

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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It is a good feeling to be producing a bulletin quite soon after the previous one. It will be relatively short because its main purpose is to give as much notice as possible of the meeting with Ronald Smith on Wednesday 18th November, in the Royal Academy of Music from 7 to 9 p.m.; full details follow later. It will be a return to our former practice of holding a single evening meeting. Obviously it will be harder for members outside London to justify the journey, and I apologise to them. We still intend to hold another all-day meeting like the first two "Alkan Days" in 1994 and 1996. However, this illustrated talk by our President promises to be particularly fascinating, and I do hope that many of you will be able to give your support.

Mrs Jean Bartholomew: Many of our long-standing members will be sorry to hear that Jean died in January this year. She was one of our first members, and was elected on to the committee at the very first A.G.M. in 1978. She then took over as Secretary from our founder and Vice-President Dr John White in 1982, and continued until she moved out of London in 1984. She was an ideal secretary, being a professional linguist as well as an accomplished pianist who played at some of our early meetings. As a close friend of Dr White's family, she worked closely with him and they ran an excellent organisation.

To give an idea of Jean's active participation in all aspects of the Society, these are some of the events she not only helped to organise but also to which she contributed in full measure: In March 1979, she played the Benedictus Op. 54 for pedal-piano (the first performance our President had ever heard) and two of José Vianna da Motta's 4-hand arrangements of the Grandes Préludes for pedal-piano, with John White providing the third hand for the Benedictus and the fourth for the Préludes. Later that year, having spent a sabbatical term in Germany, she gave a talk, illustrated at the piano, about Hans von Bülow's important essay on Alkan's Op. 35 major-key Etudes. Her translation of the article is in our library in the Guildhall School of Music. In May of the following year, she and John White played the Three Marches for piano duet Op. 40, as a prelude to Ronald Smith's performances of the first March from Op. 37, a "mystery march" which turned out to be an Alkanesque piece by Schubert, and the Symphony for solo piano. She also took part that September in the "Evening with Alkan's Trente Chants", in which four members spoke about the first four suites and played two pieces in full, after which Stephanie McCallum played the final suite in its entirety; she later recorded the suite in Australia. Jean played the *Hymne* and *Procession-Nocturne* from the second suite, Op. 38b, and was particularly enthusiastic in discussing the very French character of the pieces.

After John White became more frail and moved to stay with his family, he and Jean were once again near neighbours in Buckinghamshire. Brian Doyle and I, the last two Secretaries, saw Jean at John's funeral and she looked extremely well, so the news of her death came as a shock to both of us. We send our sympathy to her husband and family.

I should also record here, rather late, that our French honorary member Georges Beck died some two years ago. He edited "le pupitre" collection of works by C. Alkan, re-engraved and with a penetrating commentary, at a time when his scores were still difficult to find. Bernard Ringeissen's first Alkan recording for Harmonia Mundi in 1977 (later issued on compact disc), including the *Sonatine* and *Scherzo diabolico*, contained most of the pieces in that collection.

New recordings: Since the last Bulletin, the new CD from Huseyin Sermet has been released in Britain on Auvidis-Valois V 4808. My copy reached Salisbury just as I was beginning to type the Bulletin and a detailed review follows.

Our ever-alert member in Norway, Bard Dahle, has spotted two others with some Alkan pieces: "A Celebration of Piano Music from Castle Howard", performed by Anthony Goldstone, contains 23 short pieces from Beethoven's *Albumblatt*, otherwise known as *Fur Elise*, to a Scriabin Etude, and includes the Prelude in G flat major, Op. 31 No.13, "I slept but my heart was awake". This is on Amphion Recordings PHI CD 123 (1993) and was recorded in February 1993. Anthony Goldstone plays on the two Symposium CDs nos. 1037 and 1062. On the former he plays, with Caroline Clemmow, "Virtuoso Variations for piano Duet" including Alkan's *Don Giovanni* Fantasy (still the only *good* recording, discounting Nakamura and his Doppelganger). On 1062, the "Alkan Symposium", the same partners play the *Bombardo-Carillon*, originally for four feet, and Goldstone is the soloist in the second *Concerto da Camera*.

The other recording is of "Highlights of the 1995 Scottish International Piano Competition" on Olympia, but information is incomplete and I would be grateful if anyone can supply details. Bard thinks that its number is OCD 020 and that it includes the *Allegro barbaro* from Op. 35 played possibly by (?) Chang. He also tells me that the disc is already deleted!

There will be news at the November 18th meeting of the progress towards an APR release of the chamber music recorded in 1990 by Ronald Smith and partners.

The new Alkan album by Huseyin Sermet, with Jean-Claude Pennetier: I had considerable pleasure reviewing this new release, because it gave me an excuse to compare it with some good performances of the same pieces. The shrink-wrapping came with a proud sticker proclaiming "Première Mondiale / World Premiere", but as all the pieces have been recorded at least once before, I am not sure to what they are referring. However, to adopt a style used in the British satirical magazine "Private Eye", here is a list of the good things about the album:

1. Like the two earlier Alkan albums in the series (V 4659 with solo works and V 4680 with the cello *Sonate de Concert* and violin *Grand Duo Concertant*), the presentation is handsome. There is a photograph of Alkan on the front cover of the booklet and an apt quotation on the back -this time from Marmontel (1878):

"Un grand maitre, un homme de foi profonde dont l'oeuvre considerable brille de beautés de premier ordre." [A great master, a man of deep faith whose extensive work shines with beauties of the highest order.]

2. There is a good essay by Brigitte François-Sappey, the editor of the French Alkan symposium published by Fayard - though there are mistakes in the English translation, mentioned later.

3. There are very few unintentional wrong notes in the performances.

4. The sound is acceptable, recorded in the resonant acoustic of the Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud near Saumur, the French cultural centre of the West.

5. Er. ..that's it.

Let us make it clear from the start that we do know how Alkan wanted his music to be played. The evidence is all there in the scores: a dynamic range from *ppp* to *fff*; at least three kinds of detached notes - wedges, staccato dots, dots within phrase-marks; different accents - *rf sf > ^*; crescendo and diminuendo 'hairpins', including 'dim.' hairpins within a crescendo passage. There are often metronome marks, which give a guide at worst, if you believe Georges Beck that they are all too fast; or a precise instruction if you believe Lewenthal that you are too slow, as well as several pianists who ~ play at Alkan's indicated speed. As for less quantitative tempo indications, a look at the last movement of the Symphony soon shows that when Alkan writes *Presto*, he really means it. Even an ambiguous *Andantino*, which can be slower or faster than *Andante*, is clear enough from the metronome mark for the second movement in the same work. We know enough about Alkan's influences from Bach and Mendelssohn, and reports of his playing, to know that he favoured the *style severe* with little or no *rubato*. His *sostenuto* means just that, with no Brahmsian slower tempo. In short, one can be objective about an interpretation while still allowing some leeway for personal taste. So how does Sermet measure up to others' standards?

