

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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BULLETIN NO. 50- APRIL 1995

Recital by Bernard Ringeissen

The Chopin Society has arranged a recital by Bernard Ringeissen at the Wigmore Hall on Sunday May 21st at 7 p.m. Details are shown on the enclosed programme, which is equally divided between Chopin and Alkan. Members of the Alkan Society are invited to a reception at the Polish Institute, 20 Princes Gate, London (near the Royal Albert Hall and opposite Hyde Park), at 4 p.m. If you would like to attend this reception, please contact the Secretary of the Chopin Society, Diana Porter, on 0171-370-4943 by May 17th. Tickets for the concert are available in the usual way from the Wigmore Hall.

While the arrangements for the concert have been made by the Chopin Society, we are obviously delighted that Alkan's works have been given such prominence in one of the best concert venues in London, and I am sure our members will be giving their support. The refreshments at meetings of the Chopin Society are always excellent, and the reception should help to make a worthwhile outing. Sundays are not ideal for travelling, but the early start time of 7 p.m. should help with the homeward journey.

I have heard Bernard Ringeissen in Husum twice and he is a pianist of formidable technique and musicianship. This may well be his first appearance in England. He has made three Alkan recordings, the first some twenty years ago, and should give a contrasting approach to the pianists we have heard here.

Report of recent recitals

Several members heard Marc-Andre Hamelin's recital at the University of Surrey in which he played Alkan's Concerto for solo piano and works by Chopin. He had given a similar programme in the Paris Conservatoire the previous day. He gave an exquisite performance of several Chopin Mazurkas before launching into his celebrated interpretation of the Concerto. His intellectual grasp and sheer accuracy in this difficult piece remain impressive and it was very well received by the university audience. The recital was given in a recording studio on an excellent Steinway and the only sign of fatigue was in the lack of encores.

Hamelin repeated the Concerto in his live recital for the BBC in Birmingham, and reports of that recital were also enthusiastic. There was an interval discussion which used interviews with Ronald Smith and Hamelin (recorded on different occasions) which made this a particularly interesting broadcast. Before the interval we heard works including the Brahms "Handel" variations. Bearing in mind Lewenthal's remarks about the "musical box" variation in "Le Festin d'Esopo", Hamelin's idea of a running-down

clockwork effect in Variation 22 must have caused some discussion among the traditionalists.

Between the two recitals, Hamelin recorded the Grande Sonate and other works for Hyperion, and that recording should be released soon. Some members will remember his very impressive studio recording for the BBC of the Sonata a couple of years ago.

The event of 1995 so far must have been Jack Gibbons's performance in Oxford of the complete Opus 39 minor-key Etudes. The recital was arranged after the appearance of our last Bulletin, but our British members received the information directly and several managed to join a capacity audience in the Holywell Music Room on January 18th. Jack had played "Le Festin d'Esopé" and the Concerto as a teenager for early meetings of the Alkan Society. After winning the Newport piano competition he had great success with his Chopin and Gershwin recitals, with three remarkable CDs evoking the authentic Gershwin style transcribed from the composer's own broadcasts and recordings. He now brought his experience to bear on Alkan's huge collection of studies.

Ronald Smith has played Opus 39 in the course of a day, but playing the complete set in one recital posed a particular challenge. Although it carries a hint of the athletic endurance event, it was much more than a mere pianistic triathlon. Jack carried it off with enormous flair. As one member of the audience remarked, it was particularly pleasing to see a pianist who so obviously enjoyed his work.

The recital took the studies in order, with intervals after the Symphonie and the Concerto. Although I did not have a stop-watch on the pieces, it seemed to me that he largely adhered to Alkan's metronome marks, including the near-impossible speed in "Comme le vent". The first three studies all came off very well. Perhaps the "Scherzo diabolico" suffered a little from a bass-heavy balance; a full-size Steinway in a small room is hard to control under pressure.

Jack prefaced some of the studies with a short, witty and useful talk. I always feel that the Symphonie is a particularly satisfying work in its relatively concise argument and progressively shorter movements. A little more of a pause before the finale might have helped Jack and the audience to draw breath: the accuracy suffered a little from the impetuous start, but the overall impression was still excellent.

The Concerto demands the utmost concentration from both performer and audience, especially in the half-hour first movement which is the ultimate test of the Alkanian's endurance. But it contains such beautiful passages and richness of invention that it seems easier to understand every time one hears it. If anything lost a few members of the audience, this was it, but the enthusiastic applause and reappearance of almost everybody for the final two studies was ample comment.

The Overture is the piece I took longest to appreciate, not least because it has been so rarely performed in recitals and needs a particular skill to bring out the best in passages which look unpromising on paper. Jack showed no sign of fatigue in this, or in "Le Festin d'Esopé", and indeed had enough energy to interpolate the Debussyian "Les Soupirs" into his official programme, as well as three encores. The Allegro Barbaro is a mini-endurance test in itself, even without all the preceding pieces.

Jack went just beyond Alkan's usual finishing time of 10 p.m., giving a length of just over three hours for the whole event. There have been longer recitals - Ogdon's performance of Sorabji's "Opus Clavicembalisticum" for one - but this was an immensely satisfying and memorable recital. There are plans for Alkan CDs from Jack and we will await them eagerly.

Alkan broadcasts have not been numerous recently, though Hamelin's recording of the first Concerto da camera was played in the Radio 3 request programme, another success for our committee member Averil Kovacs, and Hamish Milne's studio performance of the Symphonie has been repeated.

