

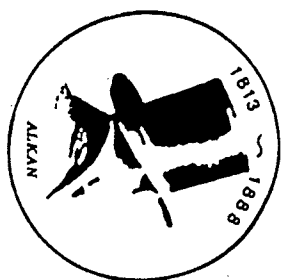
THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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EDITED BY DR. JOHN WHITE

THE CENTENARY FESTIVAL

Peter Hick here gives us his impressions of the two concerts held on the last day of the Festival, December 3rd, which were not covered in our last Bulletin: -

Kevin Bowyer's Recital of Alkan's compositions for *pédalier* took place at St. Giles, Cripplegate at 5 pm. He presented the complete set of 'Trente Prières' Op.64 followed by the *Impromptu* Op.69. Whether or not the 13 Prayers were intended for one sitting, they certainly made a convincing case for themselves, being well contrasted in mood and emotional content. The 12th was familiar from Vianna da Motta's arrangement (recorded by Ronald Smith in the 1970s); here, in its organ guise, the bell-like tune at the end rose up, most effectively through the surrounding texture. The 3rd *Prière* was immediately arresting, a cavernously sombre tune being accompanied by a haunting tremolando figure, and there was real swagger about the 4th and 8th Prayers (the latter subtitled 'Deus Sabaoth'). The opening of the 9th revealed the world of the piano prelude (Op.31 No.15) 'Dans le chant gothique' but had about it a more homely air and I was reminded of the *Marche Funèbre* from Op.39 towards the end of the 10th Prayer. The resplendent final Prayer rounded off the set with a grandly burgeoning paean. I was left feeling profoundly grateful that someone has taken up this repertoire.

Great claims are being made for the *Impromptu* Op.69. It is probably Alkan's least-known major work. The title is deceptive; there is nothing 'off the cuff' about it. Far from being extempore it emerges as a finely-wrought composition worked out with great care. Divisible into four sections united by a common pulse but played continuously for about a 2-hour, the Lutheran chorale on which it is based (ein feste burg) is used as the subject for 12 variations and a fugue. There is, however, a very cunningly devised ground-plan on which this architecture is constructed, and the piece has a rather Busonian conception I wonder if Busoni knew it.

The opening chorale sounded appropriately portentous, re-emerging triumphantly at the end before the unexpectedly quiet close. The fugue is joyous. Is the 2-piano version closer to the original than the organ presentation? Probably; the filigree figuration, which seems to be a quotation from the Chopin C sharp minor Scherzo, certainly sounded better on the piano for example, but there was something about the sheer 'gravitas' of the organ which seemed entirely appropriate to the sound-world of this piece. In any event it was good to have the opportunity of hearing both versions so well played. The issue of Kevin Bowyer's 'Nimbus' CD seems very much like manna from heaven!

(The pedal-board of Alkan's *pédalier* had A as its lowest note just as the keyboard had. This means that Alkan used three notes - A, B flat and B - which do not exist on the modern organ. Thus some adaptation has to be made when his *pédalier* compositions are played. Some idea of the difficulty is given by this extract of a letter to Ronald Smith from Kevin Bowyer: -

'.... I used my own transposed score to get away from the original A - E compass. Everything is up a minor third so as to work on the modern C - G pedal-board. This has unfortunately resulted in making the pieces considerably more difficult than they

originally were But it was either complete transposition transposing some notes up the octave, or breaking Alkan's key scheme between pieces - which I was very unwilling to do.')

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ALKAN FESTIVAL
AND RONALD SMITH'S RECITAL

by Peter Hick

Retrospectives are in vogue at the moment. Messiaen has been honoured in his eightieth birthday year. His compatriot, Alkan, was not so fortunate in his lifetime but this Festival of an introduction and seven concerts over four days provided a real celebration of his music. A unique occasion and one for which the Society can be rightly proud.

Whilst, at one time, it may have been necessary for Alkan to die in order to prove his existence, the Festival provided a more than adequate testimony to the reluctance of his music to be forgotten. Given the stirring championship of committed performance, a representative portion of Alkan's sizeable output came very much alive for those of us lucky enough to be present at these concerts.

The performances were always at least interesting and often outstanding. The familiar rubbed shoulders with the unfamiliar and there was the opportunity to hear much that was unknown. In short, the programmes offered just what a festival should offer and several first London performances were noteworthy.

