



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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

Bulletin e-mail: info@alkansociety.org

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Editor's notes

We begin this bulletin with a review by Peter Grove of the Ronald Smith Celebration organised at the Royal Academy of Music on 9th September, and with Eliot Levin's memories of Ronald, which he shared on that occasion.

Just a week previously the Society had sponsored a recital by Thomas Wakefield at University College London, on which we also report. Mr. Wakefield performs too rarely in London and it is very gratifying to know that he will be undertaking a recital of Alkan rarities for the Society early next year – we will circulate details as soon as appropriate.

Your Editor has had a busy summer and takes the opportunity to write in the Bulletin on part of what he did on his holidays – namely an excursion to the town whose name was taken by Alkan's family, Morhange. He also attended the 13th Biennial Conference on Nineteenth Century Music in Durham in July. A full report on this event, in which Alkan surfaced in a leading or support role in many contributions, is held over until our next issue in December, but mention must be made, at least, of Kenneth Hamilton's effervescent lecture and recital on Alkan's '*Concerto*' from op. 39, and Jacqueline Waeber's 'case-study of generic interplay' between Alkan's '*Chants*' and Mendelssohn's '*Lieder ohne Worte*'. We hope in any case to bring these before Society members during the coming year for their delectation.

Performances of the '*Concerto*' are no longer as rare as they were. John Longley contacted us to let us know of his monster Alkan recital as part of this year's Edinburgh Festival fringe, including the *Concerto*, '*Le Tambour bat aux champs*' and many other pieces. We congratulate him on his enterprise.

'Ronald Smith: A Celebration' at the Royal Academy of Music, 9th September 2004

This event was called "Ronald Smith: A Celebration" with good reason. The obituaries have been written, and it is now right that we should honour our late President by looking forward and celebrating his impact on the musical world: not least in the array of fine musicians taking part in the concert, all of whom had benefited from their study or association with Ronald.

The Duke's Hall at the R.A.M. was filled with a large number of friends as well as members of the Society; well over a hundred people. It is an impressive room, lined with portraits of British musicians, some shown at a very young age, and four huge chandeliers hold the lights in reproductions of natural French horns. The Steinway grand was excellent and sounded well in the generous acoustic. It is appropriate here to express our thanks to the Principal of the Academy, Curtis Price, for making this venue available to us.

After Nicholas King's welcome and introduction, we began with the youngest contributor, the seriously talented 18-year-old Jianing Kong, who is about to begin his studies at the Royal College. Many could hear Ronald's influence in his sensitive performance of Chopin's A flat Etude from Op. 25, in which he clearly but subtly brought out all the melody and counterpoint from the "Aeolian harp" texture. His technique was in no doubt either in two extremely demanding studies from the same set, the G sharp minor (No. 6) in thirds and the powerful and terrifying (to lesser pianists) "Winter Wind" (no. 11) in A minor. He also reminded us of Ronald's distinguished performances and recording of all the Mazurkas in the A minor, Op. 17 No. 4, in another expressive and controlled performance.

William Fong, a prize-winner in our centenary piano competition who is now Head of Keyboard at the Purcell School, where Ronald had many pupils, followed with Alkan's G flat major Etude from Op. 35 (No. 10), *Chant d'amour – chant de mort*. It is a long piece and hard to make convincing, but one would never have known after this performance. William shaped it beautifully and I think would have convinced even the less committed Alkanians in the audience.

Claudia Conway, the daughter of our Bulletin editor and Webmaster, could have been daunted by the large setting and audience, but she showed no nerves in her singing of Alkan's *Trois anciennes mélodies juives* and *Verset de Psaume 42*, in which she was alertly accompanied by our vice-president Richard Shaw. It was good to be reminded of Alkan's Jewish faith in these short but very touching settings. She first sang the pieces at our smaller-scale meeting at University College, and very well too, but she has certainly gained in depth and confidence since then.

It had been hoped to include one of Ronald's own compositions in the programme, but that must remain a project for the future. Instead, we had the first performance of Raymond Head's "Of Bells and Birds (*In Memoriam Ronald Smith*)". Kirsten Johnson introduced this short three-movement work and played it in masterly style. There is indeed plenty still to be said in tonal music, and this new piece managed the difficult feat of being approachable but never resorting to quasi-popular styles that patronise the listener. The first section used the bell sounds suggested in the title. Then came a scherzo-like section in somewhat wild style, demanding a good technique. Finally Ronald's sense of humour was celebrated in the last section, with an unashamed C major close. It was a very effective piece, which made its point well and at just the right length.

