etude from other microgenres is harder to spot in Op. 39 due to the presence of competing genre-levels. In the *Symphonie*, Alkan cloaks etude-like textures under the broader guise of symphonic rhetoric. This allows the technical figuration in question to develop alongside the *Symphonie*’s thematic material, creating a much more complex type of technical etude. For example, the first movement (etude 4) is essentially a study in polyphonic playing, a symphonic effect that Alkan achieves through the use of expanded shifts in register and dense contrapuntal passages. As expected in

¹⁰ Schumann’s original title reads, “*Etüden im Orchestercharakter für Pianoforte von Florestan und Eusebius*.”

¹¹ Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental Studies of Liszt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 132–133.

¹² Matthew Gelbart, “Speaking of Music in the Romantic Era: Dynamic and Resistant Aspects of Musical Genre,” in *Speaking of Music: Addressing the Sonorous*, ed. Keith Chapin and Andrew H. Clark (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 150.

Table 8.2. Diagram of Genre Systems: Nineteenth–Twentieth Centuries
 MODE/STYLE CAN SEPARATE AND CUT ACROSS
 SOME LEVELS, BUT NOT CONSISTENTLY

<i>Metagenres</i> The categories at this level at least claim to be determined <i>not</i> primarily by function but by origin (composer type or composer, nationality, etc.)	“ART MUSIC”	“FOLK MUSIC”	“POPULAR MUSIC”
<i>Governing genres</i>	CHAMBER – ORCHESTRAL – OPERATIC – CHURCH SMALL “public” GROUPS OR PIANO “private”	songs, dances, ballads	music hall, popular dances, etc. arrangements of hit tunes, etc. ◇ later many other domains
<i>Midlevel genres and subgenres</i>	quartet, symphony, grand opera, trio, symphonic poem, “music drama,” etc. lied, vocal duet, character piece, etc.	reel, jig, etc.	
<i>Microgenres</i>	nocturne, prelude, intermezzo, etc.		“swell songs,” etc.

Figure 1. Graphic by Matthew Gelbart, “Speaking of Music in the Romantic Era: Dynamic and Resistant Aspects of Musical Genre,” in *Speaking of Music: Addressing the Sonorous*, ed. Keith Chapin and Andrew H. Clark (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 150.

The Op. 39 *Symphony* as Etude in Five Levels

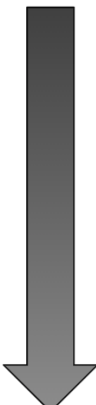
	Genre-Level	Corresponding Genres in Op. 39
 <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Broader</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Narrower</i></p>	5: Metagenre	Art Music
	4: Governing Genres <i>(Note: Level 4A is broader than 4B)</i>	A. Conceptual Etude B. Piano Transcription
	3: Mid-Level Genre	Symphony
	2: Subgenres	Sonata-Allegro Funeral March Menuet Finale
	1: Microgenre	Technical Etude

Figure 2. The Op. 39 *Symphony* as Etude in Five Levels.

an advanced technical etude, Alkan structures the entire movement around this single mechanical device. At the same time, the technique of polyphonic pianism is broad enough for Alkan to present it in numerous different variations within its symphonic context. In the climactic coda of this sonata-allegro movement, the pianist plays several 8 to 11-note chords in combination with rapid octave

Figure 3. Op. 39, Etude no. 4, Coda. Note the presence of four types of chordal difficulties: 1) chords within octaves, 2) chords on top of rapidly descending scales, 3) 10–11 note chords, and, 4) internally voiced chords.

passages, descending chromatic scales, and internally voiced chord-tones (**fig. 3**). Not only does this make for an effective musical ending, but this string of four distinct yet related chordal textures enhances the pianistic-technical interest of this etude.

The three etudes that make up the rest of Alkan's piano symphony are also based on unifying technical figurations. The beginning of the *Marche funèbre* (etude 5) resembles an exercise in contrasting articulations featuring a legato melody line above a dry, unpedalled accompaniment; at the same time, this passage remains true to its implied mid-level genre, the symphony, by suggesting an atmosphere of muted pizzicato strings pierced by a solo bassoon. The main theme of the *Menuet* (etude 6) features complex rhythmic patterns that frequently disrupt the sense of triple meter, and the asymmetrical passages in the *Trio* require a strong sense of phrasing. Lastly, the symphony's presto finale (etude 7) combines two distinct technical challenges into a single study, simultaneously testing the performer's left-hand octave leaps and right-hand velocity. Yet the four movements that make up Alkan's piano symphony can only be partially understood as microgenre technical etudes. By integrating these surface-level techniques into standard subgenre forms, Alkan significantly increased their value as practical studies.