Allegro barbaro, Op. 35 no.5: The title says it all, the metronome mark (minim = 100) is clear; Ronald Smith in both his recordings (Oryx on period pianos, EMI and now APR on a modern Steinway), Jack Gibbons (ASV) and Stephanie McCallum (Tall Poppies) all play it at minim 96-100, and within a "gnat's crotchet"(*) of 2 min 30 sec. Ringeissen is slowest but at least has character. Sermet takes just over three minutes, but worse still, the episodes are unsteady in tempo, initial dotted crotchets lengthened. Not for the last time in this album, I was reminded of an unwise decision to go fishing on a small boat off the Scottish coast: sailing out of Montrose harbour in the teeth of the wind was bracing, but once we dropped anchor in the heavy swell for several hours. ..my idea of hell on earth (or water). Sermet slows further from 88 to 80 for the last two sections: the triplets sound like slow practice and the final statement of the theme is turgid where it should take off like a rocket. Needless to say, he also makes the same mistake as Ringeissen in ignoring Alkan's very careful rests of different lengths between sections - first two crotchets, then four, then three - and thus destroys the rhythmical ambiguity. Not a good start!

(*)The reference is to a British radio show, *I'm sorry I haven't a clue* ("the antidote to panel games"), in which contestants attempt to continue a song without accompaniment and end in synchrony when it returns.

Trois petites fantaisies, Op. 41: Why are these fine pieces played and recorded so little? The only complete sets are on Ronald Smith's APR set and the Belgian recording by Daniel Capelletti. They are very appealing, and do not have the transcendental difficulties or length of the Op. 39 Etudes. Even I have played them in public, though I cannot vouch for the accuracy of the coda of no.3... Let us be grateful for the playing time of the LP, which allowed Ronald Smith to include these with his Op. 39 recording of 1977. According to Fran~ois-Sappey, they are dedicated to Liszt. Can anyone confirm this? My score has no dedication, and I can find no reference in the literature. On Pierre Reach's LP recording of No.2 (a fill-up to his first recording of the *Grande Sonate*), his notes state that they are dedicated "to L." and suggests that it might be Liszt. Perhaps this suggestion has insinuated itself into becoming fact. No metronome marks here, but clear tempo indications and character.

1. *Assez gravement*: Sermet takes a little longer than Smith or Capelletti (but his speed is acceptable. However, he ignores too many dynamic and other markings. The cantabile theme against the continuing rhythm does not really sing out. The final "Debussyian" page is well played, with a true *ppp* in the chords resonating through several octaves.

2. Andantino: Sermet chooses the slower option, taking a minute longer than Smith and two-and-a-half longer than Capelletti or Réach. In spite of this, his rhythm is sloppy in the extreme, the left-hand semiquaver chords just before the beat becoming limp triplets or worse. This is a fault with Capelletti, but it results from his excessive speed. Réach gives an impressive demonstration of technique but only Ronald Smith attains the true character of the piece. His comparison with an "unruly child" with "sly ways, wry humour and 'deformed gait'" is a good one. As I think Ronald has also said, there is a parallel with the whimsical first movement of Beethoven's G major sonata Op.

31 No.1. In the semiquaver passage with hands two octaves apart, Sermet observes the frequent *sf* marks well, but his basic dynamic is rather loud for a single *forte*, and he is unable to increase to the *ff* for the last five beats.

3. Presto: Now the depression really sets in. We should surely be in the world of Prokofiev's Toccata. A "Presto" taking seven-and-a-half minutes compared with Ronald Smith's just under six? Capelletti is also over a minute faster than Sermet. Right at the start we have a mis-reading of Alkan's text. If he had written the triplets as grace-notes, one might argue whether they should be before or on the beat. But he has written them as semiquavers, the first with a *sf*. To play them as upbeats removes all the dissonance with the quaver ostinato in the bass, as well as breaking the rhythm. The subsequent octave passage is written in a very "user-friendly" way by Alkan, with very few double-octaves or really hazardous leaps, but Sermet plays safe and boring. Later, where the momentum should really build with the long passage of buzzing semitonal right-hand semiquavers, progress is still painful. Then suddenly he leaps into action in the "hunting-style" 6-8 passage. At last an exciting speed, and he plays it well. But what has really happened? Alkan marks "Même mouvement" at the time-change, and just to make sure, adds a footnote: "C'est à dire: Mesure pour Mesure, mais non pas Temps pour Temps." In other words, the dotted crotchet of the 6-8 is clearly intended to be equivalent to the minim of the 4-4. Sermet has instead doubled the correct speed! However, he soon makes up for it at the change back to 4-4: *Même mouvement* is back to his laborious version of Presto. The coda, *Un pochettino piu mosso*, is instead somewhat slower still, and really does sound like my slow practice. At least the notes are right, but where is the excitement and sense of danger? It is depressing in the extreme, and the final tame apology for Alkan's signature *fff* chords at the extreme ends of the keyboard comes all too late.

Three Preludes from Op. 31, Nos. 14, 15 and 17: Looking in detail at just three pieces from the set of 25, I have begun to see why our French colleagues have disliked Olli Mustonen's "Gramophone" award-winning Decca recording, coupled with Shostakovich's 24 Preludes, Op. 34. Laurent Martin may be served less well by the piano sound on his Marco Polo set, but perhaps I have been misled by his overall timing of 67 minutes against Mustonen's 47. In these three particular pieces, Mustonen does sound brutally fast, where Martin's speed seems almost ideal, particularly in Nos. 14 and 17. As might be expected from the President of the Société Alkan, he also shows total respect for the composer's dynamics and phrasing.

No.14 -Rapidement: The timings show the difference: Mustonen 2.05, Martin 2.58, Sermet 3.47 - a strange idea of "rapidement". This is a rather good piece I did not know very well, in which Alkan works one of his favourite tricks towards the end. The first theme is a simple tune with accompaniment in B minor. The major-key "trio", with bold chords contrasting well with the first section, uses a device that would lose most of a student's marks in a harmony examination: the melody runs in parallel octaves at the top and bottom -but the effect works well here. The first theme returns briefly in the treble register as before, and is then combined ingeniously with the trio theme in the bass. Sermet is better at making both themes clear here, where Martin is somewhat understated - but Sermet's painfully slow tempo casts its shadow over his best efforts.

No.15 -Dans le genre gothique; Assez vite et avec beaucoup de grace: The time-signature (C) and the phrasing (beginning on the half-bar) clearly show this to be a Gavotte. Ronald Smith has recorded it twice, on Oryx and EMI (the digital recording which only appeared on an Arabesque CD), the performances differing by only one second in one-and-a-half minutes. His performance is witty, has the dance character needed, and is neat and perfectly poised. Mustonen is almost as brisk, but his clumsy and inconsistent bulges on the dynamic 'hairpins' ruin the piece. Martin is some 40 seconds slower but elegant and full of character. Sermet takes three-and-a-half minutes -over twice as slow as Smith! Enough said, I think.

No.17 -Reve d'Amour; Assez vite: Back to the stopwatch first –Mustonen 1.32, Martin 2.42, Sermet 3.32. Evidently a long dream or a reluctant *inamorata* for Mr Sermet. This is a tricky little piece with obstinate rhythms that need careful handling to avoid monotony. Mustonen is much too fast to respond to the acceleration towards the end, or to play softly enough when required. The first section, with slurred chords, is marked "très doux et très soutenu" and Martin is again the best player. The middle section is particularly tricky, with single melody notes on the beat and four-note chords on the half-beat which can easily pull the natural stress out of line. At least Sermet shows here that he has learnt the meaning of 1st and 2nd time bars! You may remember his nonsensical howler in the G flat Prelude -*J'étais endormie, mais mon coeur veillait* -on his first album, in which he played both the half-bar for the repeat (without repeating the section) and the whole bar for continuing to the end, with disastrous effect. The third section, with its limping "Habanera" rhythm, is played "d'élicieusement" only by Martin. It is also marked to be played using both pedals, and I should have mentioned in my preamble Alkan's scrupulous pedal indications in his scores too. They too are ignored far too often by Sermet. The final "palpitant" section, marked to be played a little more slowly and very quietly, is again best in Martin's performance.

