



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered Charity number 276199)

<http://www.alkansociety.org>

President: Yonty Solomon

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

Secretary: Nicholas King, 42 St. Alban's Hill, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, HP3 9NG
e-mail: secretary@alkansociety.org

Chairman: Eliot Levin

Treasurer: Averil Kovacs e-mail: treasureralksoc@aol.com

Archivist: Brian Doyle *Bulletin Editor/Webmaster:* David Conway

Bulletin e-mail: info@alkansociety.org

All contents of this Bulletin © The Alkan Society, 2006

BULLETIN no. 73 August 2006

Hamelin's Etude no. IV

Our congratulations to two notable *Alkanistes*, one on each side of the Channel, who are the joint dedicatees of Marc-André Hamelin's *Étude no. IV: Étude à mouvement perpétuellement semblable (d'après Alkan)*. This fiendish shotgun wedding of Alkan's *Étude* op. 76 no. 3 and the last movement of his *Symphonie* op. 39 no.7 is dedicated to Averil Kovacs, our Membership Secretary and Treasurer, and François Luguenot, the moving spirit of the *Société Alkan*. It contains 342 bars of *Presto tempo giusto sempre* ($\eta = 176$).

Hamelin writes in his introduction: 'If this piece is indeed performed – and I'd certainly love it to be – I do hope that the end result can still be appreciated even by those who have not been exposed to Alkan's music in general and to these two works in particular. At the very least, and for better or worse, those for whom virtuosity is a thing in itself will find much here in the way of buck-bang'.

Indubitably the pianist who can most effectively realise these intentions in performance is the composer himself - let us hope for a public première in the near future.

The *Étude* is published by Pellisori Editions, Portland, Oregon, and François is to be additionally congratulated in making it available to members of the *Société Alkan*, to whom copies were distributed with the recent edition of their Bulletin.

By the way, anyone who needs reminding of Hamelin's wonderful playing (and has access to broadband internet) can take a look at a number of video-clips of his performances on-line at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqRGAiaUmGQ&search=marc%20andre%20hamelin> -

including performances of the last movement of the Alkan *Symphonie* and other music and transcriptions by Alkan, Liszt, Godowsky and Hamelin himself (thanks to Averil for spotting this).

Two Unreported Alkan Medals

We are delighted to be able to report to readers two previously unknown Alkan medals, preserved in the private collection of a descendant of the Morhange family. As your editor is a novice in the world of medals, he requests your forbearance, and invites your corrections and comments, for the descriptions and commentary provided below.

The Silver Medal



The silver medal is 35mm. in diameter. It is preserved in its own red-morocco case, lined with green velvet, which would seem to be the original.

The obverse bears a portrait bust of the composer Jean-Philippe Rameau and is inscribed:

JEAN,PH. RAMEAU * COMPOSITEUR FRANCAIS

and

E. GATTEAUX.1816.

The reverse is inscribed:

COMPOSITION
MUSICALE
-
MENTION HONORABLE
-
M. CHARLES-VALENTIN
ALKAN
-
1832

The medallist Jacques-Edouard Gatteaux (1788-1881) came from an artistic family. In 1809 he won the Prix de Rome for medal-engraving, and on his return to Paris in 1813 he began to

be recognised as a leader in his field, unusually preparing medals entirely from his own designs and drawings. He produced the Coronation Medals for Charles X in 1824 and Louis-Phillippe in 1830. 289 medals are recorded as created by him. At his death he left his own collection of fine art to the Louvre and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

There seem to me to be two possible events to which this medal may be related. It may have been presented to Alkan in 1832 when he obtained a commendation in the Prix de Rome competition for his cantata *Hermann et Ketty*. Or it may relate (as its text, but not its date, suggests) to the ‘honourable mention at the Concours of the Institut in 1831’ referred to by Dannreuther in his 1879 *Grove* article (see below in this issue). Such a mention, whether in 1831 or 1832, is not referred to in Ronald Smith’s biography.