Visitors from overseas lent an international flavour to the events. New friends were made by the end of the festival. Chatting to the American pianist, Alan Weiss, before the final concert, I enquired about Raymond Lewenthal, rather hoping for some interesting news from across the Atlantic. It was, therefore, a real shock to be told that his obituary notice had been printed in the New York Times just six days before the Festival started. How poignant to discover this sad fact just thirty minutes before a remarkable recital by our President (beginning with the Symphony for Solo Piano, which featured so prominently on Lewenthal's pioneering RCA recording from 1966.) For me this recital provided a kind of 'impromptu memorial' to someone who had been very much a hero to me from my school days. The occasion was not, however, a sad one. Ronald Smith's advocacy is well-known and his playing riveted the attention, as so often in the past.

The sombre opening of the Symphony, which became in a sense Lewenthal's 'Sonic Epitaph', was beautifully controlled and brought an apt sense of urgency to the ideas which followed; the whole movement being delivered in a strict tempo, which pointed to Alkan's classical affinities. This was playing of immense breadth, grandeur and authority. The Marche Funèbre sounded more than usually lugubrious on this occasion, although there was an appealing charm to the wistful trio section. The craggy minuet was delivered with real punch and paved the way for a finale which was a pianistic tour de force. Despatched with an iron discipline (that brooks no hurries!) Lewenthal's 'Ride in Hell' waits for no man. Cast caution to the wind and the results may be as exhilarating as here.

Le Festin d'Esoppe followed. If a few of the variations went marginally awry it only served to highlight the fact that playing at this level is not to be taken for granted and a momentary lapse of concentration can spell disaster. But there were fine things to admire here, none-the-less.

The first half of the recital ended with the Etude from Op.35 'Chant d'Amour, chant de mort'. This had been a set piece for the Alkan piano competition, so had received some public exposure before the performance. Ronald Smith introduced it himself on this occasion from the platform, proposing a parallel with the story of Romeo and Juliet, which is well taken. A graceful serenity informs much of the love music, although there is passion in the triplet passages. The reverie is cut short by the abrupt entry of Death, who stalks through the last page, scythe in hand before a poignant final cadence. It is astonishing to think that this music has lain dormant for a century or more.

The Op.76 Etudes, which filled the second half, would have astonished many people. Now triumphantly recorded for EMI, they can fear no comparison with any other set of Etudes. An early set (despite their high Opus number), they stand unique; a forbidding monument to the athletic abilities of the human hand, allied to compositional ingenuities which transcend the very limitations of five fingers. A recent commentary suggests that they should carry a Government Health Warning! This may raise a smile, but performances of this

unholy trio as a set is a daunting task, and calls on physical reserves that few players can muster.

The fantasy for left hand alone, which is the first study, could be said to continue a tradition of left hand pieces, which exploit the medium such that the listener is not conscious of listening to music written for one hand. Superficially, the casual listener might think that it is easier to play such music with two hands but such is not the case, since the composer's figurations and chording fit the hand like a glove and, if transferred to the other hand, often become merely awkward. The left hand study here was previously championed by Busoni eighty years ago, and by John Ogden in his student days. It is a fine piece, beginning with a slowish introduction before a march-like idea, and closing with a stretto. The right hand study which follows is even more remarkable. An extended introduction leads into a gently haunting theme in A Major, which heralds some highly inventive variation writing. The second variation, for example, is interrupted by a sombre figural exposition extending through 5½ bars, which is abruptly cut short as the harlequin-esque mood of the beginning of the variation takes over, and there is an astonishing variation where the theme is accompanied by double notes marked 'strappato'. This looks unplayable on paper but it is all a matter of judicious sleight of hand and choosing the right tempo! A colossal arpeggio heralds the finale, which strides across the keyboard in the grand manner. A passage combining two main themes then follows, before the movement finally ends with a doubling of the underlying pulse, appropriately marked 'Vittoriosamente'; victorious it ends, with banners flying. All this should not obscure the fact that the piece is great fun.

The middle Etude for right hand alone is exhausting, but to have then to follow this with the study for the two hands together seems to be asking too much. It is almost as if Alkan has written the word 'Attacca' at the double bar of the right hand study. Thus reunited the two hands pursue each other over seventeen pages of semi-quavers, locked together two octaves apart. The piece proceeds with a kind of mischievous stealth; very quick, very light and with a wide dynamic range. Something sinister is afoot, and this malevolence erupts, not only in broken octaves, but also in tenths. A brief pianissimo reprise before the end recalls the opening before a triumphant glissando sweeps up the keyboard. Hopefully (and as here), ending on F, before a final affirmation of C Major dispels memories of the smouldering C Minor of which the piece begins. The whole performance was remarkable for its control and wide dynamic range. Ronald Smith hovering over the keyboard. In fact, a phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins's great poem 'The Windhover' came into my mind: 'My heart in hiding stirred for a bird, the achieve of, the mastery of the thing.' His ovation was well-deserved and, as an encore, we were treated to the little prelude 'I sleep but my heart is awake', played with a disarming charm and simplicity. Could there be a greater contrast than this? The cornuscating virtuosity of the trois grandes études and the quiet benediction which finally closed the programme, underlined the opposite poles of this chameleon amongst composers.