Three Marches for piano four hands, Op. 40: At last I can report that these are quite well played, and certainly by far the best item on the disc. Sermet is partnered with Jean-Claude Pennetier, and the need for good ensemble gets rid of any nonsense of rubato. Once again, these are pieces which deserve much wider currency: witty, lively, never taking themselves seriously, and easy enough to attract players while remaining enough of a technical challenge for professionals not to scorn them. I think they would be ideal for a future Blackheath piano festival (see report of this year's later) and have suggested them in a letter to its director Stephen Coombs. The only rival recording is by Beyer and Dagul on their interesting "Four Hands" album of French duets .

At this point I should mention three careless mistakes in the English translation. The keys of the 3 Fantasies are all given as "minor" , contrary to the French text in which they are correctly given as A minor, G major and B flat major. The third mistake is in the section on these Marches: "entre" is translated as " after" , implying that Alkan's marches were written after those of Schubert and Mahler instead of between them! Although Alkan's dates are given in the notes, those of the other two composers are not, and in view of Alkan's futuristic tendencies in some of his music, this kind of mistake should be discouraged.

No.1 in A flat: Neither performance really gets near Alkan's metronome mark of crotchet = 152: the British duo are more like 135 and the French pairing. slower still, taking over a minute longer (8.42 against 7.33). The French team also ignore many of Alkan's copious markings, particularly different kinds of staccato. Their approach throughout the set tends to tone down contrasting dynamics: "toujours la politesse" seems to be the order of the day. However, their teamwork is good and the performance has plenty of life.

No.2 in C minor/E flat major: The twelve bar "Préambule" is clearly marked with *pedal* to be held throughout. Sermet and Pennetier timidly ignore this completely, giving far too dry a sound. However, their tempo is much closer to

Alkan's *Allegro moderato* (crotchet = 120), where Beyer and Dagul are only three-quarters of this and slower still in the trio. There is some elegant playing in the Trio and neat fingerwork in the quick notes later on. All the same, the sf chords on occasional half-beats are nothing like as violent as they could be. There are a few smudges from the *primo* player on the page before the Trio which should have been re-taken. And in the seventh bar of the penultimate section (before the Coda: p.14, 1.2, b.3, 3rd beat) the *secondo* player plays D flats instead of D in the octave "twiddle" (mordant) -down a tone instead of a semitone -but corrects it on the repeat. At least that proves that they really did play the section twice; I had always wondered whether a single take was simply looped back in such passages.

No.3 in B flat: All three Marches are good pieces, but in some ways this can be the funniest of all. The limping out-of-step bass line recalls the village bassoonist in the Scherzo of Beethoven's "Pastoral". Sermet and Pennetier are closer to Alkan's speed, a *Moderement* which poses no technical challenge, than Beyer and Dagul, but both tempi seem adequate. The French team makes more of the sf marking on some of the second beats. The visual effect of the *primo* player's crossed hands at the end of the first section is lost here, of course: I can just about see Alkan's reason for writing it that way, but it is like trying to ride a bicycle with crossed hands (don't try this, please!). The trio really brings in the belly-laughs, with the bass thumps against the expressive treble melody suggesting an over-enthusiastic tuba player in the town band -or perhaps even an ophicleidist, now that we are hearing Berlioz on period instruments. These can reduce an audience to helpless mirth, but not here in this rather refined performance. However, the legato pair of bass notes at the halfway and end cadences -a cellist elbowing his clumsy colleague out of the way, perhaps -are deliciously phrased. The over-grandiose ending is well played and the piece winds down to the usual quiet ending and Alkanesque final chord in fine style.

And- er, that's it. 55 minutes of music, as on the second disc in the series (Sermet's first solo album had even less, at 52 1/2), would be short measure on many LPs, let alone CDs which can hold nearly 80 minutes. On the other hand, would one really want any more music played to this standard, in the solo works at least? The choice of Alkan's photograph with his back turned is all too appropriate, I fear.

Incidentally, while I was in the middle of typing this, the latest Bulletin came from our French counterpart. It is rather comforting to see how closely our views agree this time -even down to the same "*mal de mer*" metaphor !

Record reviews in the music press: I have considered the Valois release in some detail -excessive detail -because as a French disc it is unlikely to receive more than a brief mention in the U.K. There has been one French review by Xavier Lacavalerie in *Télérama* of August 1998. Most of his article is about Alkan rather than the performance - ". a phenomenon, a kind of French Liszt, the model for pianist-composers sacrificing all for their art." He describes the performance as "époustouflante" , which unfortunately is not in my dictionary (I will add a translation later if I find one), and "with an amazing sense of rhythm, colour and contrasting moods. A performance so obvious [? évidente] that the editor, without doubt under the charm of the unreal [irrélles] sonorities of the Yamaha piano, the grand pedal effects, the leaps [chevauchées, literally (horse) rides or overlaps] from one end to the other of the keyboard, has neglected to give us the minimum biographical information about the performers! But it is true that their transcendental interpretation is worth all the long discourses..." My colleague M. Luguenot dismisses this article in no uncertain terms: as he says, Lacavalerie's ill-informed views include another outing for the legend of Alkan's death by bookcase. Like our Radio 3 and other media (even the *Independent* now devotes almost all its CD reviews to pop music), the classical reviews in *Télérama* have declined in

quality under the current editor. He mentions another critic, the "inéarrable" [more library work needed here!] Christian Lorandin," already the prize-winner for the most risible article about Alkan (*Piano*, no.8, 1994-95), who claims in an article on Domenico Cimarosa that baroque suites contained polkas (*Piano*, no.12, 1998-99, p.90). So goes the competence of our critics...

Two releases mentioned in the previous Bulletin have been reviewed. Marc-André Hamelin's "The Composer-Pianists" , containing two Esquisses and a Haydn arrangement (Hyperion CDA 67050), has been highly praised by Bryce Morrison (a Ronald Smith pupil) in the October (or perhaps September) *Gramophone* and by Ates Orga in the Summer 1998 *International Piano Quarterly*; and also dismissed very coolly by Adrian Jack in the September *BBC Music Magazine*.

[A small correction here: in the last Bulletin I said I had not heard of Alkan's transcription of the slow movement of Haydn's 94th symphony, the "Surprise" .I think in fact it is one of the Conservatoire arrangements, "Souvenirs des concerts du Conservatoire" , either given erroneously as Symphony No.36 in Ronald Smith's "Alkan Vol. 2: The Music", or omitted altogether. A correction for the new edition? Frangois Luguenot of the Société Alkan supplied the score for Hamelin's recording. My only excuse is that someone - he knows who he is! -has borrowed my copy of the French book on indefinite loan and I was unable to check the details there.]

