



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered Charity number 276199)

<http://www.alkansociety.org>

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Julien Keauffling

The Society was sad to learn of the death of its long-standing member Julien Keauffling, in the following message from his son.

I am writing to inform you of the death of my father, Julien Keauffling, on May 20th 2003. He had a series of heart attacks over the period of the weekend but remained lucid and cheerful, despite his discomfort, until the end.

Both he and his brother (Charles) gained a great deal of enjoyment from listening to Alkan's music and found the Alkan Society a most stimulating forum of ideas and theory. Charles was very much the player and in his declining years, living in Zimbabwe, he played music by Alkan, Liszt, Chopin, Saint-Saëns and the like. All this music was provided for him by Julien who was more the listener and thinker. He was a brilliant musicologist and the most astute musical critic I have ever known. Just as Charles never played publicly, though would not stop people from listening, neither did Julien write, though would not withdraw from giving an informed opinion in discussion.

It strikes me while writing this that there is something a little Alkanesque about their lives and it might be lamented that the world is poorer for not having heard publicly an accomplished player nor been able to read a fine theorist who would have challenged people with his ideas. Nevertheless, they both introduced many people to the music of Alkan and, as such were ambassadors for the Alkan Society.

To the best of my knowledge the last concert he was able to attend was Ronald Smith's 70th birthday recital, a concert I was also able to attend. I should like to thank the Alkan Society for providing my father with so much joy

Yours sincerely,

Rev Dom Dunstan Keauffling OSB

Katharina Wolpe at The Warehouse, September 9th

As, alas, very few members of the Society attended this event, I find myself writing a review, but before doing so it is proper for me to make clear that my organisation promoted the concert and that the artist and I are close personal friends. Katharina Wolpe is an internationally recognised artist with a large repertoire extending from Mozart to Wolpe, i.e. Stefan Wolpe, her father. Nevertheless last night was something of a *début*, for she added Alkan to her repertoire.

The first work was Mozart's Sonata in C, K.330. The first bars were perhaps very slightly tentative, but Wolpe's technical control and deep knowledge of the music quickly asserted themselves. Wolpe was not out to demonstrate her brilliance, but to bring out the warmth and humanity in the music. And she succeeded admirably. Even so, whilst this reviewer is not a member of the authenticity brigade, just for one or two brief instants the thought crossed his mind that Mozart may not be at his best on a large modern Steinway.

The Alkan *début* was with a group of five shorter pieces.

From *Préludes* Op.31, Nos.13 and 8: *J'étais endormie mais mon cœur veillait...* started with a rhythm or rubato at something of an angle to what we are usually offered in Alkan. However, about a third of the way in it was suddenly exactly right; an artist of great experience was studying a composer new to her and evolving a new and valid approach. *La Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer* seared with poignancy and despair. It was, without any qualification whatsoever, as great a performance as any one has heard. The sounds and tones and range of volumes produced in this piece were breathtaking. Whatever qualms one may have felt about Mozart on a modern Steinway, one totally forgot that Alkan was used to 19th century Pleyels and Erards.

Barcarolle, No.6 from *Troisième recueil de chants*; *Duettino*, No.1 from *Cinquième recueil de chants*, Op.70; and *La Poursuite*, No.25 from *48 Motifs (Esquisses)* Op.63 completed the group.

The audience had come to hear Mozart and Mussorgsky, and to hear Mozart and Mussorgsky it had been prepared to sit through a selection of short pieces by some composer it had never heard of. However, throughout this group not a cough was heard, not a programme rustled, not a chair creaked. If utter silence, is a measure of audience reaction then we pray that Katharina Wolpe will in future play Alkan regularly.

There are orchestral and brass band arrangements of *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Very likely there is one for massed piccolos. But why bother? Wolpe was out to shew that Mussorgsky knew what he was about. She produced a tonal palette that encompassed any colour anyone could think of painting. Your reviewer, normally an avid reader of programme notes, found himself hearing, eyes shut, a set of untitled variations held together by a recurring theme. Here the big Steinway was in its element; able to bring out the dark, sombre and ponderous sides of pictures perhaps better than any other instrument, but just occasionally seeming to tempt the pianist momentarily into allowing the left hand to overshadow the right.

It is worth observing that a piano recital is not a solo performance, nor yet a duet for pianist and piano; it is a trio for pianist, piano and venue. The Warehouse must be one of the smallest public recital rooms and it has verily excellent acoustic properties. In it the public is involved in a manner with which none of the nearby larger halls is able to compete.

