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THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Reg. Charity No. 276199)

BULLETIN - JANUARY, 1983.

REPORT OF MEETING held at the Thomas Coram Foundation, 40, Brunswick Square, on Thursday, November 18th, 1982 at 7.00 p.m.

Our President and 23 members and guests were present to hear a programme by Peter Hick and Thomas Wakefield, both of them members of the Society from the Manchester area.

The theme of the first part of the programme was the 2 Concerti da Camera, op. 10. Peter Hick first played the Tutti de Concerto Esquisse, op. 63, no. 15, then talked about the Concerti da Camera, with piano illustrations (principally of the 'tutti' passages) of the 2nd Concerto in C sharp minor. He then played Ponti's complete recording of this work. After Thomas Wakefield had played, most beautifully, the Andante Romantique, op. 13, no. 2, Peter Hick finished by giving us a detailed and fascinating account, with piano illustrations, of the 1st Concerto, in A minor (see News Items).

The 2nd part of the programme was a most delightful recital by Thomas Wakefield of carefully related piano pieces by Alkan and some other composers:-

ALKAN: Saltarelle
LISZT: Tarantelle de bravoure (on Auber's 'La muerte de Portici').
RAFF: La Filieuse.
HENSELI: A Etudes
RAFF: 'Cachucca - Caprice'.
ALKAN: 1st movement, Concerto op. 39, no. 8.

It was a most distinguished and enthralling contribution to a very enjoyable evening, for which the Hon. Secretary expressed the gratitude of all present. We look forward very much to hearing them again.

ALKAN SOCIETY LEAFLET

In an effort to build up our membership numbers and publicise the activities of the Society, we have just had a batch of new leaflets printed. A few are enclosed with your copy of this Bulletin. Would you see if the libraries, colleges, music and record shops in your area will display them? Of course they could also be used to encourage your friends to join. If you would like more copies, please contact the Secretary.

UNIVERSAL EDITION

We are pleased to announce that Universal Edition are now offering members a 15% discount on all Alkan's music. As these publishers are the British distributors of most of Alkan's works currently available, this generous offer should be of interest to all of us.

A quantity of music will in future be available for purchase at the reduced price at each of our meetings, and orders for items not at hand can be placed then too. Members wishing to take advantage of the offer, but unable to attend meetings, should send their orders to Richard Shaw, 45a Cannon Hill, Southgate, London N14 6LH (tel: 01-882-5333). In this case please do not send cash or cheques with your orders. If available, the music will be sent out by Universal Edition, whose (reduced) bill should be paid in the usual way. As the cost of postage and packing will have to be added, it makes sense to order more than one piece at a time.

If the offer proves popular and plenty of orders are placed, the publishers will probably give us an even larger discount in future. So come to the meetings armed with bulging wallets, cheque books and strong, capacious suitcases.

NEWS ITEMS

John White sends us the following account of Ronald Smith's recent recital in Bromley.

'In Bromley, on Wednesday December 15th, Ronald Smith gave a pre-hearing of the programme that he is to play in New York on January 8th. Never has he been in better form. The intimacy of the splendid room in the Ripley Arts Centre allowed every nuance and refinement to be fully appreciated. The Bluthner stood up well to the demands of the pianist. The audience which contained a few of our Members, gave Ronald Smith an excitedly enthusiastic reception.'

Programme:- "Chanson de la Folle" (op. 31, No. 8); "Fa" (Op. 38, No. 2); "Capriccio" and "Le Tambour" (op. 50); "Nocturne" (op. 22); "Le Festin d'Es-ope" (op. 39, No. 12); "Concerto for solo piano" (op. 39, Nos. 8,9,10).

On Sunday March 20th, 1983 at 3.00 p.m., Ronald Smith will be giving a recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall comprising the Liszt transcription of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and Alkan's Concerto for Solo Piano. Both items will be introduced by Anthony Hopkins.

On Wednesday April 6th, 1983 at the Fairfield Hall, Croydon, with the Stephen Hope Orchestra, Ronald Smith will be giving the first modern performance of the Piano Concerto da Camera No. 1. Tickets may be obtained from the Fairfield Hall Box Office or the Stephen Hope Orchestra Office (tel. no: 01-654-2302). Members will note with interest that an article by Ronald Smith on this work will appear in the April issue of the Musical Times.