Morrison is extremely enthusiastic about the whole disc -"everything is of the most absorbing interest; everything is impeccably performed." Of the Alkan pieces, he says that Hamelin registers "every sly modulation of *Le premier billet-doux*. .." .And "Then there is Alkan's sinister absorption of the *Andante* from Haydn's *Surprise* Symphony (loyal to Haydn, Alkan's teasing perversity also makes such music peculiarly his own);..". He also praises Francis Pott's "brilliantly illuminating notes" .Orga finds the selection slightly odd ("...randomly, no d'Albert, Grainger or Dohnanyi..."). Knowing Hamelin's dislike of his reputation as merely a virtuoso who plays obscure music, he would also probably object to being described as one of the "high-wire trapeze artists of the ivories". However, Orga liked what he heard. "Classically bound is the 1847 Alkan/Haydn *partition* -none of his Beethoven Third Concerto cadenza excesses here;.." [You may recall Orga's programme notes on the Beethoven transcription for Hamelin's Wigmore Hall series, also with his Hyperion recording, which made it into "Pseuds' Corner" in *Private Eye*.] He approves of Hamelin's own studies, "paying homage to Alkan and Godowsky...a late twentieth-century kind of Stevensonian Formula One neo-romantic bravura". There is plenty more purple prose where that came from, but he concludes that the " left-hand work in *La Danza*" [the Rossini transcription] " is probably the highlight of the album. .." .

Adrian Jack is far less impressed. "Scriabin and Rachmaninov leap out at you as the real composers.. .It's hard to shed tears over the comparative neglect of Alkan, Busoni, Medtner or Sorabji...Let the trainspotters collect their numbers, but don't let's pretend they are mainline expresses." He accuses the pianist of being "emotionally lightweight and of limited imagination - how boring he makes Alkan's overblown arrangement of the *Andante* second movement of Haydn's *Surprise* Symphony, for instance; it makes you thirst for the freshness of the original." He even criticises the "thin, percussive sound, lacking body under pressure.". I wonder what Mr Jack now thinks of Hamelin's recent four-CD release on Hyperion of all Medtner's piano sonatas -for me and many others this is fine music, immaculately played, superbly recorded, and even at this stage surely a hot tip for next year's "Gramophone" awards. Let us assume that he had a bad day and go with Morrison and Orga.

I have just found out that Bryce Morrison is preparing a review of Huseyin Sermet's album for the *Gramophone*. I withdraw my earlier comment expecting little or no coverage in the U.K. Mr Morrison's review will be much shorter than mine, but from what he said to me, I think his opinion will be just as unfavourable.

The 1996 Husum discs (Danacord DACOCD 479) have been reviewed in the *International Piano Quarterly* of Winter 1997 and the *Gramophone* of December 1997. They have no Alkan and were described at length in the last Bulletin. However, I hope readers will forgive some quotation from the articles. In the latter journal, Tim Parry was particularly impressed with Piers Lane: "a piquant guide through the gossamer textures of Siegfried Karg-Elert's

2delightful *Filigran* and Frank Bridge's deceptively simple *Fragrance*. He ended his recital with Grainger's *In Dahomey*, a ragtime piece of outlandish technical energy, although he is outdone by the breathtaking aplomb of Marc-André Hamelin's unforgettable recording (Hyperion, 1/97)." He also enjoyed Hamelin in the pieces by Radamés Gnattali: "His articulation of Gnattali's dance rhythms and jazz influenced passages portrays a wonderfully animated sense of enjoyment. Hamish Milne, another regular visitor to the festival, is suitably brooding and mysterious in a slow and fairly long Prelude by Alexander Goedicke. " He liked Igor Zhukov in Scriabin's 24 Preludes, "technically fallible but (far more importantly) intensely dramatic and exciting." In Ravel's *La Valse*, Zhukov is "stoking some truly infernal sonorities, complete with a bass note-cluster played, quite literally, with a clenched fist." (Good to see that he has read the booklet notes.) He has a few reservations about the second disc of "Pastiche and Parody" , particularly for listeners who do not understand German (though there is a full translation in the booklet), but he concludes that the "generally excellent, and impressively recorded, piano playing on the first disc should, nevertheless, be sufficient to appeal to piano lovers and inveterate repertoire explorers."

To my pleasant surprise, Bryce Morrison in *IPQ* gave pride of place to the Moszkowski brothers' *Faust* parody on the second disc, *Anton Notenquetscher am Klavier*, describing the performance of Raimund Tabor and Peter Froundjian as "hilarious.. ..Here, the potential student of philosophy, theology, and so on, is replaced by another, longing for fame as a concert pianist. Mischievously encouraged by Mephistopheles and his magic powers, he struggles through a transcription of a popular song, before presenting it in the styles of Czerny, Clementi, Bach, Brahms, Weber, Chopin (where it threatens to turn into the A flat *Polonaise*), Anton Rubinstein and Liszt (a grand finale *Hungarian Rhapsody*) .Mephistopheles' s fiendish delight in his victim' s naivety ("ten minutes ago a student, and now a perfect Chopin player!") are admirably caught by Tabor and Froundjian, and the audience are reduced to gales of laughter.

More parody is provided by Honegger's stylish *Souvenir de Cho in*, and rather less convincingly by d'Indy's *Cesar Franck* (from his *Pour les enfants de tout age*, Op. 74)." He also liked Kathryn Stott's Poulenc (two *Intermezzi*) . "Equally attuned to vivacity and Poulenc's elusive *tendresse*, she is altogether more idiomatic and authentic than Igor Zhukov, whose idiosyncratic way with Ravel's *La valse* will cause raised eyebrows, particularly in French circles. Yet this arch-romantic pianist is so powerfully aware of Ravel's decadence, his sense of a society at the point of disintegration, that you are left mesmerized by his eye-to-eye confrontation." He finds some of the Scriabin Preludes somewhat "heavy-handed" , but "his *appassionato* in No. 20 is all-embracing, his rubato and colour of exceptional range and character." Hamelin, Milne and Lane are all favourably commented upon. In conclusion, "all lovers of piano music (and in this instance musical drama) will want to add this to their rapidly growing collection of Husum favourites, and the sheer vitality and stylishness of all these performances will surely help everyone to forget the less than state-of-the-art recorded sound."

Danacord records are distributed in the U.K. by Discovery. They can take some time to arrive, but in case of difficulty one can always contact the firm directly at Norregade 22, DK-1165 Copenhagen, Denmark; tel: +4533151716 fax: +4533121514 e-mail: daco@danacord.dk and website: www.danacord.dk - the producer of the discs is Jesper Buhl.

New recordings: Soon we hope that pride of place will be given to Ronald Smith's release on APR of Alkan's chamber music. Please keep reading on to reach the details of his talk on November 18th. For the moment, I could mention that the October *Gramophone* contained an advertisement from Elan Records which included a 2-CD release of some more Raymond Lewenthal recordings (Elan CD 82284). Telephone calls to Discovery (they had received so many that they already knew the number by heart) revealed no further details than those in the advertisement, but reading between the lines, one can guess that the discs will probably contain concertos by Henselt, Anton Rubinstein (No.4), Liszt's *Totentanz* and Scharwenka (one movement only, say my expert advisers), plus solo works by Alkan, presumably from Lewenthal's "Grotesqueries" disc which included the *Sonatine* and *Funeral March on the Death of a Parrot*. If there is room to include a decent selection of Alkan pieces, this should be worth seeking out; the first Elan release of Lewenthal recordings (Elan CD 82276), with his entire first Alkan LP and the *Hexameron* variations by Liszt and others, was excellently transferred to CD and well documented too.