Eliot Levin

The Alkan Weekend in Cambridge, 7-8 November 2003

The Cambridge Music Festival has a French theme this year, with the 200th anniversary of Berlioz playing a prominent part. It was therefore not inappropriate to include a mini-festival centred on Alkan in the opening weekend. We began on the Friday with the Alkan Society Piano Scholarship competition, held in Fitzwilliam College Chapel and adjudicated by Dr Denis New, Dr Peter Tregear (Director of Studies in Music) and Ronald Smith. Two freshmen competed this year, John Shaw, who is reading Engineering, and Anthony Yii Chau Ang, reading Medicine.

The set piece was Alkan's Barcarolle in G minor, Op. 65 No. 6: a simple-looking piece at first sight, but not at all easy to play convincingly. John followed it with the first movement of Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata in C minor, Op. 13. His performances did suffer from too many misreadings of the text and his tone was rather loud on the bright Steinway. As Ronald soon ascertained in his summing-up, he does not currently have a teacher, and playing the pieces to someone first could have helped to spot some of those mistakes. Anthony chose Liszt's Petrarch Sonnet No. 104, which he played from memory: an expressive and quite accurate performance which just lacked some freedom and fluency in the decorative passages. His Barcarolle was more accurate, though again on the loud side, and it needed more tonal variety.

Ronald, generous as ever, not only spoke about the two performances, but gave a short master-class on the Alkan piece, picking out three main requirements: the rhythmical problem of its starting on the second beat of the bar rather than the first (both players had not shown this clearly enough); the change of colour needed for the middle major-key section; and the problem of how to play the final chord – a pedalled staccato or with sustained pedal? Alkan does not make it clear. Ronald made it clear enough that the piano could give a quieter sound too! He was very kind and encouraging in his comments, and both players showed a distinct improvement when they attempted the piece again, Anthony in particular. It was Anthony who was awarded the scholarship for this year.

The following day, Kendrick Partington gave the first official event of the Cambridge Music Festival, a well-attended lunchtime organ recital in St. John's College Chapel. He opened with a Fantaisie and Fugue in B flat by Boëly, described in Ian Wells's programme note as the first "modern" French organ toccata, dating from 1835. This showed off the colours of the instrument admirably, as did the selection of three Preludes from Alkan's Op. 31 which followed: Nos. 18 (Romance), 15 (Dans le genre gothique) and 5 (Psalm 150). The third Prelude, marked "magnifiquement" towards the end, suited the organ particularly well.

There followed the Adagio molto from Stanford's *Sonata Eroica* Op. 151, dedicated to the composer Charles Widor and to France in general. The programme mentioned Elgar's dislike for Stanford, to the extent of incorporating his name (as "Satanford") into the Demons' Chorus of *The Dream of Gerontius*. Having sung the work several times, I was somewhat baffled by this remark, and I would love to know how it was done: is it a musical or a verbal code? I haven't yet found a scholar who knows: can anyone help? I'm familiar with Stanford's remark about *Gerontius*: "My boy, it stinks of incense", and Robert R. Rielly's article from Crisis magazine, which I found on the Web, has another fine remark from a priest present at an early performance: that the phrase "Fried souls" should be substituted for "In purgatory". But I have yet to find a rude remark from Elgar in the opposite direction.

The last item was Kendrick Partington's new transcription of Alkan's *Le festin d'Esope* from the Op. 39 minor key Etudes. Unfortunately the College authorities would not allow the performance to be recorded, and my favourite bootlegger was not present, so Ronald Smith will have to wait for another occasion to hear it. It is a most unlikely piece to transfer to the organ, but it made an entertaining – and for newcomers, possibly baffling – finale. The main drawback for me was the need for pauses between the variations to change stops. It did interfere with the flow of the music, and perhaps a more modern instrument might have a few more electronic aids for instant stop-changes. But it certainly gave a chance to exhibit some exotic sounds – particularly one effect in the music-box variation marked “Scampanatino” (tinkling), which employed a stop which chimed a set of real bells at random while the golden star on the organ-case rotated. For a moment I thought that an employee of the mighty Wurlitzer company had been secretly at work modifying the St John's organ. However, my colleague David Halls at Salisbury Cathedral tells me that it is known as a *Cymbelstern* or cymbal-star: as described in William Sumner's book *The Organ: its evolution, principles of construction and use*, it is “a gilded wooden star, to which small bells or jingles were attached at its points, [which] was caused to revolve when the stop was drawn”, and was typically found on German organs of the 16th, 17th and 18th century, in particular the Gabler organ of 1750 in Weingarten Abbey. [In an extremely contrived connection, Kendrick Partington has established a series of recitals in Nottingham in memory of Sumner, and my copy of the book was presented in 1953 by the author to my uncle, who worked at the University.]