NOTES AND NEWS

It is most important that as many Members as possible attend the Annual General Meeting this year as the future of the Society has to be discussed and determined. The meeting is held at the Abbey Community Association, 29 Marsham Street, London, SW1. It is not far from St. John's, Smith Square. Date and time: - Wednesday, July 5th at 7 pm.

We have received more cheerful news from the French Society in Paris, which is steadily growing in numbers. There is now a regular exchange of news and views which is of benefit to both Societies.

Op.31 No.13, much loved by Busoni and Ronald Smith, 'Cantiques des Cantiques' uses a verse from the Old Testament. It is to be found in the King James Bible in the 'Song of Solomon' chapter 5 verse 2. It reads there: - 'I sleep but my heart waketh'. The New English Bible gives: - 'I sleep but my heart is awake' and gives the title of the book as 'Song of Songs'. Alkan spent much time on translating the Old Testament into French and there can be no doubt that this was the verse that inspired him.

Correction: - Later this year Kevin Bowyer will broadcast, for Radio 3, Benedictus Op.54 and all twelve of Alkan's Pedal Studies (not just three as was stated in our last Bulletin).

REVIEW OF THE ALKAN SOCIETY by Dr. John White.

Part II

The inaugural public meeting was held in the Waterloo Room of the Festival Hall on 18th May 1977 at 6.30 pm. There were 22 interested persons present including Mr. Lionel from Holland. Banking facilities were to be arranged with the NatWest Clapham Junction Branch and rates of subscription agreed. There were to be reduced terms for students (but this did not prove successful because very few students had even heard of Alkan.) The number of interested persons on the card index was 67 - an encouraging figure after only four months activity. There were to be at least three Meetings per year plus the A.G.M.. Suggestions for speakers, meeting places, etc. were made. Mr. Lionel had suggested to the Secretary by letter that a discography would be valuable and it was reported that Charles Halistone, whom Dr. White had roped in, had already prepared a first draft. It was suggested that there should be prepared an album of simpler pieces for the young if M. Billandot could be persuaded to adopt the idea. (This resulted, happily, eventually in the publication of 'Alkan in Miniature'.) The Society was to be fully constituted at the A.G.M. of 1978, when President, Hon. Secretary, Hon. Treasurer and members of a small committee would be elected. Towards the end of the Meeting various additional suggestions were made by Charles Halistone, Martin Ball, Lorna Gore Browne and Jack Gibbons. (Of the 67 interested persons so far listed, about half were from the Greater London area. The others included 5 from the U.S.A., 1 from Australia and 1 from Holland.) Not long after this meeting Dr. White, with the help of a friendly Professor of Law, drew up a formal Constitution containing 13 Clauses and a copy of this was sent to all who were then Members.

Dr. White also got in touch with the Charity Commissioners and the Lady there very kindly suggested what should be put as the aims and objects of the Society. To be recognised as a Charity, the educational aspect must be emphasised. This was finally agreed:-

"the object of the Society shall be to advance the education of the public in the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the life and work of the French composer and pianist, C.V. Alkan (1813-1888)."

The Alkan Society may well be proud of its educational achievements during the twelve years of its existence.

(To be continued)

ALKAN and the Critics.

ALKAN Volume 2 "The Music".

The whole work is a labour of love, scholarship and rare insight. It deals with every facet of Alkan's brilliant genius and is likely to remain a standard text for many years. Ronald Smith's wide knowledge of the pianoforte repertoire enables him to make telling comparisons with the works of other composers. Musical examples abound. Seldom has a composer been so well served by his biographer as has Alkan by Ronald Smith.

Critics have received the book with ready acclaim. There has been practically no adverse criticism, though no summary has been quite so eulogistic as my own - given above. Here are short extracts from four reviewers:-

Wilfrid Mellers: from a long article entitled 'Reclusive revolutionary' ('Times Literary Supplement') "It is well written, well produced and, with the help of nearly 300 music type examples, offers technical analysis of the kind that promotes experiential understanding. And it is cheap at the price." Then again later: "Smith's epilogue is a masterly summary which indicates how Alkan's ambiguities make sense in relation to the 'pluralistic' society he lived in but was not of. At once aloof and fiercely passionate, Alkan will never be a member of the Establishment, though Ronald Smith has demonstrated that he cannot again be dislodged from his established position as (in Busoni's phrase) 'one of the five greatest writers for the piano since Beethoven'."