Nicholas King included some organ pieces by Alkan in his recital at St Michael, Cornhill, on 10th April, and the Funeral March for a Parrot was given in Bromley by forces directed by Mark Fitzgerald. Donna Amato took a programme of rarities to Russia and Belarus last October, playing "Le Festin" and works by Sorabji, Grainger, Balfour Gardiner and MacDowell in Minsk, Yaroslavl and Rybinsk.

Meeting with the Liszt Society

There was a good attendance for our joint recital in Steinway House. Ronald Smith gave a very fine performance of the Liszt B minor sonata which impressed this particularly knowledgeable audience, and I hope he may be able to make a digital recording. The work is already much recorded, but he brings a special insight to the music which takes nothing for granted. Kenneth Hamilton gave a witty introduction to the Sonatine and "Le Festin" and played both with great flair. A full-size Steinway in a small room may have given the impression that all Alkan's music is rather loud, but once one adjusted to the close-up effect, there was a great deal to enjoy. He certainly has some of the fastest fingers I have heard in the scherzo of the Sonatine and the demisemiquaver variations.

Ronald Smith will be playing a programme of Beethoven, Chopin, Alkan and Liszt for the Horsham Music Circle on 16th September at the Capitol Theatre, North Street, Horsham at 8 p.m. - details on 01403-252602. On 20th October he will give a recital of Bach/Busoni, Chopin, Beethoven and Alkan at Uckfield Community College, Downsview Crescent, Uckfield at 8 p.m. - tel. 0182571-2741.

For the keen traveller, Ronald Smith is making a long-awaited reappearance at the Husum festival of rarities on August 20th, with a programme of Chopin Mazurkas, including one he has reconstructed himself, the Balakirev Sonata and a sequence of Alkan pieces: the Marche funèbre, Regrets de la nonette, Chant no.1, Two caprices op. 50, and the last two major-key Etudes. Details are available from Buchhandlung C.F. Delff, Kramerstrasse 8, 25813 Husum: tel. (from the UK) 0049-4841-2163; fax 0049-4841-81686. The other pianists in the festival (19-26 August) will be Daniel Berman, Marie-Catherine Girod, Endre Hegedtis, Anton Kuerti, Philip Fowke and Seta Tanyel, and there will also be an exhibition and morning lecture devoted to the piano music of Nikolai Medtner.

Record reviews

The Hyperion CD of (CDA 66765) Marc-Andre Hamelin at the Wigmore Hall has been very well received. Reviewers in "Classic CD", "The Gramophone" and "Hi-fi News II" all give it high praise, and Calum MacDonald in the last-named chose it as his Record of the Month. As reported in the last Bulletin, all the Alkan pieces except one encore are on the disc.

Averil Kovacs and I attended an open recording session with Nikolai Demidenko at Surrey University and learned about the devilish editing tricks which can be accomplished with modern technology. Members who heard Hamelin at the Wigmore

Hall will notice that the left-hand Etude has been somewhat cleaned up, using material from the afternoon rehearsal, but the other pieces are - as far as I can tell - exactly as heard "live". They are remarkable performances and are to be highly recommended. The clear part-playing in the left-hand study, needing a particularly large hand, is striking. The right-hand study lasts a much shorter time than Ronald Smith's recording, but most reviewers, including Ates Orga in his booklet for the disc, did not point out that the repeat sections are omitted! The Beethoven transcription is also a wonderful performance, both in the orchestral sections and the audacious cadenza. The other works on the record are as given before - the Busoni "Carmen" fantasy, Chopin/Balakirev slow movement of Concerto no.1 and Medtner's Danza festiva. The Godowsky encore was eventually not considered up to standard for release, but it is on Hamelin's Godowsky recording for CBC (MVCD 1026), hard to find but worth the search. I hope that Hamelin will one day tackle the complete Godowsky-Chopin studies, a travesty in some eyes but pianistically fascinating all the same.

Stephanie McCallum's recording of the major-key Etudes on Tall Poppies (TP055) has also become available. It is well recorded and played, with enough differences from Ringeissen's earlier set to make it worth considering. Richard Murphy's review for an extinct magazine is published here with his kind permission, as is his opinion of the Esquisses of Laurent Martin. Martin's two recent Marco Polo releases had belated reviews in the April "Gramophone", the Esquisses being particularly recommended in spite of sound described as "a trifle hard in places".

Other news

The Société Alkan has recently celebrated ten years of existence, and I tried out the Channel Tunnel in order to attend the AGM last December. The attendance eventually reached double figures thanks to a couple from Le Havre as well as our committee member Averil Kovacs, and we were treated to a mini-recital of works by the Alkan family: several dances by his brother Maxime, attractive genre pieces bearing little resemblance to Charles-Valentin's output, and here receiving their first performance for a very long time. We also heard the first of the three *Airs* in five-time, the *Steibelt* variations and an unpublished transcription of a page from Gluck's "Alceste".

We congratulate our French colleagues on their continued success with far more music in print and available in shops, numerous broadcasts and recitals all bearing witness to their hard work. The publication of the collections of articles mentioned in our last bulletin has been delayed, but should be appearing soon.

Our committee member Brian Inglis recently had his first Symphony performed in St John's, Smith Square, by the City University Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Matthew Rowe. I understand that this first performance was extremely successful, and we congratulate Brian.

We are working on plans for another Alkan Day. The Guildhall School is heavily used on Saturdays and it may have to be a Sunday event. It has been hard to find participants who are all free on the same day and the original date in April had to be abandoned, but I hope that something will be arranged later this year.

Members in Britain will be aware of the recent change in our telephone numbers. Please note that most area codes in the UK have now added a 1 after the initial zero: for example, the London codes are now 0171- and 0181-.

Peter Grove