It hardly needs to be said that all Ronald's pupils played without the score – an ability which he often stressed in his teaching. The second young student, Omri Epstein, showed considerable talent too in Alkan's *Ancienne mélodie de la synagogue*, Op. 31 No. 6, and the Etude in B major from Op. 35 (No. 11), the piece with a "hidden melody" that demands great independence of the fingers to be made clear. It is also a long piece with some very similar passages and key-changes, and Omri kept his head admirably when he momentarily lost his way in the middle; I think few would have noticed, but it

happens to everybody once in a while and it takes a good musician to find the solution in a satisfactory manner. It certainly had very little effect on his poise, and by the time he reached the final pages it mattered very little in the overall impression of an excellent musician.

Christine Stevenson has played for the Society before, and appears on the Symposium compilation CD. We ought to have heard her much more. She played beautifully in Liszt's *Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este*, that early example of impressionism from his third book of *Années de pèlerinage* which Ravel must have known before he wrote his piece with a similar title in 1901. She followed this with two more of Ronald's favourite Alkan pieces, *La vision* from *Esquisses* (Op. 63 No. 1) and the first *Chant* in E major from Op. 38, which Ronald always compared with Fauré when he played it.

Our Chairman, Eliot Levin, then addressed the company with some well-chosen anecdotes of his meetings with Ronald [*see below: Ed.*] he kept it short and humorous, and led neatly into the final item from Yonty Solomon, the Bach Chaconne from the D minor violin Partita in the grandiose transcription by Busoni. This was another of Ronald's favourite pieces: the first time I heard him in concert, he played it before his mini-lecture and first performance of Alkan's *Grande Sonate* at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in June 1974. All of that came before the interval, of course: we still had a selection of Chopin Mazurkas and Beethoven's *Appassionata* to follow. A few of us remember a more recent lunchtime concert at the Fairfield Halls in Croydon, in which Ronald Smith, James Gibb and Yonty Solomon, after some marvellous solo performances, joined forces for a hilarious six-handed version of Liszt's *Grand galop chromatique*. Mr. Solomon was in more serious mood here, and his tremendous performance of the Chaconne made an ideal close to the concert.

All ran very smoothly, finishing exactly at 9 o'clock as promised, leaving plenty of time for a reception in a much smaller room for the next hour. Nicholas King, who devised the programme and invited all the participants, deserves a huge vote of thanks for putting together a wonderful tribute to Ronald. Ronald's widow Anne was present, and though this must still be a difficult time for her, I feel sure that she appreciated the occasion, which did full justice to a real gentleman, a great musician and an inspiring teacher.

On a personal note: I was recently telephoned by a record collector and dealer in Germany who was keen to obtain some accurate information about Ronald's discography for his documentation. I could not answer all his questions, but I was able to consult a letter from Ronald written in December 1968 – a typically generous and lengthy response to my "fan letter" which followed his Alkan lecture-recitals for the BBC, written several months later because it was only then that I discovered that the organ scholar at my college, one N. King, was a Smith pupil. This is not the place to discuss its contents, but I would just share the P.S. for the moment – "Forgive illeg. writing ... in the train". I'm sure many others have had the same experience!

Peter Grove

Ronald Smith – A Tribute by Eliot Levin

Rather than add to the formal tributes which have already appeared, rightly testifying to the fine qualities of Ronald Smith, both as a man and as a pianist, I should like to share with you some personal memories. I do not remember precisely when I first heard Ronald Smith play, nor when I first met him. Both must have been in the early '70s.

One of the first occasions that I met him was in a house in Ealing, I think, of a lady called Jean Shilling. It was a Sunday afternoon and we had both arrived early, presumably for a committee meeting of the Alkan Society. I mentioned that only the day before, I had discovered, to my surprise, that his recording career extended back to the era of the 78; I had found a three disc set of Bach's Triple Concerto in which he was playing with Edwin Fischer and Denis Matthews. "Yes" he said, before I could draw breath, "It was at Abbey Road. We had three Steinways next to one another with

Fischer, who taught us both, in the middle. Oh! We had such a job getting him to play in a modern way.”

It so happened that we were standing by a piano. He lifted the drop and, standing there, he played the opening phrase three times over producing three different sounds, *à la Fischer*, *à la Matthews* and *à la Smith*.

I am not a pianist - how he did it was lost on me - but I guess that even an advanced student would have learned greatly from the example.