Ronald Smith's recital in Fitzwilliam College Chapel on the Saturday evening had been sold-out well in advance and as the Master of the College, Brian Johnson (another chemist!), remarked, was a very special occasion. Ronald's walk looks a little more stiff these days, but the fingers and arms are as supple as ever, and it was a demanding programme of the kind we have always heard from him. First came Beethoven's *Appassionata* Sonata in F minor, Op. 57. After a few minor slips at the start, this became a noble and dramatic performance of great power. He took the repeat in the last movement, which enhanced the effect of the Presto coda all the more.

Then came the Alkan group, introduced by the customary witty and informative mini-lectures before each piece. The two short pieces, *Les regrets de la nonnette* and *La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer*, received wonderfully atmospheric performances. Ronald had played the *Allegro barbaro* from the Op. 35 major-key studies on Radio 3's *In Tune* programme on November 5th and under the pressure of time had not perhaps done himself justice – but here there were no such problems and he played it as well as he had over 30 years ago. It is a piece which never fails to impress, not least for its radical use of the white keys: small wonder that Alkan took the trouble to label every B natural after writing the F major key signature! Finally came the original version of *Le festin d'Esope*: another astonishing piece of pianism which had dexterity, variety, power and, despite a real sense of danger, the accuracy which the piece needs: as Ronald once said in a letter to me, Alkan wrote many apparently “wrong” notes and they all need to be played if the music is to be convincing.

With the firework parties continuing that weekend, it was fitting to include Debussy's *Feux d'artifice* after *Des pas sur la neige* in the selection of his Preludes. In his Radio 3 interview, Ronald claimed not to have played it for 50 years – but it certainly did not show either then or three days later. Not content with playing the most difficult of the twenty-four Debussy Preludes, he ended with Liszt's *Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* and the 6th Hungarian Rhapsody, with its demanding finale of repeated right-hand octaves. It takes the most relaxed

wrist-technique to bring this off – I’ve tried and mine seizes up after a few bars! – but there was no sense of strain and the power at the end of a long programme was certainly not lacking either. The audience was not going to let Ronald go before at least one encore, and it turned into a request show, settling finally for one of the most enigmatic Chopin Mazurkas, the A minor Op. 17 No. 4 – which ends far from its home key on a submediant first inversion, otherwise known as F major 6-3... A strange conclusion but oddly satisfying too.

So the weekend ended in triumph. Three members of the Society attended all three events, one being the Editor of the Bulletin – which explains my contribution to this one! The other was Ken Smith through whose intrepidity these Alkan events were able to feature in the Cambridge Music Festival. Thanks to his initiative the Society has been brought to the notice of the Cambridge Festival public with these very successful contributions. Ronald’s audience also included a young lady who had previously heard him in Husum a few years ago and was not going to let the chance slip to hear him again – though to be fair, she is currently reading Music at Girton College. I think we can be very proud of this event and I hope that our next members’ meeting in the London area will be well supported.

Peter Grove

Ken Smith also attended the scholarship winner’s solo recital on November 20th in Cambridge, which apart from the ‘Barcarolle’ and the Liszt ‘Petrarch Sonnet no. 104’ included two sonatas by Scarlatti (K208 and K209), the first movement of Beethoven’s sonata op. 10 no. 3, and Brahms’s G minor Rhapsody op. 79 no. 2. Ken adds:

Anthony’s recital in the Cambridge Music Festival was a splendid success. His standard of playing was well above the average University instrumental award holder, far above in the Liszt. He played the Barcarolle from memory, a far more polished performance than we heard in the competition. The church was nicely full and we had an appreciative audience. Anthony was, understandably, nervous to find himself pitched into the CMF with so little time to practice, but now he thinks it was a great experience. He is starting piano lessons with a Cambridge teacher, which will be fully funded by the College as part of the Alkan Scholarship.

The Bulletin is pleased to extend congratulations to Anthony on behalf of the Society as a whole

Recording News

Recent months have seen a number of important Alkan recordings, both new and re-released. Following Osborne’s ‘Esquisses’ (see Peter Groves’s comments below), we have had Stanley Hoogland’s survey of ‘Alkan Miniatures’, and reissues of Mustonen’s op. 31 Préludes and two double helpings of Ronald Smith. The following is intended as an update, not a review of the recordings, just to collate what they offer – something not always obvious from the covers and programme notes! I will just add that I am personally glad to have all of them.