The Bronze Medal



It is more difficult to suggest the circumstances surrounding the bronze medal. This is larger than the 1832 medal – 50 mm. in diameter, and 5 mm. thick. The obverse shows a classical-style incarnation of the Arts – at her feet a lyre and a palette and brushes. It is inscribed with the medallist’s name - A. BOVY. On the edge is inscribed the word BRONZE.

The reverse is inscribed, in a border of leaves:

LES INDIGENTS
De 10^E ARRONDISSE^T
À M^r ALKAN
4 FÉVRIER 1849

(The poor people of the 10th arrondissement to M. Alkan, 4th February 1849).

I think the sculptor here is must be Antoine Bovy (1795-1877), who specialised in medals of this scale. Born in Geneva, he settled in Paris around 1835, returning to Geneva shortly before his death.

The wording and date of this medal present several problems to the Alkanist. Firstly – does it relate to Charles-Valentin? It descends in inheritance from his brother Napoléon’s family, so it might relate to Napoléon– although its companion medal being definitely Charles-Valentin’s, the descent by inheritance is not proof one way or the other. Or it may even relate to Alkan *père*, who was still alive at that time.

The wording on the medal seems to imply that it is in thanks for a donation or service rendered to the poor. That in turn might suggest a charity concert – such as was frequently given by virtuosi of the period.

Although I am not aware of any record that Charles-Valentin gave such concerts, it would not have been inconsistent with his social and political views and temperament to do so. However, if the medal does indeed record such a concert by Charles-Valentin, the timing is interesting. It is only a few months, after all, following his rejection by the Conservatoire as professor of Piano, which is assumed to have sparked off his withdrawal from the concert platform in the following years. In fact from April 1846 until May 1849 there is only one mention of an Alkan concert in the Parisian journals (a soirée at the publisher Brandus in December 1848). No trace - yet - of any concert in February 1849. This medal may therefore be a small clue to Alkan's activities during a 'blank space' in his present biography. Readers' comments are invited.

The Exposition of Mysterious Order: John White at 70 and Alkan



The 70th birthday of the remarkably prolific English composer (and Alkanophile) John White was celebrated on the 9th April at Wilton's Music Hall in Hackney with a concert event containing a wide selection (47 in fact) of his 152 piano sonatas, played by nine pianists. Many of the performances were world premieres. John also has to his credit over 20 symphonies and forty ballets, as well as a wide range of theatre and other occasional music – any readers who have attended performances of the Royal Shakespeare Company or the National Theatre are likely to have heard his scores. Not only this, he has brought into being numerous ensembles to perform not only his own music but that of his contemporaries, many with evocative names such as *'The Garden Furniture Ensemble'* and *'The Instant Dismissal Symphony*

Orchestra'. Apart from his abilities as a keyboard player (he concluded the concert with a selection including some of his most recent works) he is also a skilled brass player (specialising in the tuba).

John has worked closely with many of the most original composers of the British avant-garde of the past 50 years, including Cornelius Cardew and Howard Skempton. As with one of his idols, Erik Satie, humour is often present in John's music, but his music itself is by no means a joke. Essentially tonal, favouring bare textures and static or parallel harmonies, often featuring a melody in single strand or doubled at the octave, many of John's sonatas, mostly one-movement forms which the composer has compared to the sonatas of Scarlatti, are creatures which explore his audition of aural space in a variety of techniques. Whilst the spirit of Satie is often present, so too, explains the composer, are those of Bruckner - 'the dignity and magnificence of diatonic chord progressions and unswerving metre'; Alkan – 'the exposition of mysterious order'; Scriabin, Medtner, Schumann and others.