Level 2: Subgenre

Alkan casts his *Symphonie* in four subgenre-etudes: a sonata-allegro opening, a funeral march "on the death of a good man," a menuet, and a presto finale. This multi-movement structure invokes a classical ethos, one that is made clear by the antiquated *menuet* form as well as by the funeral march's epitaphic reference to the second movement of Beethoven's 'Eroica' symphony. Zimmerman explains in the *Encyclopédie* that "[the student] must study the music of the masters such as Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, get into the spirit of their compositions and be guided by them. The beginner pupil can choose a piece that will serve as a model in which to adapt his musical ideas."¹³ Zimmerman goes on to describe how to go about developing themes in the first movement of a symphony versus an overture, a distinction that Alkan makes clear by including both of these genres in Op. 39.¹⁴ The student of these etudes thus has much to learn from Alkan's masterful interpretation of classical symphonic genres. Lewenthal calls attention to Alkan's "keen sense of architecture" in the coda of the Symphony's opening movement (etude 4); after abandoning the secondary theme in the recapitulation, Alkan reprises it in the unexpected key of B major (VII in tonic of C minor), thereby demonstrating the balanced structure of sonata-form in an original manner.¹⁵ More than being studies in how to simply *follow* established forms, these etudes demonstrate the principle of subgenres as communication between artist and audience. It was crucial for nineteenth-century pianist-composers to understand these methods in order to write music within larger forms.

Level 3: Mid-level Genre

While etudes 4-7 represent individual studies in pianistic techniques and single-movement subgenres, they also combine to form a four-movement symphony. Here lies one of Alkan's chief innovations in Op. 39; along with the *Concerto* and *Ouverture*, the Op. 39 *Symphonie* is a full-scale reproduction of the mid-level orchestral genre on which it is based. It lasts approximately thirty minutes long in performance, utilizes several standard forms, shares unifying motivic material across multiple movements, and depicts a diverse array of orchestral timbres.¹⁶ As a hands-on compositional treatise reminiscent of Zimmerman's *Encyclopédie*, Op. 39 urges the student to wield the keyboard as if it were an orchestral ensemble. For instance, the final page of the *Marche funèbre* requires the performer to make a number of subtle changes in voicing, phrasing, and pedalling to convey a series of instrumental textures: the primary theme with pizzicato accompaniment gives way to a legato echo in the lower strings only to be cut off by a foreboding timpani roll, after which each orchestral section enters one by

¹³ "Il faut étudier la musique des maîtres tels que Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, se pénétrer de l'esprit de leurs compositions et se guider d'après eux. L'élève qui commence peut choisir un morceau qui lui servira de patron et auquel il adaptera ses idées mélodiques." Zimmerman, *Encyclopédie*, vol. 3, 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵ Lewenthal, *The Piano Music of Alkan*, XII.

¹⁶ See Larry Sitsky, "Summary Notes for a Study of Alkan," *Studies in Music* 8, (1974): 68-69 for an overview of motivic relationships across the *Symphonie*'s four movements.

one for a concluding tutti swell. Alkan sparingly indicates his intended instrumentation on the score, requiring the player to use articulation, range, style, and other contextual clues to determine the type of sound being imitated on the piano. In other words, the very idea of a piano composition that contains a “hidden” orchestration is an exercise in itself, the perfect kind of puzzle for a budding young composer to crack.

Level 4: Governing Genres A and B

If the *Symphony for Solo Piano* represents a “model” orchestral symphony, it also serves to illustrate the art of piano transcription (Level 4B). The French pianist-composers in training at the Conservatoire regularly engaged with new musical concepts using the keyboard as a learning tool. Being able to not only hear and study the score of a symphony, but also to play one as a pianistic etude was an intuitive way for students to internalize material. In Op. 39, the *Symphonie* acts as the practical equivalent to Alkan’s orchestral transcriptions, which he advertised as both entertainment and study material. One of the primary ways to utilize the *Symphonie* as a compositional tool is to “reverse-engineer” its contents into a full symphonic score. At least two pianist-composers used Op. 39 in this way during Alkan’s lifetime. During a visit to Paris in 1885, Hans von Bülow met Alkan and informed him that Karl Klindworth was arranging the Op. 39 *Concerto* for piano and orchestra.¹⁷ Not only did Alkan respond enthusiastically upon hearing of this exercise, but he also indicated that Klindworth was not the first to try it. “[Alkan] was very eager to learn about [your orchestration],” Von Bülow reported to Klindworth, “Years ago his son Delaborde made a similar attempt to orchestrate [the *Concerto*], but he soon got stuck in the middle of the first movement.”¹⁸ The fact that Alkan approved of these arrangements—and possibly even encouraged Delaborde to try it for himself—further supports the idea that Op. 39 was to be studied from a conceptual-compositional perspective as well as a pianistic-technical one.