The Mustonen recording is the most straightforward as regards discography. This disc, (Decca 475 212-2), which couples the 25 Préludes op. 31 of Alkan with Shostakovich’s 24 Preludes op. 34, won “The Gramophone” Instrumental Award in 1992 and is one of a series being issued by Decca to celebrate their successes in these awards over the years. It is the only recording currently available with the complete op. 31, but items from this set appear in both Hoogland’s recital (nos. 1, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15) and in the two EMI Smith releases.

Hoogland's disc, entitled 'Pseudo-naïveté' after no. 8 of the op. 63 Esquisses, is at a bargain price, though not easy to find in the UK. (Brilliant Classics 92109 - MDC apparently have it at £3.99). He plays on an 1858 Pleyel Concert Grand. Apart from the op. 31 pieces, he plays nos 5 and 6 of the op. 65 suite of Chants, no. 2 of the op. 67 suite, three of 'Les mois' ('Une nuit d'hiver', 'Gros temps' and 'L'opéra'), the 'Petit conte' of 1859, and 10 of the Esquisses (nos. 1,4,8,10,11,35,43,46,48 and the 'Laus Deo'). The notes are desultory, and whilst giving a brief background to the composer's life, offer a novice listener very little guide to the pieces.

The two Ronald Smith 'twin-pack' releases are both at low price (EMI Double Forte 5 75649 2 and EMI Gemini 5 85484 2). The former is a compilation of recordings from 1970, 1974, 1977 and 1987. It contains the 'Grande sonate', the 'Sonatine', the three op. 16 Scherzi, the 'Chanson de la folle' from op. 31, the 'Allegro Barbaro' from the op. 35 études and nos. 1, 2,3, and 12 ('Le festin d'Esopo') from op. 39. The Gemini release is of recordings made in 1977 and 1984; it includes the Symphony, Concerto and Overture from op. 39, nos. 11,12,13,15 and 16 from op. 31 Préludes, nos. 4, 10, 11, 20, 21, 29, 41 and 48 from the Esquisses and the three op. 41 'Fantaisies' as well as a number of individual pieces; the Nocturne op. 22, the Gigue op. 24, the Marche op. 37 no. 1, the study 'Le Tambour bat aux champs' op. 50 no. 2, the Toccata op. 75 and the 'Petite conte'.

These discs must be regarded as essential for the Alkaniste, but their presentation is less than satisfactory. Both sets have extremely perfunctory notes: the purchaser of the Gemini set is not even informed anywhere (in the notes or on the cover) that the op. 39 studies 4-7 are a Symphony and nos. 8-10 are a Concerto. Of the 'Esquisses' and the 'Preludes' there is a terse sentence on each set followed by the meaningless sentence: 'The example played here by Ronald Smith is one of the most memorable'. Sic as a parrot, as Dorothy Parker once remarked. To print such drivel to accompany work which is unfamiliar to most listeners is pure aggravation. Moreover, the Gemini recording has been advertised as 'first time on CD', which is true only as far as the UK is concerned, and then only for the 1984 recordings (which were available on CD in the US). Just to add confusion to the tale, some of the small pieces from the 1984 recordings are not included on the Gemini CD, namely, three pieces from 'Les Mois', the Allegretto (Fa) from Book 2 of the 'Chants', op. 38 and the Barcarolle from Book 5 of the 'Chants', op. 70.

This means that we are still lacking, as CD versions of Smith's Alkan recordings, one side of the 1970 LP and the 1968 Oryx recordings on an 1851 piano, among other bits and pieces. But at the rate at which things have been appearing, who knows what may turn up in the near future?

All these recordings, by the way, can be purchased from Amazon through the Society's website – you can also buy all your music and book Christmas presents, making things convenient for you and enabling a small commission from Amazon to the Society.

DC

Further thoughts on Osborne's 'Esquisses' Recording

I wonder if Adrian Corleoni could have made some of his comments [*see Bulletin 63*] if he had judged only the performance and had not read Steven Osborne's booklet notes. Those, I agree, are misguided in parts. The greatest interpreters of Alkan - Lewenthal and Ronald Smith - certainly knew/know all of Alkan's music and could/can interpret these miniature

pieces in the light of the larger-scale works. I can't easily comment on individual pieces because my e-mail a/c is based in our city library and even if they didn't look askance at a Walkman, the allowed session isn't long enough. However, my general impression is very favourable. And surely the most important thing is that a highly competent, often very good, performance of Alkan is available to all; besides which, Osborne has played the fourth suite in public on several occasions: in the Husum festival of rarities, in the Wigmore, and in a broadcast performance from the Edinburgh Festival which was intelligently introduced on air, and evidently well received by the audience in the hall. We can, of course, hope that Osborne may one day think again and tackle some of the longer Alkan works: anyone who can play Messiaen's *Vingt Regards* so convincingly certainly has a feel for the large-scale.