Max Harrison: from a lengthy article in 'Musical Opinion'. ".....though Alkan's large works have now achieved a certain notoriety, if only because of their phenomenal difficulty, his status as a prolific and highly original miniaturist is largely unsuspected,

and this despite the smaller pieces being so much more accessible to performers. Not that they are less mysterious. Of certain of them Smith writes that "an intangible, almost mystical power seems to invest their apparent naivety". Given Alkan's reclusive existence, the story of his music is far more exciting than the story of his life, and I found this book completely absorbing."

Harold Truscott: from a long appraisal in 'MUSIC and musicians international'. "There are no snap judgements here. Everything through this volume contains as a study of the music is based on knowledge and insight growing over a long period, backed by the fact that the book is written by possibly the finest Alkan pianist alive; and the reader may be sure that everything has been played by the author, with a deep technical mastery as well as musical understanding, and with a complete concentration on carrying out the composer's expressed intentions. In the way in which he wanted them carried out - and this Alkan has made very clear; sometimes, as it has seemed to some commentators, to the point of lunacy. Ronald Smith has always, rightly, taken the view that Alkan was not a madman and had ample reason for what he wrote; and his results have justified him."

Ronald Stevenson: from a review in the 'European Piano Teachers' Journal'. "I'll tell you how good this book is; it kept me from piano practice before an important engagement. I'm sure its wisdom will inform my future piano practice and compensate for what it stole today. What a privilege to read Smith's analyses of the Alkan Symphony and Concerto for solo piano, which many have heard him perform in so magisterial a manner! It is like being in his studio; like having a series of masterclasses all to oneself. And we can have the lessons all over again by simply re-opening the book - which I keep doing all the time."

Alkan's Chamber Music at the Wigmore Hall - March 29th 1988.

There was no doubt about the pleasure and enthusiasm shown by the large audience in the Hall; but the critics' reviews showed a wide divergence of views. When a critic attends a concert of music by Beethoven or Mozart, he will have a fairly wide background knowledge of the composer's complete output. In the case of Alkan, very few critics have such knowledge and the results are necessarily unbalanced. One or two critics may feel that they have enough to do coping with the many nineteenth-century composers and almost resent the resurrection of another! In an extreme case, a poor critic may have his mind made up about Alkan merely by hearsay, before he actually hears a note.

Here are the reactions of five responsible critics:-

David Murray ('Financial Times') gave an interesting and balanced judgement. He makes this important point: "... We learned that far from being a pianist-composer's marginal exercises they stand very high amid Alkan's remarkable output. Their piano parts are of course terrific, which is why without Smith's unique offices they cannot become familiar concert pieces. Clark and Welsh dazzled as much in the madly driven finales of the duo-sonatas as Smith did at his incessantly virtuosic piano - but they went far to justify the boldest claim in Wilfrid Mellers' high-flying programme-notes that Alkan's 'developments through opposition' are seriously Beethovenian large-scale arguments. Not many celebrations offer such revelatory rewards."

Merrion Bowen ('The Guardian') "Charles-Valentin Alkan wrote the sort of music that gives one a restless night, like too much cheese for supper. His themes course relentlessly through the brain in a never-ending whirligig." "But Alkan really came into his own in his finales. Whereas much of his music leant incidentally on folk music of different kinds, in Italian opera, and was sometimes indebted to Schubert or Mendelssohn, it was the diabolerie of Paganini, Berlioz and Liszt that seemed to lie behind his finales, which rush furiously onwards, as Smith put it in his book on Alkan, "like a mass precipitation of lemmings over a cliff".

Anthony Marks ('Musical Times') "There is something mythic about Alkan's music, possibly because so few people have heard much of it. Perhaps that was one of the reasons so many people turned out on a foul night for a recital to mark the centenary of his death - perhaps, like me, they were keen to hear such oft-vaunted seldom-heard compositions. The treat was biggest for those who - like me - are fond of wobbly music that refuses to fit our conception of its cultural time and space." After listening to the Grand Duo for violin and piano, Marks was "exhausted" but he concludes that "Alkan is wonderful, rewarding music".

Stephen Petitt ('The Times'), by contrast, bestows a douche of cold water: "Charles-Valentin Alkan died a hundred years ago. His music is played reasonably often, though not by many, and it has been recorded. Yet he is still regarded as a mysterious composer. Two things contribute to that reputation: firstly he was a recluse, and secondly he wrote music of formidable awkwardness and technical difficulty. Those things, however, do not necessarily make him anything more than an intriguing figure. There were some at this celebratory recital who would doubtless lay claim to a higher status for him, but ultimately, individual and beautiful though many of Alkan's ideas are, and despite his unquestionable integrity, the alchemy does not quite work. He remains, essentially, an outsider."