While the transcription functions as a governing genre, an even larger kind of governing genre at work in Op. 39 is the conceptual etude (Level 4A). As the second-broadest type of genre-level, placed directly beneath the metagenre of “Art Music,” the conceptual etude applies to each genre beneath it. This includes the transcription, symphony, and single-movement subgenres, which are all conceptual studies in certain aspects of composition and performance. The all-encompassing presence of the conceptual etude is arguably the most original aspect of Op. 39 and also the most consequential for understanding the later development of the nineteenth-century piano etude. At the narrowest end of the spectrum, the four etudes that make up Alkan’s piano symphony are still individual technical studies constructed around various mechanical figurations. But as shown in my multi-level analysis, there is much more material for study when the term “etude” is applied not just to pianistic *techniques* but to musical *concepts* of form, orchestral timbre, arrangement, and so on. Alkan constructed the Op. 39 etudes around these principles, resulting in a set of applied studies for the aspiring pianist-composer to master.

Conclusion

The Op. 39 studies bear the unmistakable mark of the French pianist-composer archetype that Alkan exemplified throughout his career. Their musical challenges resemble both the performative and compositional aspects of Alkan’s training at the Conservatoire, the same institution where he once sought to educate the next generation of French musicians. Had Alkan’s career plans come to fruition, then Op. 39 might have formed the centerpiece of his piano courses.

But while the Op. 39 etudes, as educational tools, remained rooted in the standard harmonic and formal practices of their day, they nevertheless pushed the limits of technique to a degree that kept them pianistically relevant for decades to come. In 1875, eighteen years after the publication of Op. 39, the German pianist Edward Dannreuther offered a collective appraisal of Alkan’s etudes:

“They belong to the most modern development of the *technique* of the instrument, and represent in fact the extreme point in which it has reached. Though they cannot stand comparison, in point of beauty and absolute musical value, with the Etudes of Chopin and Liszt . . . they have a valid claim

¹⁷ Hans von Bülow, *Neue Briefe*, ed. Richard Maria Ferdinand Du Moulin-Eckart, (München: Drei Masken Verlag, 1927), 116.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 116–117.

to be studied; for they present technical specialties nowhere else to be found—difficulties of a Titanic sort—effects peculiar to the instrument carried to the very verge of possibility.”¹⁹

The pedagogical value that Dannreuther describes here is quite different from that of Czerny’s earlier etudes. Whereas Czerny essentialized the preexisting elements of piano technique and converted them into hundreds of accessible studies, Alkan and his contemporaries developed new elements entirely. Their pioneering efforts, in the form of orchestral studies and pianistic spectacles, led to etudes of extreme technical and conceptual difficulty. Alkan’s Op. 39 studies represent his own expansion of the etude genre into this uniquely Romantic mold, one that has been all-but-forgotten about today. Perhaps further investigations into exactly what the Romantics and their pupils were *studying*, not just playing or composing, will reveal more about the nature of their abilities, their values, and ultimately, their legacies.

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Interview with Hiroaki Ooi

Pianist Hiroaki Ooi offers insights into his historic performances of Alkan's music in Japan

What is your general background in piano performance?

I was born and grew up in Kyoto, an ancient capital city in Japan. I went to Kyoto University, where I studied electrotechnics. Self-taught on the piano, I began my performing career in the field of contemporary music. At the age of 28, I entered a music school for the first time and took regular piano lessons with Bruno Canino. I studied with him for four years. At the same time, I studied the harpsicord, the clavichord, the fortepiano and the organ. My piano playing style can be described as based on the Italian school inherited from Canino and 'Historically informed performance practice' (*Historische Aufführungspraxis*). My recent activities with period instruments include the Japanese premieres of Frescobaldi's *Fiori Musicali* (3 Organ Masses) on a baroque organ with meantone temperament, Francois Couperin's complete 27 *Ordres* on a French harpsichord (in 8 concerts), and Bach's Six Trio Sonatas BWV 525-530 on a pedal-clavichord with 2 manuals. My recordings on CD and DVD include Xenakis' piano concertos 'Synaphai' and 'Erikhthon' with the Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg and the Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks, J.S. Bach's 'The Art of the Fugue' on an historical clavichord by Joris Potvlieghe, and 15 of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas on various fortepianos, available also on i-Tunes.



How did you first become acquainted with Alkan's music?