Peter Grove

The Other Alkan Aîné



ALKAN AÎNÉ.
12 Février 1809.

Little bits of information continue to trickle in about the elusive typographer Alphonse Alkan, known as Alkan aîné. Although we still await any clues to link him to the family of *our* Alkan aîné, a rare pamphlet, of which there is a copy in Cambridge University Library, yields the photograph reproduced here. The pamphlet, '*Les quatre doyens de la typographie parisienne*', was printed in Angers in the year of Alphonse Alkan's death, 1889. The biographies of three of the *doyens* were written by Alphonse, but he hands his own story over to his colleague M. Leprince. Unfortunately Leprince, whilst deeply interested in Alphonse's typographical activities, sheds not the slightest glimmer of light on his subject's personal life or origins. We learn only that he was born in Paris on 12th February 1809 and began working as a printer at an early age before completing his education. Clearly one of Alphonse's major contributions to his profession was his publication of his trade's first French trade journal, '*Annales de la typographie*' (1838-40); the extensive bibliography of his works provided shows that he devoted himself entirely to typographical men and matters.

Behind his tinted spectacles, Alphonse comes over as something of a sinister figure; still, add a flowing beard and you might perhaps come close to the Old Testament image of the composer featured on the medallion on this Bulletin's title page.

DC

Van Dieren on Alkan

Bernard van Dieren (1887-1936), was three-quarters French and born in Rotterdam, but settled in England in 1909. Highly regarded by his musical friends (who included Peter Warlock, Khaikoshru Sorabji and Cecil Gray) and contemporaries, his works never reached a large audience. His idiosyncratic personality is reflected in his only published collection of essays, 'Down Among the Dead Men' (1935), (and perhaps also in his rumoured, but never so far materialised, scabrous biography of Richard Wagner). The title essay, part of which is reprinted below, represents, together with Sorabji's comments in 'Around Music' (1932), the

first serious attempt at a critical evaluation of Alkan's music in England. All notes and translations are the Editor's.

[.....] The average English musician needs French relations to hear of Alkan. The case of Alkan is indeed instructive. In the estimation of the ablest contemporary judges, as well as of those who still study his works, he was equally fascinating as a pianist and as a composer. None the less, he has now long remained in semi-obscurity. Outside France he has been forgotten, or deliberately ignored. This throws a peculiar light on the systematized unfriendliness that awaits the man whose name has not established itself in the popular memory. To be long neglected is as bad as a fault. 'Qui quitte perd sa place', the French, with their undeserved renown for thoughtful manners, say; and 'les absents ont toujours tort'¹, It is sad, but 'only too palpably true'; One would imagine that the qualities which make Alkan repellent to one musician must at least recommend him to another. But this did not happen. Once Alkan's name had become an empty sound, there seemed to form an occult conspiracy to keep his music away also from ears that could have no reason to object to it.

When Busoni, in his early Berlin years, presented a compendium of piano-literature, Alkan was violently abused by all critics. Liszt had been the bugbear of the Berlin fraternity. It vetoed French music, French piano music especially, on principle. So Alkan was decried for his supposed exhibition of the features that sempiternally served as the Aunt Sally of musical patriots. Even then the hostility shown was remarkable. It amounted to a personal proscription whose common denominator may be roughly summed up as follows: 'Busoni insists on dishonouring his talents by the playing of virtuoso's music which serious musicians indignantly reject. Still, he might retain the sympathies of old-timers enamoured of romantic sentimentality and of keyboard fireworks. There is no music so bad that a good word could not be coined to defend the taste of such fervent amateurs. But when it comes to such preposterous rubbish as Busoni tries to ram down our throats with his Alkan, it is time to voice a vigorous protest, to tell him that it simply won't do, and shall not be tolerated.'

Whether the rabid prejudice that rears its ugly head here had echoed as far as London I have no means of telling, but it is a fact that on the few occasions when Busoni or Egon Petri included any Alkan in their programmes there, critics almost unanimously, and with similar vehemence, denounced the composer and his interpreters.

E. D., in the Grove article on Charles Henri² Valentin Morhange *dit* Alkan, writes of his 'astounding' opus 35, and while ranking his music below that of Chopin and Liszt 'in point of beauty and absolute musical value', is kind enough to compare him to Rubinstein, and to say that his '*Etudes*' have 'a valid claim to be studied' for 'technical specialities' nowhere else to be found 'in the music of their date'. This is about as far as critics without deliberate enmity will go. And that probably because the 'omni opera' of Alkan are incorporated in the '*materiel d'étude*' of the Paris Conservatoire.