Some of the Alkan Society's members, including your Editor, were present for this landmark concert, although I myself was not able to be there for the entire marathon. The composer however agreed during a brief conversation to let me interview him and a few weeks later I visited him in his home in a surprisingly rural corner of Hackney (at the other end of the borough to Wilton's) and chatted to him about his views on music and those who had influenced him – especially, of course, Charles-Valentin Alkan.

John was inspired to turn to composition whilst at the Royal College of Music after hearing a performance of Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphony*. The result was John's *First Sonata*, which clearly shows its parentage, along with some influence of Bartók. The music critic Felix Aprahamian reviewed the first performance of the sonata (played by Colin Kingsley, who also played the piece at the Wilton's concert) enthusiastically and encouraged the music publisher Alphonse Leduc to take on the novice composer – within a year John had written fourteen sonatas, but had moved on to reflect other influences and discoveries. Some of these influences had deep roots – as a lad John recalls reading Sorabji's *Mi contra Fa* and other musical esoterica which were surprisingly on the shelves at his local suburban public library. At the Royal College, John soon became interested in 'anybody but the mainstream', and his interest was immediately engaged when Oliver Davies introduced him to the music of Alkan – he thinks the first piece he heard was *Super flumina babylonis*.

The great attraction to John of Alkan's music is the 'combination of huge emotional range and intense rigour', added to which are the frequent passages of sensuality and physical beauty. Alkan's language can incorporate both the miniature and the labyrinthine, but it always has its own inner logic and is never afraid to follow this, wherever it may lead – even to the anti-climactic. As with Satie, John suggests, 'if you're going to be crass, do it with flair!' He was also fascinated by Alkan's 'mixed parentage' – the music combining in some ways the sensuality and delicacy of the French school with 'Beethovenian forthrightness'. And the closer you are involved with the music, he feels, the more you can appreciate the purity of Alkan's underlying classicism, his symmetries, and his concentrated expressions of passion. Overall there is the exciting tension in the music of the combination of devotion to traditions going hand-in-hand with overt or covert subversion.

John also feels that Alkan is 'inclusive' in his music – 'there is no sense of doctrine, and he never speaks down – whatever problems there may be spring out of the music itself' rather than any extraneous message which the composer wishes to convey. Alkan's Beethovenian confidence compares in this senses with Brahms and Mendelssohn, where we may often feel that the composer is self-consciously 'checking out whether what he is writing is appropriate' or acceptable to the audience.

One of John's earlier compositions, the *Eighth Sonata*, was written as a direct tribute to Alkan. The first movement of this monumental work is a symphony in five movements, including two scherzos. Apart from this there are two andantes and two barcarolles. The finale as originally conceived had additional parts for two timpani and five trombones. It has never been performed in full, although Roger Smalley broadcast the symphony section many years ago.

John's work with Cardew and others - he took part in performances of the *Treatise* including a full run through its 193 pages at York – led him to indulge in an experimental phase himself, but the works of this period he has now set aside. Partly he became dissatisfied with the philosophy that music needed to bear a political message. But a more important impact was working on music for the theatre. 'In the concert hall you can write justificatory programme notes about 'candelabras of sound' or whatever. But working in the theatre, the music has to hit the audience first time.'

The variety of experience the sonatas offered at the April concert - varying from a demented tango-fantasy to a Brucknerian chorale, by way of an impression of a train carrying Scottish football enthusiasts and a piece 'in which the virtues of long-distance running are represented in a favourable light' – and the delighted reception given to them by the audience, made it clear that John had learnt this lesson well. We look forward to the next 152 sonatas.

An edition – both printed and recorded – of John White's first 36 sonatas is presently in preparation by the pianist Jonathan Powell. For details contact Jonathan at:

jonathanpowell@mutablelogic.com

Alkan in Grove – 1879

Eliot Levin has brought to our attention the original Grove article on Alkan, written in 1879 by Edward Dannreuther. We reprint it verbatim without comment, tempting as it is to add the odd (*sic*) or [!].