Initially, I associated the name 'Alkan' with a chemical compound!¹ Anyway, like many pianists, I used to have a vague notion of an obscure early nineteenth century composer who wrote nothing but pieces

¹ In Japanese, 'Alkan' is both written and pronounced the same as 'alkane'.

to be played at extremely fast tempos, but not music worthy of much attention. In 2008, in Kyoto, I played Beethoven's 32 Piano Sonatas on six different fortepianos, in chronological and stylistic order, as well as Beethoven's 9 Symphonies transcribed by Liszt on three period instruments dating from the 1840s (J.B. Streicher, Pleyel and Erard) in a series of 13 concerts. When comparing several arrangements of 'Cavatina' Op. 130-5 to include in the last concert, I finally came to realize the sheer originality and musicality of Alkan. Thereafter, I played Alkan's transcriptions of Mozart's 'Thamos, Konig in Agypten', K.345/336a, Mozart's Piano Concerto K.466 and Beethoven's Piano Concerto Op. 37 among others. Then I asked Mr. Osamu Nakamura² (Kanazawa) for some advice. I asked him which piece of Alkan I should play first. He suggested that I start with the earliest works. I felt a little discouraged. Performers have a tendency to expect composers to be perfect in every aspect. Nevertheless, after playing the major works by Charles Ives and Giacinto Scelsi, I came to agree with what Antoine Marmontel said. "Alkan is complete in himself, he is no one else but himself. In spite of his strengths and his weaknesses, he thinks and speaks his own language" (1887). In Alkan's honour, I have to mention that it was the first time for me to give not only a recital of only Alkan's works (February 2021), but also a recital of Chopin's works (November 2020) and Liszt's works (January 2021).

What drove you to learn the Op. 39 in particular?

I wanted to create programmes that would be suitable for Pleyel pianos dating from 1843. I chose five composers: Berlioz, Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, and Alkan. For Chopin, I chose the 27 Etudes and 2 Sonatas; for Liszt, I chose the B minor Sonata and the 12 Transcendental Etudes. And it seemed only natural to choose the Etudes Op. 39 for Alkan, which contain some of Alkan's most substantial works. The Chopin Etudes Op. 10 and Op. 25 take about half an hour each and the 12 Transcendental Etudes by Liszt take about 65 minutes. Alkan's Etudes Op. 39 take about 2 hours—they are rather like the Mosasaurus that swallows the carnivorous dinosaur Indominus Rex at the end of the film 'Jurassic World'. It is the most ambitious of the etude genre and is an ultimate "dead end". Debussy, Ligeti, and numerous other composers from the 20th and 21st centuries reverted too readily to the early 19th century style of Chopin.

Do you have any plans to play other pieces from Alkan's repertoire in the future?

I am most interested in his 'Benedictus' Op. 54 (1859); '12 Etudes pour les pieds seulement'—etudes for the pedals alone (1865); the 13 Prieres Op. 64 (1866), 'Impromptu sur le Choral de Luther' Op. 69 (1866) and 11 grands preludes Op. 66 (1867), which I would like to perform on the piano-pedalier. It is very difficult to get access to this instrument in Japan, so I may have to substitute the organ for now. For comparison of pieces with the same titles (various couplings are possible), I may perform from Rameau, Alkan, Messiaen, etc. I may upload some demonstration performances on YouTube sooner or later. Since I played 'Quasi Faust' as an encore when I played the Op. 39, I am planning a "Faust recital" with the whole of the Grand Sonata Op. 33 and the Liszt Sonata together with the 'Grosse vierstimmige Concert-Fuge uber eine von Herrn Dr. Liszt gegebene Thema' Op. 24 by Friedrich Kuhmstedt (1809-1858). This work (1850) is based on a theme from Liszt's Sonata. Other works are the Schumann/Kleinmichel Overture from 'Szenen aus Goethes Faust' (1853), and Ronald Stevenson's Prelude, Fugue and Fantasy on Busoni's Faust (1949/59). I am also thinking of combining excerpts from Op. 39 with other pieces. An evening with all four movements of Alkan's Symphony, Moscheles' Sonate Melancolique Op. 49 (1821), and Grande Piece Symphonique Op. 17 (1862) by Cesar Frank/Blanche Selva. Or all three movements of the Alkan Concerto for solo piano, J.S. Bach's Italian Concerto BWV 971, Telemann's Solo Concerto in B minor TWV 33:AI, Sorabji's 'Concerto per suonare da me solo' (1946), with Finnissy's 'Alkan Paganini' (1997) as an encore. This may have already been done by someone else.

I noticed that one performance will be played on an old Pleyel piano. How did you come into possession of this piano for the concert and how does the experience of playing differ from a modern piano?

² A Japanese pianist known for his premiere recordings of many of Alkan's works.