He was, in the most complimentary sense, a proud man, knowing his abilities, but never showing off. He was well aware that Schmidtkowski or von Schmidtowitz would have furthered his career more than Smith. “Fortunately,” he remarked in his quiet way, “we are called by our fathers’ names; otherwise I would have been ‘Basher, the pianist’”.

Never showing off? Well, hardly ever. I remember the twinkle in his eye at an Alkan Society Day when he remarked casually that the tempo of the next piece required him to play 14 notes per second.

He was aware, too, that devoting so much to the cause of a largely forgotten composer was not, in today’s parlance, a good career move. He was an Alkan specialist, but, I should like to claim, that he was as much a Beethoven specialist, a Chopin specialist and a Liszt specialist.

I bumped into him at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in about 1984 and mentioned to him that I was about to issue a recording of the first movement of the ‘Emperor’ concerto played by Eugen d’Albert. He was overjoyed that this long rumoured recording would at last be heard, but, the time for preparation being longer drawn out than anticipated, I had the feeling that he began to doubt the genuineness of my claim. When eventually I was able to send him a tape, I had the temerity to hint that he might like to write something for the sleeve. The detailed and highly instructive appreciation which he wrote must have taken a considerable time, even for a mind working at the rate his did. Indeed, one might remark that had Ronald Smith chosen to be a critic rather than a pianist, music might have gained as much as it would have lost.

I have no experience of Ronald as a teacher, but I do recall more than once his firm declaration that ‘*Most peoples’ practice consists in making their faults indelible*’. I guess that he expected somewhat more than the best his students could attain; I guess, too, that his students respected this, recognizing in this his own inner compulsion.

One afternoon we worked together drafting some papers for the Alkan Centenary Celebration of 1988. One sentence we rejected repeatedly for not expressing precisely our intentions. Suddenly Ronald’s face went deep crimson and he strode from the room. About five minutes later he returned, as quietly as he had left, and the sentence soon expressed precisely our intentions. Every word had to tell in a sentence, as much as every note in a score.

Alas, various commitments prevented me from attending a number of his concerts; on the occasion of his 80th birthday concert I was prevented by a gentleman committing suicide at Clapham. Another delay caused me to arrive on the late side at the concert to mark the 50th anniversary of the Fairfield Halls. I grabbed a ticket and rushed up the stairs, not stopping for a programme. Holding the door open about 1½mm, I could hear, but not see, a towering performance of the Bach-Busoni Chaconne. I thought, “I don’t recall ever hearing Ronald play it like this; he really has changed his views.” Of course, as it ended and I opened the door further I found I was applauding Yonty Solomon.

For Ronald Smith, Bach and Busoni were two giants. Most appropriately, Yonty Solomon will now conclude this recital with a performance of the Chaconne.

Thomas Wakefield Recital at University College, London

Alkan Society Sponsored Recital on 2nd September 2004.

From 30th August to 3rd September University College London hosted an International Post-Graduate Conference in Hebrew and Jewish Studies. Delegates came from all over Europe, including Central Europe and countries of the former Soviet Union. A wide variety of papers were delivered – none of them alas mentioning Alkan, although, in the secular field, Jewish boxers, klesmer musicians and authors all figured, as well as (in a paper given by your Editor) Alkan's contemporary, the disreputable composer, fantasist and blackmailer Isaac Nathan.

The conference gave the Society an excellent opportunity of fulfilling its mission to spread knowledge of Alkan and in co-operation with UCL a piano recital by Thomas Wakefield was arranged to which Society members as well as conference delegates were invited. The programme spanned a range of Jewish composers – Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer, Alkan and Gershwin - and proved to be the basis of an electrifying display of an astonishing technique.

We began with two of Alkan's rarely heard transcriptions – 'La garde passe' from Grétry's 'Les Deux Avides' and the chorus of the Priests of Dagon from Handel's 'Samson'. An excellent introduction to the way in which Alkan 'orchestrates' on the piano by use of differing textures, they also remind us of Alkan's deep sense of musical history, unusual in most of the virtuosi of his era.

There followed three of Mendelssohn's Characteristic Pieces, opus 7, followed by four of his more familiar 'Songs without Words'. The opus 7 pieces were new to me and I think to most of the audience. They too show a heavy debt to the past, in this case that of J. S. Bach. Mr. Wakefield's presentation showcased their intricacy and ingenuity, but for all their intellect they could not persuade as effectively as the Songs. The Funeral March (op. 62 no. 3), which Moscheles was later to orchestrate for Mendelssohn's own obsequies, came over especially as a perfect gem, simultaneously noble and ironic, almost Mahlerian, a romantic masterpiece in miniature.