Max Harrison ('Musical Opinion'). Mr. Harrison is a man who knows his Alkan and wrote a very appreciative review of the whole concert. Two passages in it struck me with particular force. Speaking of the Trio Op.30 he writes: "In fact, this intensity, which is almost as evident in many quiet, slow passages as in quick energetic ones, is as much part of the explanation for Alkan's neglect as the technical demands he makes on his performers. An entire concert of his works leaves one feeling a most unusual combination of exhilaration and exhaustion. Another difficulty for both performers and listeners is that so much happens, and goes on happening, in short spaces of time." Later on he continues: "The trouble with an occasion like this is that the music is so fascinating and raises so many issues that one almost forgets to say anything about the players. In this case the best thing that can be said to them is that the performances were altogether worthy of the consistently extraordinary music. Clark and Welsh took part in commandingly virtuosic accounts of two works each, but Smith was at the piano throughout this long evening and played everything from memory, drawing out the precise meaning of every one of those myriad notes. It must stand as one of the high points of his inspired advocacy of Alkan."

The South Bank Festival November 30th - December 3rd.

Little attention was paid to the organ recitals by the critics but they were in unanimous agreement when praising John Lenehan's piano recital - the most eulogistic coming from the pen of Bryce Morrison ('Music and Musicians'). Apart from the 'cello sonata the items of the Wednesday evening concert were treated as rather interesting oddities. The Thursday evening concert produced debate again on the merits of the trio and violin duo and some interest was shown in the arrangements for string quartet of a few of the 'Esquisses'. Of Ronald Smith's recital, the climax of a splendid four days, some critics discerned weaknesses in the playing. To play such a hair-raising programme after the effort and stress of the previous three days, Ronald Smith would have had to be more than human to appear as fresh as a daisy.

David Murray ('Financial Times') made these comments: "Yes, there are enough pieces by the composer- pianist Charles-Valentin Alkan to make a 'festival', and if the centenary of his birth went under-remarked in 1913, interest in his curious music has grown enough to ensure that the present centenary of his death should be celebrated properly. The two recitals I heard seemed to confirm a longstanding impression that, though nearly everything Alkan wrote is at least 'interesting', he rose to more than that chiefly when he was at his most madly over-extended and intricate."

Malcolm Miller ('Jewish Chronicle') under the title 'Alkan's originality' gave a sensible and appreciative review of the whole festival. Here are a few extracts from it: "The view that Alkan's style is predominantly sombre, unmelodic and obsessive results from ignorance of the music. In the works performed at the festival, a wide perspective emerged - poetic, colouristic, lyrical, dramatic - which imbues them with striking qualities and originality. "Also featured was Alkan's synagogue music - stolid yet inventive settings of the 'Etz Chaim Hi' and Psalm 150, forthrightly sung by Kentish Opera under Mark Fitzgerald." "But the main fascination of Alkan's oeuvre lies in the solo piano music, consisting of miniatures (entertainingly introduced by Ronald Smith in his lecture/recital) and larger-scale works."

Finally, to finish with a dash of cold water, here are two extracts from an article 'Dead as a parrot' by Adrian Jack ('Independent'). Speaking of the 'cello sonata he writes "The real gem of the work is its fascinating slow movement, in which the 'cello plays pizzicato syncopations against the piano's glistening figuration in the treble. The finale is a balneario which sent us home happily enough but could have been truly devastating had it been better played. In fact the 'Sonata' as a whole got a sketchy performance. Mr. Smith playing from memory yet failing to project the character of his very busy part with either force or clarity." Then again later, writing of the Benedictus and the Improvitu "As so

often with this supposedly other-worldly composer, the unremitting activity of the notes built a barrier to any message behind them.

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

Wednesday, May 17th at 7 pm at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Silk Street, Barbican (nearest underground station MOORGATE) in the Lecture/Recital Room (check at the Entry Desk in case of a room change). The brilliant young pianist William Fong will play the following programme:-

- Prokofiev Sonata No.3 in A Minor Op.28
- Rachmaninov Etude tableaux in E Flat Minor Op.39 No.5
- Alkan Le tambour bat aux champs Op.50 No.2
- Chant in E Op.38 No.1
- Le Festin d'espe Op.39
- Chopin Sonata in B Flat Minor Op.35
- Ravel Gaspard de la nuit.

Wednesday July 5th at 7 pm.