The end of June was marked by the usual round of music exams, the end of choir rehearsals till September, the Wimbledon tennis championships, and the arrival of a tape from Husum for preparation of programme notes for the 1997 CD. For once there was time for some proof-reading of my essay and checking of the German translation (for musical rather than linguistic errors), and the fax lines between Salisbury, Husum, Berlin and Copenhagen were kept busy. The two main works on the disc (Danacord DACOCD 489) are one-movement Sonatas by Anatoly Alexandrov (1918) and Pierre de Bréville (1923), played by Yuri Martinov and Marie-Catherine Girod respectively. The Alexandrov is something of a combination of Rachmaninov's keyboard style in the grand manner and a less extreme form of Scriabin's harmony within a firmly tonal framework. The de Bréville work favours a more sparse style typical of much French music of the period. The other works include Reynaldo Hahn's four "Portraits of Painters" (1894) inspired by Proust's poems on Cuypp, Potter, Van Dyck and Watteau, played by Jeffrey Swann, and two of Hermann Goetz's *Genrebilder* from 1876 played by the Canadian pianist (born in Vienna) Anton Kuerti, a real connoisseurs' musician featured in a recent *Classical Piano* magazine. Kathryn Stott is a player who always combines immaculate playing, every detail in the score treated with total respect, with inspired musicianship. She contributes Dohnanyi's *Pastorale*, based on a Hungarian Christmas song, and three late Preludes (1987) by Astor Piazzolla, whose tango-inspired pieces are currently much in favour with Gidon Kremer, Yo-Yo Ma and others. The selection of rarities is completed by two short waltzes for piano duet by the Dutch organist and composer Georg Hendrik Witte, dedicated to Brahms and played as an encore to Michael Struck's lecture-recital on Brahms's four-hand arrangements of his own music, aided by Ina Peeken. Less rare is the final item, the Liszt arrangement of Schubert's *Ave Maria*, played as an encore to Roberto Cappello's programme of Schubert/Liszt song transcriptions. That comprised the entire *Schwanengesang*, with fourteen numbers, and the complete set of twelve songs which Liszt chose from the twenty-four in *Winterreise*. It is intended to issue the whole recital on CD at a later date, as a companion to Cappello's sensational first Husum recital from 1993 (on the oddly-named "Artist Memory Club" label, AMCCD 93002-2), with works by Hummel, Pixis, Thalberg, Liszt and Strauss waltz transcriptions in the main programme. Whether the new set will, like the first, include every moment of the recital -applause, church bells, duck-calls from the castle moat, the audience leaving (these are designed to be easily programmed out if desired) -is yet to be revealed.

In an attempt to avoid the eternal problems of technical terms (musicians don't need them, non-musicians don't understand them) or references to keys (unnecessary for those with scores or absolute pitch, useless for those without), we have experimented with a few timing points in the text for the two longest pieces. Their accuracy to the nearest second cannot be guaranteed, since they were taken from the analogue tape and a stopwatch, rather than DAT or the disc. However, we hope that they may be useful in finding the way through unfamiliar works. One other trap: in addition, one cue was mis-typed in the original copy, went through all the proof stages, and is out by one minute. If anyone spots this, I shall be quite impressed, as well as rather pleased that the verbal description of the music at that point is so clear!

I try not to "plug" too many records by artists I have met, but will just mention one from Piers Lane which I think should be of interest: his complete Etudes by Saint-Saëns on Hyperion CDA 67037. Apart from some playing of great virtuosity on well-known party pieces like the *Etude en forme de valse*, one of the most notoriously difficult in the repertoire, there are some interesting parallels with Alkan's studies. The second piece on the disc, Op. 52 No.2 from 1877, is an exercise in independence of the fingers, in which a melody is passed through a repeated chord -exactly the same principle as Alkan's Op. 35 No.11 in B major from 1847. There are also six studies for the left hand alone, needless to say much shorter than Alkan's Op. 76 No.1. Some pieces are quite short, even slightly routine, finger-exercises, and there is a study in thirds very much derived from Chopin's Op. 25 No.6 in G sharp minor and in the same key. But there are also some extensive pieces including three Preludes and Fugues and a wonderful Toccata adapted from the 5th Concerto. It is not intended to be profound music, but often has great beauty and is consistently well played.

Concerts: Because of my hastily taken notes, I omitted one of Ronald Smith's concerts from the supplement to the last Bulletin, which was a lunchtime recital in the Fairfield Hall, Croydon, on 13th October. I have already given a Grovelling apology to our President and now offer it to our members. However, I hear that a large and enthusiastic audience came to hear his programme of Beethoven's *Appassionata*, the Chopin C minor Nocturne (Op. 48, No. 1) and his *Tarantella* and 4th *Ballade*, Liszt's 13th *Hungarian Rhapsody* and Alkan's *Les regrets de la nonnette*. Moreover, with the help of our Croydon committee member, he sold an impressive number of records after the recital. Ronald is shortly returning to the recording studio for a programme of Chopin and Beethoven, and then I hope he will award himself a good long break.

Two other concerts which took place just too early to be previewed were Carlo Grante's recital at the Wigmore Hall on 18th October and a concert with one of our younger new members, Michael Harvey, at St Lawrence Jewry in London the following evening. Carlo Grante gave the world premieres of Alistair Hinton's 4th Sonata, "Ballade", of 1978 and 6 *Preludi e Fughe* (1997) by his compatriot Paolo Tronçon, who dedicated the work to him. He also played nine of Sorabji's 100 *Transcendental Studies*. Kaikhosru Sorabji, as many members will know, wrote some important essays on Alkan in his books *Around MusIc* and *Mi contra Fa*, and for many epitomised the Alkanian tradition or the lone pianist-composer writing impossibly long and difficult works which nobody played. In Sorabji's case, that was partly because he banned all performance of his music for forty years after his own performance of his *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the longest piano composition ever written) was so badly received. Although he admired Busoni, one of the few pianists who admired and played Alkan at the time, his music seems to me to have little in common with Busoni's or Alkan's apart from its length and technical demands (there are unpublished compositions even longer than *OC*).

He eventually allowed first Yonty Solomon, then others, to perform his music, and John Ogdon recorded *oc* for Altarus Records: an account of the sessions, written by Alistair Hinton, is included with an Ogdon tribute in the Spring 1998 *IPQ*. Marc-Andre Hamelin has recorded the Sonata No.1, which lasts a mere 22 minutes, also for Altarus. Although some believe that Sorabji's ban ought to have become permanent, he has his supporters, and the Transcendental Studies are being edited for publication by a team of pianists in several countries, including Hamelin and our member in Sweden, John Fritzell. The organist Kevin Bowyer has already recorded one of his Organ Symphonies, lasting about two hours, in Salisbury Cathedral, where he also recorded his Alkan album for Nimbus (NI 5089), and is working on a performing edition of an even longer work.