Our first taste of 'pure' Alkan was a selection of the op. 31 'Préludes' concentrating on those with Jewish connections. No. 5, a paraphrase of Psalm 150, which until now I had thought playable only on the pédalier, was delivered with authoritative bravura and nicely-judged pedalling which made booming of the cymbals in the central section both convincing and musical. The Synagogue Melody (no. 6) and no. 13, inspired by the Song of Songs, are perhaps amongst Alkan's most performed pieces, whilst no. 20, in essence a klesmer 'skotshne' dance, paved the way perfectly for the next item on the programme, Gershwin's familiar 'Three Preludes' in jazz style.

The second half of the recital began with Alkan's bracing 'Minuetto alla Tedesca', op. 46. I pity any court ladies who might be required to dance to this number, tornado force both in its rhythm and its often bizarre harmonies. Ronald Smith comments 'A violent wrench from F minor back to A major in Alkan's trio drives him to the frontiers of credibility'; but in Mr. Wakefield we had a guide with a clear perspective of where the composer was leading. In the following three pieces from the second book of 'Chants' we had the smoother but sinister 'Procession-Nocturne', followed by an enigmatic Andantino hinting here and there at Chopin, and a chilly and dark Barcarolle in G minor. This last reminds us how Alkan was inspired in his 'Chants' by Mendelssohn's 'Songs Without Words', on which they are a sort of commentary or paraphrase. Ronald Smith is not too friendly to book 2 of the 'Chants' in his biography but Mr. Wakefield's performance was more than persuasive in making the case for airing them.

The final piece on the programme was Alkan's very rarely performed transcription for solo piano of the overture to Meyerbeer's opera 'Le Prophète'. By the time the opera entered rehearsal in 1849 it was already far too long for performance and the overture was axed by the composer at this stage – the orchestral score has been lost, as have the parts (if they ever existed). But Alkan had already been

commissioned to produce his arrangement, as a consequence of which the only published version of the overture was in the piano score. As a piece of music it proves the conventional wisdom that Meyerbeer was not adept at generating large-scale structures using music alone. But as a piano solo it is just sensational, with its evocation of every variety of orchestral colour and instrumental combination. Mr. Wakefield's mastery of this extraordinary material was prodigious, and merited the storm of applause that ensued.

But even this heroic performance was capped by Mr. Wakefield's encore, Alkan's 'Le chemin de fer' of 1844. By the end of this dizzying train-ride, the first in the history of piano literature, the audience was thoroughly exhilarated and exhausted, although Mr. Wakefield seemed admirably unruffled. His performance was justly eulogised by Eliot Levin, and the audience's enthusiasm must mean his reputation is now secure as far as Riga and Dnepropetrovsk. How fortunate for the Society that he will again be displaying his formidable talents for us early next year in a recital to contain many of Alkan's most elusive works, and will also be giving a recital in tribute to Ronald Smith to mark the Alkan Society Piano Scholarship this November (see below).

DC

Forthcoming Events

The Alkan Society Piano Scholarship 2004, Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge.

As a prelude to the Scholarship Competition, **Richard Shaw** will be giving an illustrated talk on **The Alkan Miniatures** in the Fitzwilliam College Auditorium on **Wednesday 13th October at 6 p.m.** Alkan composed well over one hundred tiny pieces for the piano, nearly all unusual in some respect, some lasting for little more than a minute, The whole series displays an enormous range of style, scope and technical difficulty, and present a challenge for the beginner and advanced pianist alike. Richard Shaw's talk will have particular reference to the work set for this year's scholarship: 'Song of Songs', No.13 of the twenty-five Preludes Op. 31. The presentation will be informal, and audience participation is invited.

The Scholarship Competition will be held on **Friday 12th November at 6pm in the College Auditorium.** Interested members of the public are invited.

A recital will be given by **Thomas Wakefield** on **Saturday 13th November at 8.00 pm in the College Auditorium,** and dedicated to the memory of Ronald Smith. The programme is scheduled to include Alkan's transcriptions of the overture to 'Le Prophète' and his version of the first movement of Beethoven's C minor Piano Concerto, including the remarkable cadenza, as well as works by Chopin and Liszt. Tickets are available at £10 from the Fitzwilliam Porter's Lodge (tel 01223 332000) or by e-mail from Dr. Peter Tregear (pjt21@cam.ac.uk).