The Annual General Meeting at the Abbey Community Association, 29 Marsham Street, SW1.

As previously mentioned, it is of the greatest importance that as many members as possible attend this meeting in order to put forward their ideas for the future of the Society and to appoint new officers. As yet no-one has volunteered to help with the running of the Society. If this situation remains unresolved by the meeting then, sadly, it will be the Society's final meeting and this will be the last Bulletin.

There follows an article written especially for the Bulletin by RUTH JORDAN, the author of biographies of George Sand and Chopin, for which she was awarded a Certificate of Merit by the Chopin Institute in Warsaw. She recently gave a series of lectures for the Spiro Institute on five 19th-century Jewish composers. Her chosen composers were Alkan, Offenbach, Halévy, Gottschalk and Julius Benedict. In 1984 she won an award for her autobiography.

ALKAN'S FRIENDSHIP
with
CHOPIN and GEORGE SAND

Ruth Jordan © 1989

Paris of the 1830's was an artistic powerhouse where nearly everybody knew everybody. Musicians, writers, poets and artists often met in the same salons, patronised the same restaurants, attended the same concerts and exhibitions, read the same literary and artistic publications. Acquaintances were easily made. Many evolved into cordial professional relationships; some matured into friendships; few withstood the test of time and circumstances.

In September 1831, when the 21-year-old Chopin arrived in Paris, he had never heard of a young prodigy called Alkan. He dutifully presented his letter of recommendation to Ferdinand Paër, Master of Music at the Court of Louis Philippe, and was soon introduced to

most of the aged and aging lions of musical Paris - Cherubini, Rossini, Meyerbeer, Hummel, Auber, Kalkbrenner. Instinctively he sought out pianists/composers of his own generation and, just as instinctively, gravitated towards those who, like himself, were foreigners in Paris. His early circle included 20-year-old Ferdinand Hiller, 21-year-old Franz Liszt, 22-year-old Felix Mendelssohn, 24-year-old George Osborne, Paris-born Alkan, in spite of the age affinity - he was nearly eighteen - did not quite fit in.

However, in the close-knit artistic society of the day Chopin and Alkan could have hardly failed to hear of one another or acquaint themselves with each other's work through sheet music or attendances at the same venues. Most certainly they would have rubbed shoulders at those fashionable Celebrity Recitals where as many as thirteen pianists would perform the same evening, as they did at the Salle Pleyel in 1832. When they did meet they fell easily into a form of collegial friendship, shared with other young pianists/composers of their acquaintance. On 30 May 1836 Ferdinand Hiller, writing to Chopin from Frankfurt, concluded "Please give my regards to M. and Mme d'Este, Matuszynski, Baron Stockhausen, Alkan etc". Obviously Chopin and Alkan had been moving by then in the same salons and were known to be friends.

In March 1838 Alkan gave a performance of his piano reduction of Beethoven's 7th Symphony which he had arranged for two pianos and eight hands. His co-pianists were Zimmerman (1785-1853), Gutmann (a pupil of Chopin's) and Chopin. From then on their friendship progressed smoothly and cordially, both dropping the formal "vous" in favour of the collegial "tu" and "toi" prevalent among young artists of their age. Neither being given to unnecessary social calls, they would exchange hurried notes which, in those days, were the equivalent of today's telephone calls. "Cher ami," Chopin pencilled a message in October or November 1839 from his rue Tronchet rooms, "If you have your copy of Moscheles' Sonata for 4 hands please send it round to me. Chopin."

Alkan's notes: were equally brief, sometimes even cryptic if the following is anything to go by. "Mon cher Chopin", he wrote one morning, "Batta is expected tonight at Zimmerman's. C.V. Alkan." Chopin would have understood perfectly. Alexandre Batta (1816-1902) was a Dutch cellist who in 1835 settled in Paris and became the darling of the salons. Zimmerman, who since 1826 had been a Professor of Piano at the Paris Conservatoire, and was incidentally a neighbour of Alkan's, was giving a soirée at his home, with Batta playing some of his cello compositions and himself at the piano. Alkan was inviting Chopin to come along as his guest. Whether at that early stage either of them had a cello sonata in mind is purely conjectural. Judging by their fastidiousness and Batta's reputation, they would have both considered the Batta technique too facile for their own respective styles.

Towards the end of 1841 or early 1842 an elegant white card was delivered to Alkan's home, bearing the name and address of the sender: Frédéric Chopin, 16 rue Pigalle. Below was an urgent message with no preamble: "Cher ami, please send round the other volumes of Fétis, but tonight please, won't you, as late as you wish. Yours, Ch."