In 2010, I started a project 'Portraits of Composers' (POC) in Tokyo, a series of solo recitals dealing with post-war, avant-garde piano music by composers from the second half of the 20th century to the present. So far I have completed 46 programmes, during which I have performed some 500 works. For the last few years I have been using a concert space where one can play the inner side of a New York Steinway (a rare possibility in Tokyo). This space also owns the Pleyel fortepiano from 1843 in good condition. That is the reason why I programmed 5 concerts of "French avant-garde in the 1840s". The Pleyel is, of course, the perfect instrument for Chopin. It was also interesting to play Berlioz/Liszt's *Symphonie Fantastique* on an instrument by Camille Pleyel, who was almost about to be killed by Berlioz.³ There is also no problem in playing Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes*, the first edition of which indicates the use of an old instrument with only 6 octaves. However, to perform Alkan's Op. 39 on an instrument with 80 keys and with a single escapement would be quite hazardous. So I strongly recommend a more recent instrument, such as an Erard after 1850 with 84 keys and with a double escapement. It is an even easier task to play Book 2 of Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues on an historical clavichord. By the way, maybe thanks to the Corona pandemic, the facsimile of the 'London First Edition' of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata* (Royal Harmonic Institution, 1820) was uploaded on IMSLP last April. This London version suggests that the whole piece can be played on a single fortepiano of five and a half octaves, instead of two different fortepianos of six octaves for each movement. Strangely enough, the construction of the movements in the London first edition is the same as in Boulez' second sonata. I wonder whether it is usual for pianists in London to play the *Hammerklavier* using the London first edition rather than the Vienna first edition.

What preparation goes into performing a concert series with such extensive and difficult programmes?

I have played many of the longest and most difficult pieces in the modern repertoire, so preparation is no different. Incidentally, when I look back at pianists who have performed Alkan's Op.39 complete, most of the performers have been in their twenties or thirties, which is not surprising. Here is a list of performances of Op. 39 performed complete, in one day, by a single performer:

- (1) Osamu Nakamura (1959-): 01/03/1984 Ishikawa Bunkyo Kaikan (Kanazawa)
- (2) Osamu Nakamura: 12/03/1984 Studio Runde (Nagoya)
- (3) Osamu Nakamura: 06/04/1984 Toranomom Hall (Tokyo)
- (4) Jack Gibbons (1962-): 18/01/1995 the Holywell Music Room (Oxford)
- (5) Jack Gibbons: 15/02/1996 Queen Elizabeth Hall (London)
- (6) Teppo Koivisto (1961-): 03/02/2007 (Helsinki)
- (7) Jack Gibbons: 25/08/2013 the Holywell Music Room (Oxford)
- (8) Vincenzo Maltempo (1985-): 02/11/2013 Minato Mirai Hall (Yokohama)
- (9) Jack Gibbons: 15/12/2013 Merkin Concert Hall (New York)
- (10) Hiroaki Ooi (1968-): 27/02/2021 Shoto Salon Hall (Tokyo) [Pleyel fortepiano 1843, 80 keys, 430Hz]
- (11) Hiroaki Ooi: 14/03/2021 Shozan-An Hall (Ashiya) [Hamburg Steinway 1986, 442 Hz]

It is hard to believe that six of the eleven performances took place in Japan and it is shocking that the work has still not been performed in Alkan's home country, France. In Japan, Alkan's works seem to be appreciated and loved more by amateur piano enthusiasts (often fans of Marc-Andre Hamelin) than by professional musicians. It would be unfair not to recognize the pioneering achievement of Mr. Osamu [Kanazawa] Nakamura, who at the age of 25 played through the entire cycle from memory as early as in 1984. Nakamura was first and foremost a composer of avant-garde music. This was not in search for new concert pieces to perform, but rather a discovery in the context of post-modernism. Unfortunately, there are no live recordings of these concerts. Nevertheless, Prof. Takahiro Sonoda (1928-2004), who attended the concert in Tokyo on 6th April 1984, was very enthusiastic. "It was the

³ After Marie-Félicité-Denise Moke broke off her engagement with Berlioz to marry Pleyel, Berlioz devised a plan to murder Pleyel, Marie, and her mother. The plan was abandoned for obvious reasons.

first time I discovered the true value of Alkan”. Prof. Sonoda was a pupil of Leo Sirota and Marguerite Long, lived in Baden-Baden, had been a member of the jury at international competitions in Warsaw, Moscow, Brussels and Munich, and was well versed in the history of piano music, including Busoni and Godowsky. In a sense, this was the ground zero of the Alkan Renaissance in Japan. These past months, Mr. Nakamura has been curating a selection of around 700 works by over 100 composers born in the 1820s, “the darkest continent in the history of piano music”. To begin with, he is soon going to play works by 7 composers born in 1821, namely, Charles Bovy Lysberg, August Wolff, Friedrich Kiel, Rudolf Willmers, Auguste Emmanuel de Vaucorbeil, Frederic Brisson and Joseph Rudolf Schmachner. One can only admire his inexhaustible vitality.