Those who have had the privilege of listening to Jack Gibbons on several occasions will be delighted to hear of his recent success in winning the 2nd Newport Pianoforte Competition last September. In addition to £1,000 prize money and an upright piano, this also means a number of engagements, scheduled mostly for 1984, to include a concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and a broadcast with the B.B.C. Welsh Orchestra. We offer our warmest congratulations to him.

Last November, when he was prevented by a recurrence of back trouble from giving an Alkan recital in Paris during the Paris Festival, Ronald Smith was his 'stand-in'.

November 24th, 1982 was designated by the French radio programme 'France-Culture' as a 'Journée Alkan'. In a programme entitled 'Alkan le Berlioz du Piano' several hours were devoted to the discussion and performance of Alkan's works, including a contribution, in French, by Ronald Smith, who also played examples from the piano & 'pedalier' repertoire. It is hoped that a synopsis may appear in a later Bulletin. Comments from members in France would be received with great interest by the Hon. Secretary.

It is tempting, in this connection, to look back to Frank Lioni's warning quoted in the Bulletin of January, 1979; 'We must be careful that France does not take the initiative when she suddenly remembers that Alkan was French.....'.

Mr. & Mrs. Lioni send New Year greetings from the Netherlands, likewise Dr. Alkan from Israel.

In this and future issues of the Bulletin, we are publishing some of the important sources relating to Alkan's life and musical activities. These will include letters to and from Alkan, contemporary accounts and reviews of his piano playing and compositions, as well as articles which shed light on the social and artistic environment in which he lived.

We start with Frederick Niecks's engaging account of his meeting with Alkan in Paris in the summer of 1880. At this time Niecks⁽¹⁾ visited numerous artists, mostly musicians, recording their personal memories of Chopin. The fruits of this research appeared eight years later in Niecks's Frederick Chopin as a Man and Musician.⁽²⁾

In almost every chapter of this book we find him skilfully ferreting out many of the fables which sprang up after Chopin's death. He was often able to reject these by contacting those of Chopin's colleagues and contemporaries still alive. Take the case of Charles Rollinat: Rollinat's brother, François was a particularly close friend of George Sand and a frequent visitor to her country house at Nohant. One would expect Charles Rollinat's 'Souvenir de Nohant', which appeared in Le Temps on September 1st, 1874, to be accurate, but thanks to Niecks we now know this to be an historically unreliable if charming, account.

'M. Rollinat', Niecks⁽³⁾ writes, 'relates also how in 184-, when Chopin, Liszt, the Comtesse d'Agoult, Pauline Garcia, Eugène Delacroix, the actor Bocage, and other celebrities were at Nohant, the piano was one moonlit night carried out to the terrace; how Liszt played the hunting chorus from Weber's Euryanthe, Chopin some bars from an impromptu he was then composing; how Pauline Garcia sang Nel cor più non mi sento, and a niece of George Sand a popular air; how the echo answered the musicians; and how after the music the company, which included also a number of friends from the neighbouring town, had punch and remained together till dawn.'

Simply by consulting Liszt and Pauline Viardot (née Garcia), Niecks was able to dismiss Rollinat's story, pointing to its non-too-subtle blend of fact and fiction.

'Madame Viardot-Garcia', Niecks continues, 'declares that she was never at Nohant when Liszt was there; and Liszt did not remember having played on the terraces of the chateau.'

All this is worth noting. Firstly, it reveals Niecks's healthy scepticism of all information lacking a suitable pedigree and his diligence in pursuing truth and accuracy by checking facts and opinions wherever possible. Secondly, it reminds us of the value of trying to trace such details back to their sources.

This last point is, of course, of particular relevance to Alkan studies. Just think of the numerous legends surrounding his life and death, legends which have to be carefully evaluated. Contemporary reports of Alkan's death in 1888, to take one such example, give no hint of anything unusual or irregular. Yet, as time went on, more and more dramatic accounts of the event appeared in print. These went unchallenged until January 1973, when Hugh Macdonald's critical examination of some of the evidence appeared in the Musical Times.

Niecks's account of Alkan appeared in the Monthly Musical Record on January 1st, 1914. Although some thirty years had passed since their meeting, there is no feeling that Niecks expanded his narrative to compensate for a hazy memory. He was too much the careful scholar to resort to such methods.

We are giving below the second part of Niecks's article, the first just being a resume of Marmontel's well-known biographical sketch.