Yet, any musician who will trouble to go through some of Alkan's work is sure to experience one of those rare thrills that come with the discovery of new, strange, and unexpected beauty. Is there anything more overwhelming than the sudden sight of a perfect landscape as seen in some small towns at the turn of an unpromising street? A player who knows 'what most piano music is, and what may be expected of the average French composer, could seldom meet greater revelations than are to be found on every page of Alkan. When he finds a piano piece

¹ 'Those who leave, lose their place' and 'The absent are always in the wrong'.

² Aaaaargh!!

called 'The Fire in the Village', previous experience suggests several horrors that must be in store for him. Instead he hears an exquisite tone-painting like one of the movements of *'Harold en Italie'*. As an introduction, one might study a short, perfectly shaped, impressionistic picture for piano, with the title *'Le Tambour bat aux Champs'*. I seriously doubt whether there is another short composition which in an equally simple form conveys so overwhelming a mood of concentrated tragedy. As a 'piece for piano', it has alone, quite apart from its implications, a singular charm. No one, has he the most primitive appreciation of musical beauties, can fail to be touched by it, and yet there lies in these unadorned phrases a depth of imagery, an incandescence of sentiment, and a universality of meaning which remind one of the most intense lines of Poe or Blake. More astonishing still, this scorching Salvator Rosa-cum-Delacroix piece is executed with a Mozartian precision and grace that few composers attain.

How is it that a man of this imaginative power and this striking technical perfection was unknown outside a limited circle of personal friends, and of archaizing specialists? The total absence of picturesque biographical information is presumably to some extent responsible. If one could tell something about his life beyond the bare facts of birth, appointments, and death, there might be some romantic lure to draw musicians to the works. Unfortunately, there is no material. The best one could do in an attempt to 'make something of' his life would be to suggest that it was wrapped in mystery. Certainly, as far as one can detect, most of it must have been spent in the same fabulous prison where Paganini learnt to perform on a single string. Unless on a larger scale something happened to him of the kind that Borrow³ relates of his own strange youth. Borrovians will remember that a whole day of his life had been mislaid - in spite of most careful research it could never be traced.

Alkan's admirers are naturally anxious to discover the slightest additional facts that could arouse interest, or even simple curiosity. But persistent probing and snuffling and ferreting has failed to bring to light anything beyond the commonplaces, such as that the most considerable musicians of his day - Liszt to begin with - missed no opportunity of visiting him when they came to Paris. Pianists and composers with intuition for spots where inspiration is likely to be found, never let a chance pass of calling on Alkan, of listening to his conversation, his latest ideas, compositions, and whatever technical suggestions he might make.

He is one of those lonely figures, and one of those peculiarly individual artists that cannot be actually compared to anyone, but about whom one must speak in terms of constant reference to familiar names, simply because there is no other means of suggesting anything of character and achievement. If one speaks of his qualities while recalling aspects of the works of other artists, it is not because he 'is rather like that'. One cannot profitably quote whole pages of the music. There is no more dishearteningly ineffectual method anyhow. Therefore one is inevitably reduced to the pathetic procedure of citing other names. As long as it is understood that this is not intended as a bolstering up of a shaky case, there is no great harm done. In spite of this I feel unhappy about the necessity, and therefore tiresomely emphasize the point, in the hope that I may only hurt myself.

The names of which one thinks in connexion with Alkan are indicative of his significance. Some of his detractors have called him a Berlioz of the piano; if it was not intended as a compliment, it was an unconsciously felicitous suggestion. Alkan has much in common with

³ George Borrow, 1803-1881. Author of 'The Bible in Spain' (1843), and 'Lavengro' (1851), which I believe is the source of the quoted story.

Berlioz, but he also has much in common with Haydn; his music has a lovable ruggedness which recalls some moods of Cervantes or Defoe; but it possesses the distant tenderness of Verlaine or Chopin (the Chopin of the Preludes and the Ballades), and a variety of colour and rhythm, a vivacity of profile combined with wealth of detail such as is perhaps only found in Berlioz himself.

He is markedly methodical in the lay-out of the separate sections and in the deliberate intricacy of instrumental design. In this we find a substratum of pedagogic *arrière-pensée*. But few composers retain his liberty of movement where they have so definite and practical an object in view. There is in many places a dark strain from which we might infer that he was a somewhat enigmatic personality, and yet there are not many equally compelling and immediately attractive composers amongst those with so pronounced and unmistakable an individual tone.