Years later, when parting with this card to the autograph collector Pallier-Laurent, Alkan explained the background to the urgency. George Sand, who had been on intimate terms with Chopin for several years and was living in a self-contained flat at the same address, was working then on her novel *Consuelo*, based on the character of her friend the opera singer Pauline Viardot. Through Chopin she had already borrowed from Alkan a volume of Fétis Dictionary [a gigantic and scholarly work preceding the first Grove by nearly 50 years]; now she needed to look up the composer Porpora. Her best writing time was from midnight to the small hours of the morning, so the reference was urgently needed. It was rather late when Alkan got the message - by hand of a courier - and nearly midnight by the time he managed to find the books and dispatch them. He and George Sand had not yet formally met and he felt it was quite natural that she should use Chopin as an intermediary.

The formal introduction, if formal it was, would have taken place in late 1842, when George Sand and Chopin moved into an elegant court known as Square d'Orléans, where Alkan had been living for some time.

Originally a single residence, the enormous building had been converted by an English architect into eight brick-built blocks of flats giving on to a court with a fenced garden. Tentatively called Cite d'Orléans or Cour d'Orléans, it eventually became known by the English name "Square" d'Orléans. It was a fashionable colony of successful artists who included, at various times, Kalkbrenner, Marmontel and Zimmerman. George Sand rented flat No.5 of a certain block; Chopin flat No.9, while Alkan had long been living in flat No.10 of that block. George Sand later described how many of the residents, all busy artists, would take it in turn to cook one big meal a day for those who wanted to chip in, to save time and work. Alkan kept aloof from these communal feedings. His friendship with his new next-door neighbour neither progressed nor receded, and he still preferred to communicate via notes rather than visits. Thus, one Monday in 1843, he pushed a note under Chopin's door reading as follows:

"I am going to put you in a quandary, dear Chopin, because I am going to ask you something which will be as difficult to accept as to refuse. Still I cannot help asking you. I should like to know if you would play with me the Adagio and Finale of Beethoven's Symphony in A [7th] at Erard's, Saturday evening, first of March. It is the same arrangement for 8 hands we played five or six years ago at Pape's [Pape was piano maker who, like Pleyel and Erard, had a recital room]. This year I am going to offer the two other parts to Pixis [1788-1874] and Zimmerman, if it is all right with you. If you do not want to play there is no need to start explaining when I next call on you. Just slip a note under my door with a Yes or No. Until then, and after, ever yours, C.V. Alkan."

Chopin declined, probably because he no longer had the stamina demanded by an Alkan performance. It is unlikely though that he gave his answer in the manner suggested.

It is well worth mentioning here that while Alkan admired Chopin's music and was most knowledgeable about it - viz his inclusion of the latter's compositions in his concert series of the 1870's - it cannot be taken for granted that Chopin felt the same about Alkan's. He rarely had a kind word for fellow pianists/composers however charming he was in his direct contacts with them. What he did have in common with Alkan was a profound dislike for Liszt's piano works.

In 1847 the long George Sand-Chopin liaison came to an end with much bitterness on either side. Alone in his Square d'Orléans flat after she had permanently moved back to her ancestral home at Nohant, Chopin badly needed someone to take his mind off things; who better than an uninvolved next-door neighbour who, like himself, spent the day giving piano lessons and was uncommitted in the evening? To his family in Warsaw he wrote on 28 March of that year: "Yesterday ... I went with Alkan to see Arnal [one of the leading actors of the day] at the Vaudeville." The way he mentioned Alkan indicated that the family knew the name well. Chopin's sister Louisa may even have met him during her visit to Paris a few years earlier.

In April 1848 Chopin arrived in London, not to escape the aftermath of the February Revolution as complacently reported by the English press, but to put into effect a British tour he had been planning since the previous December. To his closest friends - the Polish Count Grzymala, Gutmann and the cellist Franchomme - he wrote frequently and lovingly. To another friend he mentioned he had also written to Alkan. Unfortunately for posterity Alkan was no great keeper of letters received so there is no knowing what the content or tone were. No reply is known either. In November a terminally ill Chopin returned to Paris and the following summer, to escape the cholera epidemic, was moved from Square d'Orléans to the outskirts of the capital. The drive to his new home was too small to accommodate all the carriages of anxious friends who drove out to visit and offer help. Later he was moved back to Paris to Place Vendôme. There is no indication that Alkan called or wrote once Chopin had ceased to be a neighbour.