What reactions have you received from audiences after performing the Op. 39?

The most striking impressions came from the poet Masaharu Yamamura: “I feel Mr. Alkan must be a good person”, and television producer, Hideaki Takaoki (who has had several pieces dedicated to him by Nikolai Kapustin), who said, “The advantage of attending a live performance of the whole of Op. 39 is that we cannot skip the 11th piece (Overture)”. If there were some common motifs running throughout the whole of Op.39, for example, a returning to the beginning of the first piece at the end of the twelfth piece, one could feel a greater sense of unity of the whole of Op. 39, and therefore be encouraged to treat the Opus as a whole. So far, I have been unable to find anything linking the separate pieces that make up Op. 39. (If anyone knows of anything please let me know). Mr. Nakamura’s comment about the lengthy ‘Overture’: “I think that Alkan deliberately intended it to be unbalanced” —was the most convincing for me, as it was a composer’s point of view. (If you can ‘explain’ what this ‘Overture’ is, please let me know).

How has Covid affected your work as a pianist?

Japan has had a difficult time, although not as difficult as Europe. As for the Pleyel recitals, I commissioned new works for fortepiano from Adam Kondor (Budapest) and Claude Lenner (Luxembourg), who repeatedly asked me if the concerts were really going to take place. Last November, at the behest of the Japanese and Austrian governments, the Vienna Philharmonic came to Japan from Austria during the lockdown to perform large scale works such as ‘L’Oiseau de feu’ (The Firebird) and ‘Ein Heldenleben’ in front of densely packed audiences all over Japan. The “irreplaceable” artists—the musicians of the Vienna Philharmonic, and the conductors Muti and Barenboim, were told that their isolation in Japan would be greatly reduced. So, I would like to propose that our illustrious colleagues in France practice Alkan’s Op. 39 and fill the venues of the concerts that have been cancelled due to Covid-19.

What are your plans for after Covid ends?

First of all, as a citizen of Japan, I am sincerely grateful to the British government for dispatching the aircraft carrier Queen Elizabeth, and other carrier strike groups to the Indo-Pacific region at this time. Indirectly, I think, it also serves to prevent the next epidemic. Next year (2022) is the 100th anniversary of Iannis Xenakis’ birth, so I would like to perform some of Xenakis’ works, including ‘Eonta’, again. However, there is one section where two trumpets and three trombones blow strongly into the soundboard of the piano. With spittle flying all over the place, it may be a little too close for comfort.

*John Snelling, one of the society’s founders now living in Japan, kindly reviewed and assisted with this interview.

Letter to the editor

Alkan in Oz.

I was able to attend the recital at St. George's Cathedral last evening, the 17th of June, which was apparently the date in 1857 when Reubke himself gave the initial rendering of his sonata.

The programme was:

Passacaglia in C minor by Bach

Sonata on the 94th Psalm by Reubke

Impromptu sur le choral de Luther Un fort rempart est notre Dieu by Alkan

Organ Symphony No 5 by Widor

The cathedral is modest by British Gothic standards being only about 55 yards long. Built in the 1880s, it is of red brick and a very attractive building right in the heart of Perth CBD. The organ is by the Australian firm Knud Smenge Pty and installed in 1993. It was enlarged in 2010 by the South Island Organ Company Ltd of New Zealand, who added a 32ft bombarde stop and a horizontal array of trumpet stops. It is a mechanical-action instrument, the largest of its kind in Western Australia and has 48 speaking stops and 3516 pipes. It is raised above the west door where it can be both seen and heard to full advantage. For the recital, all the chairs were turned 'round to face the west door and, as the console is hidden behind the pipework, three cameras were used to project the recital onto a large screen. One camera was on the pedal-board, the second on the console as seen from the left, and the third was above the organist's head, giving a superb bird's-eye view on the manuals.

Unfortunately for me, I had to leave just after the Alkan (cancellation of trains!) but I was there long enough to hear rapturous applause. Most of the time the overhead camera was used, giving the audience an excellent opportunity to see the fiendishly intricate fingerwork. Surely, human fingers were never designed to move at such a speed? We could also just make out the lower half of the score, a sea of black ink. His page-turner had a job keeping up with him.

Dr. Nolan himself said: "Bach's Passacaglia, Widor's 5th Symphony, and particularly Reubke's Sonata on the 94th Psalm, are regarded as some of the most technically difficult writing for the organ, but frankly, they are akin to playing 'Teddy Bears Picnic' at half speed compared to some of the organ music of Alkan". But it all went without a hitch.