Alkan never shies at the boldest tone-painting; he knows no half-heartedness. But however unreserved a colourist he dares be, he retains a structural purity which should satisfy the most exacting stylists. His technical procedure displays the deliberate precision of an engraver; his lines are chiselled with reasoned and cool accuracy. Yet this never tones down the fascinating glow of his coloration; in the most fantastic pictures the utter truthfulness of his musical temperament convincingly knits together the diverse qualities.

As a teacher he possessed qualities of imagination combined with methodical insight and enthusiastic convictions that made the most gifted eager to learn from him. Anyone who has ever given or received instruction will know that this is neither the truism nor the contradiction which the bald statement at first sight appears. The crystalline clarity of his structures, and their rhythmical incisiveness, reveal sufficiently the supple power of thought which must have inspired the select few who could value this exceptional combination and for whom it was a constant spur to higher ambition and elegant discipline. If a teacher with so regulated a mind can show his disciples his own convincing works, he gives them something that cannot be found elsewhere. His personality, we gather, was like his music, strangely varied and consistent; the 'texture' of the gnarled oak-bark next to the silkiness of a lily-petal. He has the acerbity and the strident accents of a Hogarth or Rowlandson, and withal he is a dreamer whose enchanting vignettes have the melancholy sweetness of Watteau. No composer was less impeded by keyboard limitations than Alkan, who draws from the unpromising 'daily-bread' medium an undreamt variety of colour and a width of expression which, like Berlioz's orchestra, presents tender figures against proud, jagged mountain and rock backgrounds, amidst the clamour of fiery combat. With equal felicity he knows how to improvise on a fugitive, whispering, little piping melody that sounds like the ghost of a devout old supplicant reciting his lyrical canon of simple faith in a silent, sun-warmed village church.

While this poet lived his retired life in some dark corner of Paris, the limelight was for the Steibelts⁴, the Pixises⁵, and the Kalkbrenners⁶. He was the unsurpassable virtuoso, but the

⁴ Daniel Steibelt, 1765-1823. Alkan's op. 1 (c. 1827) is a set of variations on a theme from his 'Orage' concerto.

⁵ Johann Peter Pixis, 1788-1874. Active in Paris in the 1820s and 1830s. One of the perpetrators, with Liszt, Czerny, Thalberg, Henri Herz and Chopin, of the 'Hexameron' variations on Bellini's 'Suoni la tromba'. Pixis's brother Friedrich Wilhelm (1785-1842) was a violin virtuoso.

⁶ Friedrich Michael Wilhelm Kalkbrenner, born in Germany, settled in France after studying at the Conservatoire (1799-1801). As van Dieren later points out, his name translates literally as 'limeburner'.

others had the public. The sentimental Scheffel⁷, who slobbered together the complete apotheosis of tears-moonlight-violets-and-ichweissnichtwas⁸ sadness, has laid it down that *'Es ist im Leben hässlich eingerichtet, Dass bei den Rosen gleich die Dornen stehn'*⁹. (Significantly enough, an important role in his tearful *'Trompeter'* is filled by 'The Tomcat Hiddigeigei', whose dismal melodies follow on the go-a-rovings of the Knight Before. Only, he meant it all very seriously.) I should say that the trouble is not so much the thorns being so near the roses as that some people get all the roses; while others have not enough skin for the thorns, thistles, cactus leaves, and stinging-nettles that are thrust on them in abundance. Here was Alkan with his brilliant light hidden under a bushel, and there was the appropriately named Kalkbrenner - Limeburner! - with rings on his fingers and bells on his toes, like the ladies scorned by the Hebrew minor prophet¹⁰, having, and bringing, music wherever he went.

This egregious Kalkbrenner - speaking as a composer - once summed up the merits and infantile ambitions of his successful fellows and himself in a memorable description of some *'Grande Fantaisie pour Piano sur Thèmes Caractéristiques'* of his own: *'Sehn Se, det Janze ist ein Draum, eine Dreimerei; es beginnt mit Lieuwe, Passion; Disperation, Verzweiflung; und et endigt mit einem Militärmarsch'*¹¹! One despairs of ever improving on such a confession; if composers would all be so honest we should perhaps discover how many of their works have grown from similar mental images.

Piano music with the spiritual and structural qualities we connect with the symphonies and string quartets of the classical masters is rare enough, but there is none of it with which Alkan need fear comparison, however different his idiom may be. Yet oblivion has overtaken him and his name, partly for lack of biographical glamour, and one shivers to think of the other great works there may be which suffer under the same crippling disability. There must have been composers who did not have, as one mild consolation, the admiring friendship of confreres to draw a little posthumous attention to them.