A few days after Chopin's death (17 October 1849) Count Grzymala wrote to a mutual friend that just before the end the patient had rallied enough to say that he wished his unfinished MSS burnt "except the beginning of a piano-playing method which I leave to Alkan and Reber, who may find some use for it." This deathbed wish is puzzling. Reber (1807 - 1880) was not a friend; what is more, he was best known as an instrument composer who during Chopin's lifetime had composed only six piano pieces. The coupling

of his name with Alkan's suggests that the motive behind the request was not grateful friendship, but a dying man's attempt to save from oblivion some fragmentary jottings which he had grandly entitled *Méthode des Méthodes*. In the event they went to his sister Louisa and, after several changing of hands found their way to London, where they were acquired by Alfred Cortot.

Alkan probably did not hear of the deathbed bequest any more than Reber did. Presumably he attended the funeral, but he was not among the pall bearers nor did his name feature among those who subscribed to a Chopin monument. It would appear that sometime in 1848, while Chopin was still in Britain, Alkan had begun to distance himself from him so as not to give offence to George Sand, whose help he was seeking.

To understand this unexpected development one should remember that after the collapse of the Chopin-Sand liaison on a note of bitterness and hurt, their mutual friends split into two irreconcilable coterie denouncing one lover or the other as callous and ungrateful. It would have been very difficult indeed to continue to befriend both. Now in 1848 Alkan's fervent ambition was to succeed Zimmerman as Head of the Piano Department of the Paris Conservatoire. He needed influential friends to pull strings and his thoughts turned to Mme Sand, his one-time neighbour at Square d'Orléans and the *châtelaine* of Nohant, whom he remembered as a generous and gracious lady.

George Sand did not disappoint. She threw herself wholeheartedly into the campaign and in August 1848 penned a warm letter of recommendation to Charles Blanc (1813-1882), Director of the Department of Fine Arts, which she posted to Alkan to read and forward. From then on Alkan was bound to be circumspect. It was not difficult. Chopin was away in Britain and when he returned he was too ill to question the absences of an eccentric friend who, unlike Gutmann or Franck, had never been an intimate.

As it happened Mme Sand's intervention was of no avail. Charles Blanc never answered. He was more preoccupied with the fate of his elder brother the politician Louis Blanc (1811-1882) whose life was in danger, than with a professorial appointment. Long afterwards, when Alkan had lost, George Sand chided both brothers. To Louis Blanc the politician, who had briefly been her lover, she wrote on 5 April 1849: "I wrote to your brother a few months ago to ask him to do something just He preferred to do something that was not, and did not even answer me." To Charles Blanc the Director of the Department of Fine Arts she wrote on 24 June 1849: "Cher ami, you are right, I was very annoyed with you, particularly because of your silence."

Once the Alkan-Sand goodwill was established it continued to flourish. Now it was Mme Sand's turn to ask a favour. She had dramatised her rural novel 'Francois le Champi' and sent Alkan complimentary tickets for the premiere at the Paris Odeon, which she wanted him to offer to well-known musicians from whom she had been alienated since the break-up with Chopin. Alkan was enchanted. "This morning," he wrote back on 23 November 1849, "when I received your note I no longer felt at odds with mankind. I went out immediately to invite Franck and Gutmann, but they couldn't make it. I also sent word to M. Pleyel." The distinguished Sand scholar Georges Lubin asks in a discrete footnote: "Couldn't? Or wouldn't? With Chopin hardly cold in his grave"

But Alkan had transferred his allegiance to George Sand and Chopin's recent death and belated funeral were no impediments. Late that night, after the performance was over, he added: "Thank you for thinking of me; and thank you even more for the pleasure the play gave me. I'll see it again and try to take those whom I care for. It has something which makes me feel a better man; something which only great souls like yours can make me feel."

The courteous correspondence between Paris and Nohant continued. It coincided with the great blossoming out of George Sand the novelist as a playwright and Alkan, who admired her work, was not shy of asking for complimentary tickets for first night. On 15th February 1852 he wrote to ask for a complimentary ticket for the premiere of her latest

play 'Le Mariage de Victorine' which was due to open at the Paris Gymnase. "But I want to hear directly from you," he humorously added, "not from that large châtelaine pouch of yours." She used to come up fairly often, so one day he tried to return the compliment. "My dear excellent lady," he wrote on 10 April 1853, "if by chance you should be in Paris and if, while there, you should come to my 'petite soirée' on the 23rd, I would consider it a great honour and an even greater pleasure. C.V. Alkan the Elder."

It was a far cry from the youthful scribbled notes to Chopin. It was all graciousness and respect, as befitted a distinguished if frustrated composer and the foremost lady novelist of the day. George Sand's diary however has no entry suggesting that she ever heard Alkan play. By the late 1850's their correspondence had petered out.

END

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