Finally, it struck me that if you take the initial letters of the composers in the order of playing you get BRAW, a Scottish word for splendid—which very adequately summed up the recital.

Best wishes, Paul Gibson

PROGRAM NOTES

Impromptu sur le choral de Luther 'Un fort rempart est notre Dieu'
Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888)

Charles-Valentin Alkan is at last beginning to be recognised as the towering genius he undoubtedly was, as both composer and pianist. Indeed, Busoni's judgement is that Alkan stood with Liszt, Chopin, Schumann and Brahms as one of the five greatest composers for the piano since Beethoven. Alkan is one of the truest of Beethoven's heirs in terms of his structural handling of rhythm and the creator of some of the most dauntingly difficult music ever written.

Born into a large and prodigiously talented musical Parisian Jewish family of Alsatian extraction, Alkan became a student at the Paris Conservatoire at the age of six. He won the first prize of the Conservatoire at the age of ten, and premier prix in organ playing at the age of 20. This perhaps accounts for the dozen pedal études in particular which are deemed almost unplayable. Until the mid-1840s Alkan was one of the most celebrated piano virtuosos in Paris, and often shared the concert platform with Liszt and Chopin. Alkan is said to have been the only pianist in whose presence even Liszt felt nervous; and Vincent d'Indy, who heard him play near the end of his life, maintained that he surpassed Liszt in interpretative powers. However, it was the death of Chopin in 1849 that resulted in Alkan withdrawing from public life and devoting himself to composition.

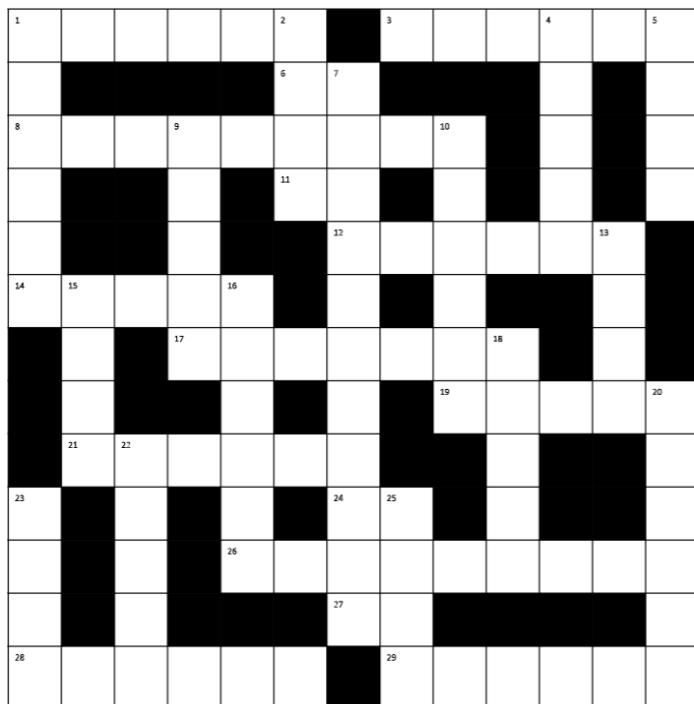
Alkan was a master of the pedal-piano and his *Impromptu sur le choral de Luther*, based on Luther's celebrated chorale *Ein feste Burg*, is his most imposing composition for the instrument. Though originally composed for pedal-piano or three hands at one piano, such are the very formidable technical difficulties of the work that the renowned pianist Roger Smalley rearranged the work for piano duet. Alkan expert Ronald Frost described the *Impromptu* as placing 'inhuman demands on a single player'.

The *Impromptu* does seem to be a misnomer for such a gigantic, deeply considered and complex design. It falls into four principal sections: a passacaglia, a scherzo (with a distinct homage to Chopin), a sicilienne and a dastardly fugue finale, firmly entrenched in the styles of Bach and Beethoven. From this performer's perspective, I have never encountered a work that requires sheer, circus-like, co-ordination between the hands and the feet. Showing the technical requirements aside, this is genius music written by a musical giant.

Distractions and diversions

Solution to Prize Crossword number 8

G	R	A	N	D	E		S	O	N	A	T	E
E		N			D	S				N		A
L	E	S	Q	U	A	T	R	E	A	G	E	S
D			U		M	A		N		L		I
O		M	A			F	U	G	U	E		E
F	A	U	S	T		F		I			O	R
	P		I	R	E	L	A	N	D		A	
J	E			E		A		E	R	U	P	T
E		V	I	N	G	T			A	N		I
W		I		T		E	S		W			P
I	M	P	R	E	S	S	I	O	N	I	S	T
S		E				T	A			P		O
H	^E / _U	R	E	U	X		M	E	N	A	G	E

Prize Crossword number 9 (Set by *En Songe*)**Notes:**

- Many of the solutions are composers who influenced, or were influenced by, Alkan. Their clues are factual rather than cryptic.
- Completed grids can be sent to the Treasurer* to arrive by December 1st. The first correct solution (drawn randomly from a hat) will win a CD of a rare performance of the *Symphonie* from op. 39.