Carlo played the Studies well. Most were quite short, each based on one technical aspect of piano playing, and several were quite attractive impressionistic pieces. Alistair Hinton is the curator of the Sorabji archive and he too is influenced by the Alkan/Medtner/Busoni romantic style - deeply unfashionable, of course, with the enthusiasts for "squeaky-gate" avant-garde contemporary music. His one-movement sonata was inspired by the four Chopin Ballades and their 6-8 rhythm, as well as Medtner's *Sonate-Ballade*, though the style was his own rather than imitation or parody. The sound was often powerful but always attractive, and certainly in Grante's interpretation had none of the ugly sonorities characteristic of some recent piano music. Troncon teaches at the Bolzano Academy of Music. His Preludes and Fugues took a modern look at an old form: some had minimalist features, others pointilliste; the first was entirely on white notes but still sounded new; some of the fugues were quite hard to follow. On the other hand, the fourth did draw on historical models. My favourite was the third, in which the middle pedal was used to sustain a chord of D on notes which were hardly ever played, but subtly resonated through the piece and became completely clear at the end.

Not surprisingly, the audience - including at least four members of the Alkan Society - was small but seemed totally committed to the performances, listening with a rapt concentration and silence which is all too rare in London concerts - no coughs, snapping spectacles, rustling sweet-papers or programmes here. Both composers were received enthusiastically after their pieces.

Michael Harvey, who is a pupil of Yonty Solomon - another reason for the lengthy account of a non-Alkan concert - played *Le Festin d'Esope*, the last of the Op. 39 minor-key Etudes, in his concert on 19th October. He was rather unhappy about the piano provided when I spoke to him, but I hope the piece went well in spite of that and was the audience-pleaser that it usually is. He is keen to learn more Alkan works and in true campaigning style, has already thrown out a challenge on an Internet site devoted to neglected composers. We await the response with interest.

The Husum festival of rarities took place as usual towards the end of August, with several excellent recitals, notably those from Marc-Andre Hamelin, Piers Lane, Leslie Howard and Boris Bloch (replacing the injured Charles Hopkins). Hamelin included all seven versions of Godowsky's reworking of Chopin's "Black Key" Etude, a choice typical for Husum - in Blackheath he also played seven, but based on different Chopin originals. He included some Medtner and - a real discovery - some beautiful pieces by the Russian composer George Catoire, a little like early Scriabin and with some luscious textures and melodies. Lastly came Reger's challenging Variations and Fugue on a theme of Bach, which can sound very thick and academic, but here were totally convincing. Piers Lane gave a typically generous programme with an impressive range - Scriabin, Busoni, Berlioz/Liszt (*L'idée fixe*, based on the *Symphonie*

Fantastique), Albeniz, Saint-Saëns and two transcriptions of sections from Delius operas (*Margot la Rouge* and *Irmelin*) made, surprisingly, by Ravel and Florent Schmitt when they needed the money. He and Hamelin both played six encores. Having been very slightly dismissive of Leslie Howard's Liszt recording marathon last time, I am now a total fan after his Husum recital and his indefatigable efforts at Blackheath only a week later. Although even he could not convince me that Rubinstein's 1st sonata is more than an impressive effort for a young composer, he played that and the Sibelius sonata with a relaxed virtuosity which was wonderful to behold. The second half, containing three large and rarely played Liszt works, included his own new edition of the *Fantasy on themes from Mozart's "Figaro" and "Don Giovanni"*, longer than Busoni's version but removing all his passages not in Liszt's manuscript and filling out sections only when justified. (This is now published by Editio Musica Budapest.) The *Grosses Konzertsolo* of 1850, almost a first attempt for the B minor Sonata, was another very unfamiliar piece which he played brilliantly. Speaking to him afterwards in Jacqueline's Cafe, the daily venue for informal post-concert discussions, I discovered that his range of interests is enormous - inevitably labelled at present as a Liszt specialist, he also collects Moszkowski scores, plays the organ, helps young musicians in African countries, and much more. Have we found the man to play Alkan's pedaler pieces at last? First find your working pedaler...

Boris Bloch and Oleg Marshev, the other late substitute for an indisposed pianist, inevitably had to include some less rare works in their programmes. Bloch included pieces by Borodin, Balakirev and Shostakovich, Liszt's 2nd Ballade and Bach's transcription of a Marcello oboe concerto - a tricky piece recorded, I think, by Glenn Gould. He ended with the Liszt version of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*, a less radical reworking than the one with orchestra which leaves much of Schubert's original untouched. Marshev played Rachmaninov's 2nd Sonata, which is as mainstream as they come, but his other pieces included Prokofiev's Op. 32 pieces, two of Emil von Sauer's concert studies (he is recording all 30 for Danacord, and the first album is already released), dances by Ginastera and Pabst's paraphrase on Tchaikowsky's *Sleeping Beauty*.

Two concerts, by pianists I will not name, were disappointing for me (and in one of the two, for everybody else) while in the opening recital Janina Fialkowska, obviously a fine player, was struggling with the piano in her Polish programme of Chopin, Szymanowski, Lutoslawski, Panufnik and Moszkowski. The usual Steinway technician Thomas Hübsch, a man of such skills that Alfred Brendel brought him to Britain for his recent recording sessions of the Schumann concerto, was for once away working at the Busoni competition - but to be fair, his replacement did manage to improve the action considerably for the rest of the week.

Our member from Brooklyn, Mark Morrison, crossed the Atlantic as usual for the festival, and the British count was swelled this year by no fewer than five newcomers: Mike Spring, producer at Hyperion Records and the man behind their essential Romantic Piano Concerto series (already up to Vol. 19), and Harriet Smith, editor of *IPQ* and deputy editor of *Gramophone*, came to several recitals, as did the British-born Prof. Neil McKelvie from New York (of whom more later). For Piers Lane's recital there were also Chris Wines, his producer at Radio 3 for "The Piano" series, and his pianist friend called, I think, Alison Taylor. Chris is doing his best to maintain standards on our music station while the managers press for better ratings at any cost, or rather lower cost. I understand that the "Piano" series has been well received by listeners, and will be extended to an hour when it returns in the spring. That should help to take care of the criticism in the last Bulletin of the rather rushed and shallow commentary forced on Piers at times.

"pianoworks98" at Blackheath and Ronald Stevenson's *Le Festin d'Alkan*: It was good to see so many of our members at Blackheath, often for several events besides Marc-André Hamelin's recital. They included John Fritzell from Sweden, with six pianists in the cast who had played in Husum over the years, plus the visit from the Husum director Peter Froundjian and his son Nikolai, it sometimes felt almost like a Husum reunion. However, Blackheath had a wider scope although there were indeed many rarities in the programmes: a children's concert, chamber music, recitals for one, two and up to six pianos, a special Grainger evening, masterclasses, the Hamelins' cabaret and a very difficult quiz for "pianoraks" devised by Jeremy Nicholas, the author of a Godowsky biography, pianophile, reviewer, composer of songs and radio presenter. For the record, I think the audience did best in the quiz, closely followed by Charles Hopkins, a man of immense knowledge (he also writes for *IPQ*) and player of a wide repertoire of music when his hand is not injured.

[Linguistic note: an "anorak" is a boring collector of trivia, named after the traditional coat worn by trainspotters as they write down engine numbers on draughty stations. Its most common manifestation today is the compulsive computer user and Internet surfer. Hence piano + anorak = pianorak: any tedious enthusiast who insists on telling you all known facts about piano music and recordings. I'm sure you can name at least one example, possibly with initials PG].