ALKAN, CHARLES HENRI VALENTIN. Born at Paris 1813; and still living (1875). Pianist and composer, chiefly of études and caprices for his instrument. His astounding op. 35 (12 études), op. 39 (12 études) and the Trois grand Études, (1) 'Fantaisie pour la main gauche seule', (2) 'Fantaisie pour la main droite seule', (3) 'Étude à mouvement semblable et perpetual pour les deux mains' have not yet met with the attention on the part of pianoforte *virtuosi* which they merit. They belong to the most modern development of the *technique* of the instrument, and represent in fact the extreme point which it has reached. Though they cannot stand comparison in point of beauty and absolute musical value with the 'études of Chopin or Liszt, yet, like those of Anton Rubinstein, which are in some respects akin to them, they have a valid claim to be studied; for they present technical specialities nowhere else to be found, difficulties of a titanic sort, effects peculiar to the instrument carried to the very verge of impossibility. Alkan was admitted to the Conservatoire of Paris in his sixth year (1819) and remained there until 1830, during which term he was successful in several competitions, and left the institutions with the first prize in 1826, and an honourable mention in the Concours of the Institut in 1831. After a short visit to London in 1833 he settled as a master of the pianoforte at Paris. His published compositions mount up to opus 72, and include two concertos, several sonatas and duos, a trio, a large number of *pièces caractéristiques*, and transcriptions and songs. Amongst these, his works for the pianoforte with pedals, known in England as the 'Pédalier grande', op. 64, 66, 69 and 72, take rank with his études.

Edward Dannreuther (1844-1905) was (according to the present *Grove*) born in Strasbourg. He studied at Leipzig with Moscheles and Richter, and gave the first complete UK performance of Chopin's F minor piano concerto in 1863. He also later gave British premiers of the concerti of Grieg, Liszt and Tchaikovsky. Settling in the UK, he became best known as a tireless supporter of the music and ideas of Wagner, and in fact founded the Wagner Society in 1872. He wrote a number of other articles for the first *Grove*, including the entry on Wagner.

Thomas Wakefield at the Cambridge Music Festival

The following is the proposed programme for Thomas Wakefield's concert at Fitzwilliam College on 11th November, following the Cambridge Music Festival theme of 'Music, Mathematics and Mozart'. (See also <http://www.cammusic.co.uk/diary11-12november.htm>).

Bach: Three Preludes and Fugues from 48 Preludes and Fugues for the Well-Tempered Clavier: Book I, No XV in G major; Book II, No IX in E major; Book II, No XV in G minor. (CMF Theme: prime examples of Music and Mathematics.)

Mozart: Sonata in F major for four hands K. 497 (CMF Theme: Mozart. Alkan and Saint-Saëns played this piece together in 1875)

Alkan: Scherzo Focoso (CMF Theme: none [*according to Ken Smith – but surely we can allow its construction as having an interesting 'mathematical' form? – Ed.*])

INTERVAL

Alkan: Aime-Moi. No. 1 of Trois Morceaux dans le genre pathétique Op. 15 (CMF Theme: Example of arithmetical progression applied to notes per beat)

Pinto: Sonatina in C major op.4 no.3 and Minuetto (CMF Theme: associated with the Mozart theme)

Webern: Variations for Piano (CMF Theme: Complex mathematical content)

Mozart/Liszt/Busoni: Figaro Fantasy (CMF Theme: Illustrates how other composers drew inspiration from Mozart).

Society Members are welcome to attend the concert which will be at 20.00. Don't forget also the Alkan Society Scholarship competition on the previous day at 17.15.