'When in the summer of 1888 I visited Paris, Alkan was one of the musicians whose acquaintance I was most anxious to make. Marmontel rightly points him out as the most original and curious artist-physiognomy it is possible to study.⁽⁴⁾ A dreamer as an artist, a philosopher as a musician, and something of a misanthrope, he withdrew more and more from the world and its noisy empty shows, and became a more and more confirmed hermit. Having heard much of his strange ways and the difficulty of approaching him, I procured a letter of introduction from a friend of mine who during a sojourn of several years in Paris had wooed the shy artist with unusual success. But even thus armed I know that I was undertaking an enterprise that called

for much circumspection. After careful consideration of the possibilities of a safe plan of campaign, I decided to begin by calling at his house. My question whether M. Alkan was at home was answered by the concierge with a decisive "No". To my further inquiry when he could be found at home, the reply was an equally decisive "Never". And in spite of all the expenditure of diplomacy and eloquence I lavished on the powerful functionary, this was all the knowledge I could obtain. My next move was to write a respectful and propitiatory letter to the great man, asking for an interview, and enclosing our common friend's letter of introduction. The result of this petition materialized into a missive such as was perhaps never before received by mortal man. A brief scrawl of a note, written on an odd scrap of paper, stuck into a cheap envelope. The handwriting so shaky that it could be described only by the epithet vermicular, and the style so curt and awkward that it was impossible to say with certainty whether the writer was rude or clumsy in expression. But the predominant effect of the letter on the receiver was that of a hard repulse. The next time I saw Mme. Dubois she asked me how I had fared with Alkan. I told her my doleful tale; but instead of condoling with me, she laughed at me and thought my story good fun. "What are you going to do next?" she asked. "Do next?" I asked, much surprised. "How can I, after having been so rudely repulsed, take another step to approach him? I must respect his desire, and preserve by self-respect." "No, no; nothing of the kind. He plays every Monday and Thursday at Erard's. You go there, without ceremony, and make him a fine speech - don't talk of Chopin, talk of Alkan." The advice went much against my grain, but Mme. Dubois' powers of persuasion overcame my reluctance. The next Monday or Thursday found me soon after three at Erard's. The spacious room, apparently used for solo recitals and chamber music, had no other furniture than chairs and two instruments - an ordinary grand piano and a pedal grand. There were present Alkan playing, and two listeners, a lady and gentleman - English I think. As soon as the master had finished the piece in hand he rose to meet me. I felt somewhat nervous - how would he receive me? But my fear was soon dissipated. His reception of me was not merely polite, but most friendly. And what was my astonishment when after a few formal words the venerable, white-haired, white-bearded, stooping (almost hunchbacked) old man began to talk freely and with the greatest amiability about Chopin and other matters. In fact, it came out that the reason of his reluctance to see me was hyper-conscientiousness - he was afraid that the information he could give me was not important and sure enough. He had a most impressive presence. The face of a noble Jewish type, the capacious head and the penetrating and refined expression spoke all of the thinker. And the venerable appearance of his presence was heightened by his dress, which was clerical in cut and colour.

The reputation Alkan had as an intellectual - he was also credited with being learned in Jewish lore - we saw already documented in his face, he confirmed also by remarks about Chopin made in a depreciatory tone, "Chopin was not a reading man. Pierre Leroux, the philosopher and socialist, who loved him tenderly brought him all the books he published, but his friend left them unread, nay uncut. Victor Hugo's writings he did not like, nor George Sand's." On my expressing a desire to hear him play, Alkan said, "Excuse me to-day, but if you will come back again, I shall do so with pleasure." Of course I did not fail to put in my appearance. On this occasion about a dozen ladies and myself formed the audience. and we had the great privilege and pleasure of hearing him for nearly two hours play compositions of his own, of Mendelssohn, of Bach, and of Bach-Vivaldi. Much of this music he performed on the pedal piano, of which he was very fond and for which he wrote a good deal (for instance, Op. 64, 66, 69 and 72). Of the character of his truly masterly playing I remember this. It was free from any kind of extravagance and of over-accentuation of his individuality: loyalty of interpretation seemed to be his chief aim. Firmness, repose and sobriety in rhythm and dynamics struck me as outstanding features. But the playing was as much distinguished by the clearness of phrasing and the richness of delicate shading, as by the avoidance of the abuse of tempo rubato. The legato element may be said to have been the predominant element. In the main I agree with Marmontel's estimate of Alkan's admirable style of playing inclusive of some austerity, "the austerity that suited his Puritan and convinced nature."

In the intervals and at the conclusion I had some more delightful conversation with Alkan - during which his face was now and then illumined by a kindly sly smile - of which I remember especially our discussion of Bach's arrangement of Vivaldi's concertos, in which, and its relation to the originals, he was greatly interested.