* treasurer@alkansociety.org, or
Nick Hammond, Woodend House,
High Stittenham, York YO60 7TW, UK

Need a hint? Send an email to *En Songe* at:
EnSonge.Alkan@gmail.com

Across

- 1 Owner of a Beethoven lock, dedicatee of a Schumann concerto and life-long friend (6)
- 3 *Square d'Orléans* neighbour (6)
- 6 Meditative-sounding Russian river, perhaps in Tomsk? (2)
- 8 One of his overtures was thought to exist only in CVA's transcription (9)
- 11 Typographic space, or setter's preposition? (2)
- 12 Hate nearly tested in reverse (6)
- 14 Gold leaves leaving for long-serving Alkan Society chairman (5)
- 17 Von Bülow dubbed CVA as his pianistic equivalent (7)
- 19 He said CVA had the most perfect technique, but their early friendship waned (5)
- 21 1832 *Prix de Rome* winner to CVA's second place (6)
- 24 Alternative French gold? (2)
- 26 Initially *Marche Héroïque*, *Réconciliation*, *Juan*, *Saltarelle* sandwiching As results in Indian rulers (9)
- 27 Extreme right-wing party found within Alkan fugue? (2)
- 28 CVA made transcriptions from his oratorios as well as a composing a lost concerto cadenza (6)
- 29 May well have attended some of CVA's *Petits Concerts* and was later Director of the Paris Conservatoire (with initial) (5, 1)

Down

- 1 Attended Beethoven's deathbed with his pupil 1 ac; CVA played his works in public (6)
- 2 Mantle found in hero before (4)
- 4 German pianist, based in Paris, performed 8-handed *Allegretto* from Beethoven 7th with C-V & N Alkan and Zimmerman in 1845 (5)
- 5 Mixed-up unit features in two of *Les Mois* (4)
- 7 Maybe he provided the inspiration for CVA's op. 38, in both key sequence and form (11)
- 9 Confusingly multiply bile from my book collection, briefly (2, 3)
- 10 Looter backed to get new gear (6)
- 13 Return of zoot suits a wizard country visit (2, 2)
- 15 Look to last part of Aesop's feast for sunrise (4)
- 16 Neonate's chief carer? (3, 3)
- 18 Al & Liz back a monstrous suffix, or more rarely a thorny desert plant (5)
- 20 Born in the city where 3ac grew up and a favourite pupil of 19ac. (6)
- 22 *Andante* from one of his symphonies transcribed by CVA (5)
- 23 CVA often performed his works on the pedalier (4)
- 25 Swiss pianist-composer, assistant to 19ac, colleague of 7dn and 17ac (4)



The Alkan Society

aiming to promote the education of the public in the knowledge,
understanding and appreciation of the life and work of Alkan

Registered Charity
no. 276199



The **Alkan Society**, founded in 1977, is an organization with members from across the globe. It is based in the UK and registered as an official Charity.

The Society promotes the life and work of the French composer and pianist Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888). It supports regular recitals, produces publications (including a regular Bulletin) and is the definitive source of information on Alkan's life and works.



About Alkan

Alkan was recognised by Liszt and Chopin as one of the outstanding musicians of their day. His music has been championed by such eminent performers as Claudio Arrau, Ferruccio Busoni, Jack Gibbons, Marc-André Hamelin, Raymond Lewenthal, John Ogdon, Egon Petri, Sergei Rachmaninoff and Ronald Smith.

His works cover a vast gamut of forms, moods and techniques, combining rigorous classicism with bold modernity. His individual use of harmony and rhythm, extraordinary imagination, and uncompromising keyboard writing guarantee his music a unique place in the repertoire, making him one of the great figures of the Romantic era.

Join the Alkan Society

Annual membership fee: £20; Students £10

As a member you:

- ✓ Contribute to the aims of the Society
- ✓ Can purchase discounted tickets for our recitals
- ✓ Receive regular bulletins and other news
- ✓ Can contribute announcements and promotions to our website
- ✓ Can benefit from our expert query service on the life and music of Alkan

Join at:

www.alkansociety.org

Or contact: membership@alkansociety.org

Who we are

President: Stephanie McCallum; **Vice-presidents:** Anne Smith, Hugh Macdonald, Nicholas King, Richard Shaw
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Information: info@alkansociety.org

Web: www.alkansociety.org

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