The central event for us was Marc-André Hamelin's recital, containing three Alkan pieces and the Stevenson work inspired by them and other music by Alkan. His performance of *Le Festin d'Esopé* was sensational, all the variations going at Alkan's metronome mark. Whether Var. XVII and XVIII, with their chains of hemidemisemiquavers (a.k.a. 64th notes), really work at Alkan's speed, especially in a very resonant hall like Blackheath, is a matter of opinion and perhaps I side with Lewenthal's view at times. But to see it done live...

Hamelin also gave us the Barcarolle from the Op. 65 *Chants* and the *Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer* (Preludes Op. 31, no.8). The latter was played extremely slowly, but I think it worked on this occasion.

The Stevenson work, commissioned by our member Peter Hick, was an ambitious three-movement composition designed to illustrate Stevenson's contention that "composition, transcription and variation are all essentially the same thing". It begins with a kind of Concerto without orchestra, inspired by the Alkan model but with purely Stevenson's music. It is dark music packed with frightening technical difficulties - multiple glissandos, leaps in contrary motion, octaves and so on. There follows a quiet movement based on octave- transformations of the Barcarolle theme, with trio sections incorporating quotations from Alkan and other composers. The last movement is in free variation form, containing cadenzas for each hand (cf. Alkan's Op. 76 *Grandes Etudes*) and more quotations including the opening movement of Alkan's Concerto for solo piano (Op. 39 No.8). I would be a "pianorak" to list all those I spotted, but I was rather pleased to notice a less familiar one in particular: the very pretty *Duettino* in F major, No.14 of the Op. 63 *Esquisses*, which I think I dared to play to our President at a very early Alkan Society meeting.

Hamelin played the work magnificently, of course, ably helped by none other than Leslie Howard as page-turner. Whether it has much of a future is another question: it will be a rare virtuoso indeed who takes it on. The rest of his programme contained one of the quieter Medtner sonatas, the *Sonata reminiscenza*, and as said earlier, seven of Godowsky's Etudes after Chopin. Although Carlo Grante has made a well-received recording of all 53 on three CDs for Altarus (the last contains only six, together with four Chopin waltz transcriptions and the Passacaglia on Schubert's "Unfinished"), Hamelin can

play them up to speed and in such a way that the original piece is always clear. It is good to know, therefore, that he has already laid down about twenty in the studio and should finish the set next year. I would guess that they will fit on to two CDs too!

The press coverage of Blackheath was sparse, with most newspapers continuing to concentrate on the Proms, South Bank and Edinburgh Festival. Our member Martin Anderson- frequently the obituarist for significant but less well known musicians -wrote a good article for the *Independent* which conveyed well the informal and sometimes chaotic atmosphere, with pianists scattered everywhere and events running late. He gave central position to Hamelin's recital. His claim that Hamelin "must now be the closest - post-Horowitz -to claiming the title of 'world's greatest pianist'" (even if some of us believe it) is rather bold and probably not very meaningful - but what he wrote about the "buzz" before the recital was well put: "you don't often see concert-going middle-England pressed against the recital room door, waiting to rush in and grab the best seats. You do at Hamelin recitals, and it is hardly surprising: his technique is breathtakingly virtuosic, but he uses it to give himself space to think about the music. Hamelin can interpret where other pianists are worried about getting all the notes and his musical curiosity guarantees programmes that eschew the Mozart-Beethoven-Schumann axis of less adventurous players." [In passing, Hamelin is quite capable of turning out a very good Schumann recital, and did just that later in the month at a Wigmore Hall coffee concert, playing *Waldszenen* and the *Fantasy in C major*.]

Naturally, Martin was very open to any new music and wrote well about the Stevenson piece, describing it as "a deeply compelling, even disturbing, exploration of the bowels of the piano, a lesson in how to make the instrument tell... Half an hour in length, it is certainly one of Stevenson's most important works to date and a major addition to the repertoire. Whether other pianists can play with Hamelin's calm aplomb and electrifying precision remains to be seen. "

For anyone interested further, there is an interview and a survey of Stevenson's music in the Summer 1998 *IPQ*. Apart from "Grove" of course, the article in Baker's Biographical Dictionary is also worth seeing, where Nicolas Slonimsky describes him as a "Brythonic composer" , whatever that may mean. There is also a series of recordings by Stevenson and others gradually coming out on the Altarus label. A symposium edited by Colin Scott-Sutherland, including an essay by Ates Orga on the piano music, was due for publication by Toccata Press in September. One of our members interviewed Mr Stevenson at Blackheath and I hope that a transcript of the interview can be published in a future Bulletin.

Future concerts: On 28th February 1999 at 4 p.m. in the Wigmore Hall, Leslie Howard will be playing Alkan's *Symphonie*, Op. 39 Nos. 4-7, and his transcription of the *Cavatina* from Beethoven's Op. 130 String Quartet in B flat major. He will also play Beethoven's Fantasy in G minor, Op. 77, the Op. 33 Bagatelles and 32 Variations in C minor. Here is a most welcome addition to the small list of Alkan players. I understand that the score for the Cavatina has come from the Lord Londonderry collection. I know nothing about this and would welcome any more information.

In June next year Marc-André Hamelin has another three-concert series on Tuesdays at the Wigmore Hall. The repertoire is all of interest, but the first concert, on 1st June, in particular: this will contain Alkan's *Grande Sonate* Op. 33, *Les quatre ages*, in possibly one of the first performances in a major

London venue since Ronald Smith's premiere of the work in the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1974. The other works are Medtner's *Sonata romantica* and Sophie-Carmen Eckhardt-Gramatte's Sonata No.6 - "Drei Klavierstücke". She was a remarkable musician, born in Russia in 1899, who made her American concert debut in concertos for both violin and piano. She lived for some time in Canada, where her archives are kept, and died in Germany during a tour in 1974. A neat link with Alkan is that her sixth and last sonata consists of movements for left hand, right hand and both hands -but not just reunited hands but an ingenious combination of the first two movements, which are very different from each other and not originally designed to fit together (the first is a close adaptation of a movement from an earlier sonata). Hamelin's recording of all six sonatas are on a 2-CD set from Altarus.

The second recital on 8th June contains Medtner's largest sonata, the "Night Wind", and Schubert's last, the profound Sonata in B flat, D. 960. Hamelin has played the latter in several venues this year, including a broadcast recital from the Manchester "Glories of the Keyboard" festival. The third recital contains the last Medtner sonata, the *Sonate-Idylle*, supposedly written, at the request of his publisher, in a less uncompromising style to appeal to amateur pianists, and seven Chopin/Godowsky studies. Lastly comes the American composer Frederic Rzewski's "The People United will Never be Defeated", a set of 36 variations on a Chilean protest song lasting almost an hour. If the political-sounding subject (the piece also incorporates an Italian revolutionary song and Eisler's antifascist "Song of Solidarity"), the unfamiliar name, and the recent date of composition (1975) sound off-putting, let me encourage you to give this work a try. Like the great variations based on the Paganini 24th Caprice, it has a short, simple, memorable theme. The variations are divided into six groups: in each one, the sixth recapitulates the previous five, and after an improvised cadenza the thirty-sixth takes us on a lightning tour of all the other thirty-five, as if in a video on fast-forward. The styles of the variations cover a huge range -simple, dissonant, virtuosic, jazzy, atonal, pointilliste, etc.; there is humour and some unconventional musical effects. But the structure is so clear that it can be taken in on the very first hearing. I rate it as a modern classic. Hamelin played it in Husum in 1990 with enormous success, and the performance was broadcast later. There are several recordings -the composer's, Ursula Oppens and Stephen Drury -and Hamelin has recently recorded it for Hyperion for - release next year (his earlier recording for Altarus was never released).