Letter to the Editor

News on Alkan publications from Peter Grove

Dear David

I had to order a piece of music from United Music Publishers recently, and they sent me their latest catalogue of piano music, with a section for Charles-Henri-Valentin Alkan (sic). There isn't much new to report, but at least it doesn't have the pieces which used to be in the separate Alkan catalogue marked with an asterisk, indicating that they were about to be republished, but hardly ever were - for example, several transcriptions (Beethoven Cavatina from Op. 130 quartet, Gluck *Gavotte d'Orphée*, the minuet from Mozart symphony 39, Weber *Choeur - barcarolle d'Obéron* and the Mozart D minor concerto transcription - only the "Romance" middle movement was ever in print), as well as the 4-hand version of the *Saltarelle* from the cello sonata, da Motta's 4-hand arrangement of *Benedictus*, and nearly all the organ/pedal-piano pieces. Hardly any of these ever appeared; I acquired some in the Musica Obscura edition (R.I.P. - see later) and some as photocopies from François Luguenot or Brian Doyle.

The list is frustratingly in alphanumeric order rather than opus number, so that anything with a number comes first (2 *Nocturnes*, 3 *Andantes romantiques*, ...30 *Chants*), then the rest from Alkan in *Miniature* (compiled by Ronald Smith) to *Variations on Steibelt* Op. 1. The only items I can see that may not have been in the old list are the 11 *Pièces dans le style religieux* Op. 72 (with transcription of the Pastoral Symphony from 'Messiah'), but that might just be because I haven't got it in my collection. I notice that the Op. 66 pieces, 11 *Grands Préludes & 1 Transcription du Messie* also appear in a list of pieces for piano duet, because they are for

3 hands or pedal-keyboard or 3-stave organ. And of course two *Etudes* from Op. 76 are in the section for one-handed pieces. And I've a feeling that Alkan in Miniature was not available for quite a while, so it's good to see that back again.

I also see that the *Barcarolle* Op. 76 No. 6 is available as a separate piece, price £3.50. And that the collection edited by Georges Beck for "le pupitre" is in the list, having, I think, been out-of-print for a long time. This contains re-engraved versions of the *Saltarelle* op. 23, *Le chemin de fer*, *Marches quasi da Cavalleria* Nos. 1 & 3, *Scherzo diabolico*, *Minuetto alla Tedesca*, *Nocturne* No. 2, *Sonatine*, "*Barcarolle* in B minor" (sic - it's really in G minor, op. 67 no. 6), "*Andantino*" (really *Andantino*, no. 2 of the 5th *Receuil de Chants*) and the *Zorcico (danse ibérienne à 5 temps)*. The bargain price of this: £69.95 ... Why is French music so expensive? It's even expensive in France!

The man at UMP also mentioned that the Musica Obscura edition, which reprinted some works as extremely bad photocopies, like the Mozart D minor concerto transcription, has ceased publication.

Peter Grove.

Personal

A new departure for ASB – from a US member...

60something lady, cultured, multilingual, alive, of cheerful disposition, tidy, avid reader, gardener, likes to travel. Not a musician, but a classical music lover. Seeks kindly, conversant and solvent correspondent with similar interests.

Contact -

The Resident, P O BOX 5835, TAKOMA PARK, MD 20913, U S A

Editor's Notes

- The Society's President **Yonty Solomon** gives a lunch-time recital at the Fairfield Hall, Croydon, on **Tuesday 19th September at 1.05 pm**. Programme to include Bach-Busoin, Chopin and Mussorgsky (Pictures at an Exhibition). Tickets £3.80.
- **All the Alkan Society Bulletins**, from no. 1 of 1977 to the present, are now on-line and downloadable from the Member's section of the website
- The Treasurer has informed me that all **membership payments by credit card** were processed in the last week of July.
- Don't forget to **access Amazon through the website** at www.alkansociety.org when you are purchasing for yourself or for gifts – the Society receives a small percentage commission (at no extra charge to you) which helps towards our costs.
- Volume II of **Kevin Bowyer's conspectus of Alkan's organ music** is now expected to be released by Toccata records in Spring 2007. It will include *Pro Organo*, the last 6 of the pedal studies and the op. 72 set of pieces *dans le style religieux*, including the Handel transcription.