Another danger, by no means negligible, is that the sympathetic praises of a few insistent lovers of so recondite a figure may be themselves dangerous. They seldom serve any good purpose, however worthy the intentions; and they raise the suspicion of unfriendly critics who happen to be ignorant of the music. The case for the prosecution always seems the more convincing. When one reads law-court reports one hopes that the culprit may get off, but, while one admires the generous ingenuity of his counsel, a conviction seems the only possible conclusion. That, no doubt, is why the defence is allowed the final word.

Alkan and Piccinni¹² illustrate in contrasted ways the hideously doubling effects of ignorance and neglect. Two such remarkable figures are today practically unknown, although the one earned fame rarely surpassed - 'undying fame' it was called - and the other possessed a most striking and distinguished personality. This should considerably modify our tempers when we

⁷ Joseph Victor von Scheffel, 1825-1886, poet and author of the popular verse saga 'Der Trompeter von Säckingen' (1854) and 'The Songs of the Tomcat Hiddigeigei'. An opera based on 'Der Trompeter', by the composer Victor Nessler, was produced in Leipzig in 1884.

⁸ 'I-don't-know-what'

⁹ 'It is bitterly decreed in life that there is a thorn for every rose'.

¹⁰ I cannot trace this biblical reference; or perhaps the 'non-reference' to the famous nursery rhyme is van Dieren's idea of a joke. (Probably Isaiah 3, verse 21, though he is hardly a *minor* prophet - Secretary.)

¹¹ This jargon is presumably a parody of Kalkbrenner's Hessian accent; something like 'You see, youth [? - perhaps a version of *jeunesse*] is a dream, just dreaming; it begins with love, passion; then despair; and ends with a military march'.

¹² Niccolò Piccinni (1728-1800), also discussed by van Dieren in the first part of this article as a forgotten master.

set out to pronounce judgement on the composers of our own time, or on the surviving representatives of authentic, if antiquated, ideals.

'Dictionaries are like watches,' wrote Dr. Johnson, 'the worst is better than none, and the best cannot be expected to go quite true'¹³, but O my soul, what demon-watches they are to remind us of the uncertainty of the moment, and of the futility of the most ardent human striving, if they happen to be slow or fast!

*Lasciate ogni speranza*¹⁴ would be a fitting remembrance to print at the head of a lexicon. If we praise and condemn let us remember our uneasy blushes when we read of the immortality or of the imperishable glory of men whose names we should never know if their first letters did not set them in columns where the accident of an irrelevant chase has led us.

Let us also measure future chances by the lame, neutral lines the knowing editor allots to a composer we may happen to know and revere, but who has fallen out of public favour. He is admitted only for the completeness demanded of books of reference which, for a scholar's reward, 'deliver the body dead or alive' to whoever is on a missing artist's tracks.

Still, Hamlet could not even have said 'Alas' but for the grave-digger.

(From 'Down Among the Dead Men. And Other Essays' by Bernard van Dieren, OUP, 1935, pp. 11-19)

Alkan and his Contemporaries

An essay by your Editor, entitled 'In the Midst of Many Peoples', has been published in the magazine 'European Judaism'. It assesses and compares the attitudes to Judaism of Alkan, Meyerbeer, Halévy and Mendelssohn. The title is drawn from the verse in the Biblical book of Micah from which Alkan took the epigraph for the slow movement of his Grande Sonate for the cello. The Alkan material in the essay will be known to Society members, as it is a compression of the essay 'Alkan and his Jewish Roots' published in Bulletins 62 and 63. Unfortunately, copyright considerations preclude making the article directly available from the Society's website; but for any member who wishes a copy of it, the Editor can supply it on request in 'pdf' format (which requires the freely downloadable Acrobat reader programme) - just send an e-mail to info@alkansociety.org.

Your Editor, nobly supported by his daughters Claudia and Naomi (soprano and pédalier-hand respectively), is also giving an 'anecdotal recital', entitled 'Hebrew Melodies', on neglected Jewish composers of the nineteenth century, featuring the lives and the music of Alkan, Meyerbeer and Nathan. Amongst the music to be performed will be Alkan's 'Trois anciennes mélodies juives'. The event takes place at the New North London Synagogue, 80, East End Road, London N3 on Sunday December 14th 2003 at 7.30 pm. Entrance is £7.50, with proceeds to the synagogue building fund. Please contact me if you are interested in coming (tel: 0208 360 5127, e-mail info@alkansociety.org).

¹³ I cannot trace this quotation. It is not beyond van Dieren to have made it up, however.

¹⁴ 'Abandon all hope' – the inscription above the gates of the Inferno according to Dante.