Joanna McGregor, a vigorous campaigner for new music, was heard playing Rzewski's "Winsboro (?) Cotton Mill Blues", a short piece evoking the sound of a factory, in the Channel 4 series on contemporary music, one of its all too rare forays into classical music.

The Internet: Several members have sent me printouts of some interesting sites. There has been some difficulty in finding Jonathan Judge's Alkan Archive and I will try to find out what the situation is. One site compiled by Alan Paul with the help of Averil Kovacs includes a short biography and a selective discography: its address is <http://www2.shore.net/paul/alkan.html>. Our member Steve Smythe has a website including several Alkan items on <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/ssmythe/homepagefr.htm>. For Hamelin fans, the Canadian group of pianists, Piano Six, has a site at <http://tor-pwl.netcom.ca/~colwell/index.html>. Finally, Prof. McKelvie, chemist, pianist, collector of scores, chess master, first-time visitor to Husum, runs the "Piano List", a site with some 500 contributors, mostly in the USA, which exchanges information about concerts, records, availability of scores and other pianistic matters. I have seen a

Alkan is a martial art devoted to self defence from assault by feathered ~ vertebrates; such are the hazards of relying on the verity of trade directories.

Given the biography of C.V. Alkan, and the potential interests of euphonimists and aviculturalists throughout the country and indeed the world, it can only be a matter of time before our services become pivotal; I look forward to then being of assistance.

In the interim I rely on your good graces to keep our name on file, and will withdraw your name from our lists with such dignity as is left under the circumstances.

Yours sincerely

Radio 3: Hopes have been raised somewhat by the appointment of Roger Wright as the new Controller. He comes from Deutsche Grammophon and seems to be a defender of tradition and quality. The other man tipped for the job, a different Roger, worked for EMI (an enemy of Alkan!) and had been concerned with such musicians as The Artist Formerly Known as Nigel Kennedy and Vanessa-Mae. He has gone to Classic FM, which should suit him much better.

The press continues to criticise the lower standards of Radio 3. In particular, the new version of "Record Review" , now called "CD Review" , has not been greeted with much enthusiasm. I have been collecting some of the fatuous things said in the first few programmes, and may print a few if I need some material in a future bullet in. "Building a Library" has been pushed back to 11o'clock and reduced to half an hour, and a "Record of the Week" occupies far too much time in the middle. The only good thing recently was an interview with Marc-André Hamelin, mainly about his new Medtner recording, which also had two excerpts from his "Composer-Pianists" album including Alkan' s *Scherzetto* from the *Esquisses*, and a section from Joseph Marx's Romantic Concerto, which is with the Korngold concerto for the left hand in the Hyperion Romantic Piano Concertos series.

THE ALKAN SAGA

How the recording of the Chamber Music took nearly ten years to *see*
the light of day

A talk, with recorded examples, by RONALD SMITH.

Royal Academy of Music, Wednesday 18th November 1998 from 7-9 p.m.

Members and guests welcome -Admission free

Underground: Baker Street. Turn left past Madame Tussauds and walk to the first small road and the first building on the corner. The meeting is in the Board Room in the York Gate arinexe. If in difficulty, ask at the main Academy. The Academy bar will be open before and after the meeting. This will be a good occasion for members to suggest any more corrections and amendments for the new edition of Ronald Smith's books on Alkan's life and music, particularly regarding the discography.

I hope to see a good number of you on November the 18th.

Peter Grove
20 October 1998

Supplement to Bulletin 55

Please blame the lack of memory (mine and the computer's) which forces this.

1. Some more concerts: Christopher Berg is presenting a Sorabji concert at Merkin Concert Hall, New York, on Sunday December 6th 1998 at 7 p.m.

Programme: the 60-page, 45-minute 2nd Piano Sonata (1920), unperformed since 1924, played by Tellef Johnson, a student of Alan Feinberg; *Trois fêtes galantes* (1918), settings of poems by Paul Verlaine, sung by Felicity La Fortune -previously heard only on BBC radio; and the premiere of the Piano Quintet No. 1 (1920), played by Christopher Berg himself, Marshall Coid, Lalit Gampel, David Cerutti and Christine Gummere. The concert will be recorded for release on Altarus Records.

Ronald Smith's former pupil Freddy Kempf is giving the lunchtime concert in the "New Generations" series at the Wigmore Hall on Wednesday 28th October at 1 p.m., also broadcast on Radio 3. Programme: Chopin-*Barcarolle* and *Polonaise-Fantaisie*; Granados - *El Amor y la Muerte* from *Goyescas*; Liszt - *Vallée d'Obermann* from *Années de Pèlerinage*, Book 1. Following Freddy's controversial third place in the Moscow competition, mentioned last time, it has been reported in the *Independent on Sunday* and elsewhere that a well-wisher has presented him with a Steinway concert grand.

Some other Alkan concerts from Marc-Andre Hamelin accessible to overseas members: 8th November in the Philharmonie, Berlin - Alkan Concerto for solo piano and Schumann Fantasy in C; January 27 in Opera City concert hall, Tokyo, and January 29 in Izumi Hall, Osaka - Grande Sonate plus Mozart Rondo in A minor, Medtner Sonata Romantica, Rachmaninov 2nd Sonata; February 23 in the Alte Oper, Frankfurt - programme for Goethe celebrations including Grande Sonate. Sorry to mention him again, but his agent sends me the information.

2. Scores: Dover has recently published an Alkan album, works chosen and with an introduction by Marc-André Hamelin. It contains the Symphonie, Concerto and Festin d'Esopé from Op. 39, the Saltarelle Op. 24, Toccata Op. 75 and Barcarolle from Op. 65, reproduced from the French editions. The introduction is quite short, with no detailed commentary on each work. This should be cheaper than the French editions - however, it is not available in the U.K. A case for shopping on the Internet, perhaps -or ask a friend in the U.S.A. I hear they will soon be bringing out a Medtner sonata album which should also be a good way to collect significant works at reasonable cost.

International Piano Quarterly: It has taken me a year to discover this offshoot from the *Gramophone* empire, prompted by members and by meeting its editor. I have no personal interest in it! It is good to find a publication which treats Alkan as a normal established composer. In the Autumn 1998 edition, Barrie Martyn mentions Alkan in his Medtner article as another composer who always used the piano in his works. In his book on the composer, Alkan's "Parrot" is mentioned as an example of a bizarre title (Medtner used some too) -though of course that is one good example of Alkan's not using the piano! IPQ reviews the first batch of the Philips "Great Pianists of the Century" in that issue, a unique collaboration between recording companies (EMI please note!). John Ogdon will be in the next batch of releases, and I believe that Alkan's Concerto, or part of it, may be included, though I cannot find the reference at the moment. The first two issues of IPQ (Autumn and Winter 1997) are sold-out and unobtainable as back numbers.

Addenda and Erratum: pp. 6 & 7 -"epoustouflant" means "stunning, astounding" and "inenarrable" means "hilarious" .Thanks to Salisbury Reference librarians for accepting the phone enquiry. p. 13 - I think my strange term "octave-transformations" ought to be "octave-displacements" or "octave-transpositions" .

PJG 21.10.98