And thus ended an extremely interesting experience that will always remain a cherished memory.'

1. Friedrich (later Frederick) Niecks (1845-1924). After a career as a violinist in his native Germany, he settled in Scotland, becoming Professor of Music at Edinburgh University in 1891. He held this post for twenty-three years. He is mostly remembered today for his work on Chopin and Schumann.
2. There are a number of references to Alkan in the book: Niecks acknowledges Alkan's assistance (Volume 1, page viii); Chopin takes part in one of Alkan's concerts in 1838 (11, 16); Alkan as one of George Sand's friends (11, 147); Alkan's account of Chopin's lack of interest in reading books written by George Sand and Pierre Leroux (11, 164); Alkan's friendship with Chopin (11, 170); Chopin introduces one of his pupils to Alkan in winter 1844/5 (11, 343).
3. 11, 127-8.
4. In Antoine François Marmontel's Les pianistes célèbres, Paris, 1878.
5. Very likely the wife of the composer, teacher and organist, Theodore Dubois (1837-1924). In 1880 Dubois was teaching harmony and composition at the Paris Conservatoire; he became Director there sixteen years later.

POSTSCRIPT: If any reader discovers the whereabouts of Niecks's manuscript notes on Chopin and Schumann, I should be very glad to hear from them. Edinburgh University has some of his lecture notes, a few poems, and part of his library, but not what must have been a sizeable pile of correspondence with all the leading musicians of his day. All such news, please to:

Richard J.S. Shaw, c/o King's College, Faculty of Music, Strand,
London WC2R 2LS

We are pleased to include in this Bulletin a review by a member, Tony Webster, of a performance of the Alkan 'Cello' Sonata.

ALKAN'S SONATE DE CONCERT FOR CELLO AND PIANO OP. 47.

It is good to see the Alkan cello sonata turning up unexpectedly at a professional public recital. Rohan and Druvi de Saram presented it at their Folkestone recital last June.

The Sonata is a substantial work in four movements, whose character is dominated by typical Alkan fire and passion, especially in the exhilarating piano part. The first movement (Allegro molto) contains much idiomatic cello writing. It is often reminiscent of Mendelssohn and at times recalls Chopin's cello sonata. The second movement (Allegretto) is imbued with a graceful, lilting melody, very attractive, if perhaps too protracted. It gives way to an Adagio in which the piano part, which is virtually complete in itself, reminds one of the reflective and religious character of Liszt's late works. The Finale (Prestissimo), which has the rhythm of a saltarello, is a sort of enlarged Mendelssohnian scherzo, but with daemonic, obsessional overtones. Here, especially, Druvi de Saram was hard put to sustain the diabolically difficult piano part, so that the final chord brought forth a gasp before the inevitable applause.

Although full of excellent ideas and striking moments, the Sonata contains a number of episodes which are awkward, even banal. Perhaps the uneven quality of some of Alkan's writing was due to the infrequent performance of his work in public. Notwithstanding these strictures, this Sonata is a

worthy companion to the Chopin. If the de Sarams can polish their performance and include it regularly in future programmes, this work could well win to Alkan converts who might never come to him through the solo piano repertoire.

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS:-

Tuesday, January 25th, 1983: Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Silk St., Barbican. Stephanie and Peter McCallum will be presenting a joint programme.

Friday, March 18th, 1983: at 7.00 p.m., Trinity College of Music, 11/13 Mandeville Place, W.1., when Martin Ball will be giving an illustrated talk on Alkan's pieces for 'pedalier' and organ.

May Meeting: The visit to the National Musical Museum, Brentford will take place on either

Friday, May 13th, 1983 or Friday, May 20th, 1983 at 7.00 p.m.
(date to be confirmed by Museum)

The Director is making great efforts at home and abroad to procure as many Alkan piano-rolls as possible for us to hear.

July Annual General Meeting, Wednesday, July 13th, 1983 at 7.00 p.m.: at the Abbey Community Association, 29 Marsham Street, London SW1.

November Meeting - Sunday, November 20th, 1983 at 3.00 p.m.: Joint meeting with the Chopin Society at the Polish Institute (details to be announced).

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Outstanding subscriptions should be given or sent as soon as possible to the Hon. Treasurer,

Brian Doyle, 27 Fawcett Street,
London S.W.10.

Rates:-

£3 (members in or near London. £4 for both husband and wife).

£1.50 (members outside London. £2 for husband and wife).

£1 (students)

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