Marc-André Hamelin is undertaking a number of European performances in the last quarter of this year, many of which will feature Alkan. These include a recital at the Conservatorio Verdi in Milan on November 21st where he will be playing Schumann, Albeniz and Alkan, and a recital in Paris at the Théâtre le Trianon on 6th December when the programme will include Alkan, Haydn, Liszt and Schumann. On **Sunday November 28th at 3.30 pm** he is performing a similar programme at the **Performing Arts Building (PATS), University of Surrey, Guildford** (box office telephone: 01483 686876)

A Visit to Morhange



My wife and I were in north-west France in June of this year to experience the music of another neglected French-German-Jewish composer, Giacomo Meyerbeer - his opera 'Les Huguenots' was being given a rare outing in Metz, and his final work, 'L'Africaine' was also being produced in Strasbourg. Of course, Alkan's attitude to Meyerbeer was at best equivocal – we have on the one hand his withering parody of Grand Opera in no. 12 of 'Les mois', 'L'Opéra', but also on the other his sensational arrangement of the overture to 'Le Prophète' (see the review above of Thomas Wakefield's concert).

I could hardly miss the opportunity, in the circumstances, to explore some of the region with which we know Alkan had close connections. Although we still have tantalisingly little information about the exact origins of Alkan's family, we have firstly the evidence of his family surname Morhange, and also the snippet of information from a contemporary newspaper reference that one of his few outings from Paris was to Metz, to sort out family business. Anny Kessous, a Messine member of the Société Alkan, suggests that this visit may have been associated with the final settlements of Jewish property resulting from Napoleon's oppressive 'infamous decree' of 1808, the problems resulting from which were still being sorted out thirty years later.

I was fortunate to be able to find a copy of an excellent book, '*Mémoire des communautés juives de Moselle*' by Henry Schumann (Metz 1999) which in words and pictures gives a comprehensive view of the rise and fall of the local Jewish population from the Middle Ages to the present day, and was an invaluable guide in my explorations. Many of the sleepy villages to the west and south of Metz once had remarkably thriving Jewish communities although outside Metz itself very few remain. But their traces are still discernible. In Maizières-lès-Vic, for example, some 15 miles south-west of Morhange, the synagogue was built in 1870, but the last services were held there before the First World War. The present owner, reports Schumann, keeps the old synagogue in good condition, saying 'People worshipped here, so it's a holy place which we have to look after', to which Schumann adds '*Que ce gardien de notre patrimoine soit haleureusement remercié*', a sentiment with which I fully agree. Internal emigration, to Paris and other centres, in the period up to 1939 continued to diminish the communities of this region, a process which of course was completed by the horrors of German occupation during World War II.

Morhange itself is about 20 miles south-west of Metz, with a population of about 4,500. In general its recent history has been one of persistent decline. The battle of Morhange in autumn 1914, in which about 8000 lives were lost, was a blow from which the town has perhaps never quite recovered. Now it is quaint and very quiet, with an attractive little church but little to attract the casual tourist.



However there are records of Jews having lived in the village since 1687. Until 1864 their worship was carried out in hired premises but a property was then purchased on which to build a synagogue. This was finally consecrated in 1901 but then destroyed by the Germans in World War II, along with fifty or so others in the region. All that is left, according to Schumann, is a single pillar, ornamented with a Star of David, now incorporated into one of the houses. Despite an extended stroll around the centre I was unable to locate this.

The most extensive trace of Morhange's Jews is their ancient cemetery. This proved extraordinarily difficult to find. Enquiries of the locals at the patisserie (the quality of whose products I can heartily commend) produced much head-scratching and contradictory opinion as to whether it survived or indeed had ever existed. But it is indeed there – follow a track behind the main street and you come across a grassy rampart, dotted with ancient gravestones, sloping steeply down to a more modern graveyard dating from the late nineteenth century.

Somewhere amongst these crumbling and half-buried stones, if anyone had the patience to catalogue and transcribe them, may well be located some of the secrets of Alkan's ancestry. It is as likely as not that in this peaceful, forgotten place lie the parents of the composer's mysterious grandfather Marix Morhange. It is not too far from Morhange to the town of Dillingen, now in Germany, which is associated with the Alkan family of butchers and klesmer musicians whose connection to the composer has never been formally established. But in Dillingen, now a centre for the chemical industry, no poetic scenes are left for our imagination to conjure with.....

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