

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Reg. Charity No. 276199)

BULLETIN - APRIL, 1983

REPORT OF MEETING held, by kindness of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, in the Lecture/Recital room of the School at 7.00 p.m. on Tuesday, January 25th, 1983.

13 members and 3 guests were present to listen to a joint programme by Stephanie and Peter McCallum, whom we were delighted to have with us again. The programme consisted of the following works:-

ALKAN: 2 Military Caprices, op. 50
(no. 1 Capriccio alla Soldatesca
no. 2 Le Tambour Bat aux Champs)
FIELD: Nocturne in F
ALKAN: Nocturne op. 22
ALKAN: no. 1 (for left hand alone) of Trois Grandes Etudes, op. 76.

Peter discussed in some depth the structure, themes and rhythmic features of each piece, with illustrations by Stephanie, and then the pieces were performed by Stephanie. The combination of Peter's critical analysis, presented with flair and in a most engaging manner, and the customary brilliance and distinction of Stephanie's performance, provided a most interesting and stimulating evening, attended by regrettably few members. Richard Shaw expressed the thanks of all present.

REPORT OF MEETING held at the Trinity College of Music on Friday, March 18th, 1983 at 7.00 p.m.

Seventeen members and friends were present.

As Martin Ball was not able to give his projected talk on Alkan's compositions for pedalier and/or organ, Richard Shaw had volunteered to play the fourteen short pieces from "Alkan in Miniature". Richard was a pupil of Ronald Smith and is a fine pianist. He says that Ronald was the finest teacher he had ever had in any subject. As a musicologist he has done some painstaking and original research on Alkan and his music. This has benefited the Society greatly and Richard has worked for it in other ways.

After refreshments, John White gave an account of the inception of this collection of pieces, how they were chosen, printed and published. Then they were considered in three groups. First came the five selected from the Preludes op. 31. Interesting points were illustrated by Richard as John described them and then they were played straight through. Similarly, in the second group, came the "Air in 5-time" from the second suite of impromptus op. 32, and the three pieces selected from the "Trente Chants" - "Canon" (op. 65 no. 3), "Barcarolle" (op. 65 no. 6), and "La Voix de l'Instrument" (op. 70 no. 4). The third group to be considered included "Gigue" from op. 24, and the four pieces chosen from the "Esquisses" (op. 63) :- No. 1 "La Vision", No. 4 "Les Cloches", No. 25 "La Poursuite" and the final sketch "Laus Deo".

After a brief interval, Richard introduced a few more of Alkan's short compositions. These included nos. 12 and 16 from the Preludes (op. 31), the first of the "Trois Petites Fantaisies" (op. 41), the "Premier Nocturne" (op. 22) and No. 9 of the "Onze Pieces" (op. 72).

Patrick Lee thanked the pianist and commentator for providing a very interesting evening at short notice and the Meeting ended at about 9.00 p.m.

ALKAN REFERENCE LIBRARY

Thanks to the untiring efforts of John White, the following Alkan works have been acquired on microfilm for our library at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

- Op. 69 Impromptu sur le choral de Luther
- Op. 66 11 grands préludes et une transcription du Messie de Handel.
- Op. 16 No. 4. Variations on a Song from Donizetti's opéra "Anna Bolena"
- Op. 16 No. 5. Variations on Air de Capulets from Bellini's "I Capuleti".
- Op. 16 No. 6. Variations quasi fantaisie pour le Piano sur une Barcarolle Napolitaine.
- Op. 27 Marche triomphale pour piano.
- 12 études d'orgue, ou de piano à pédales, pour les pieds seylement
- Transcription of Weber's Scherzo du Trio Op. 63.

The Society is most grateful to our member in Hereford, Mrs. Vera Tompkins, whose generous contribution has made it possible for these recent additions to be made.

If any members have spare recordings, or would like to make donations towards the acquisition of more recordings to be passed on to our library at the Guildhall School, contributions would be most gratefully received by the Hon. Secretary or other committee members.

In this connection, may I also express our gratitude to our Hon. Member in Germany, Herr Knut Franke, who on his recent visit to London most generously made a donation to the Society.

BARBICAN REFERENCE LIBRARY

The Librarian of this new library has invited us to send copies of the Alkan Society Bulletin for inclusion in the Music Section, which it is hoped to open shortly. We feel that in view of the fact that the library is next door to the Guildhall School, this could be of great advantage to us, and possibly encourage new membership.

NEWS ITEMS

RONALD SMITH

(i) NEW YORK CONCERT IN JANUARY, 1983

To quote the New York Times, "Mr. Smith's performance was no mere act of survival - in which memory and technique met every test, it was also a musical experience in the best sense of that word. He deserves our thanks."

We were also very pleased to receive an account of the concert from one of our U.S. members, Wallace Lafferty, who, with his wife, made his first visit to New York from Richmond Va., expressly to hear Ronald Smith's recital. He writes that the first half of the programme comprised La Chanson de la Folle au Bord de la Mer ("hypnotically" played), Capriccio alla Soldatesca, Le Tambour Bat aux Champs, Nocturne Op. 22 ("That alone was worth the trip to New York") and Le Festin d'Esopé and the second half consisted of the Concerto for Solo piano - "spectacular, and interrupted before the beginning of the 2nd movement by a call for bows..... Upon completion of the Allegretto, our artist received a well deserved standing ovation as the house went wild."

- (ii) Many members will no doubt have heard the lunch-time concert on March 17th (Radio 3), repeated the following week, and those of us who were able to be at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on Sunday, March 20th, heard Ronald Smith, introduced by Antony Hopkins, play the Liszt transcription of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, followed by the Alkan Concerto for Solo Piano. It was a simply unforgettable experience. He will be recording

the Beethoven/Liszt Seventh Symphony later in the year.

- (iii) Ronald Smith wrote, just too late for inclusion in the January Bulletin, that his recording of Le Grande Sonate was due out in the U.S.A., in February, and that future Alkan recordings were planned. Members will be delighted to know that his 3-disc set of Op. 39 etc. is one of 3 piano recordings nominated for the 'Grammy' award, the other two nominees being Horowitz and the late Glenn Gould.
- (iv) The world premier of Alkan's Concerto da Camera No. 1 given by Ronald Smith on April 6th at the Fairfield Hall, Croydon, received a good deal of welcome publicity. The premier was mentioned in the Times (March 21st) and on April 1st Ronald was interviewed on Radio 4's "P.M." programme. This was followed by a substantial article in the Sunday Times (April 3rd) with the headline "Mr. Smith revives a genius". It goes on to tell how Ronald first encountered Alkan's music, gives the history of the Concerto da Camera, followed by a potted biography of Alkan. It ends on a humorous note. One day, out of the blue, Ronald Smith received a letter from Exeter telling of a bus, carrying the local orchestra, which had been seen bearing the graffito - "I used to think Alkan was silver foil, until I discovered Ronald Smith".

A reminder that Ronald Smith's article on the Piano Concerto da Camera No 1 appears in the April issue of the Musical Times.

THOMAS WAKEFIELD

Those who heard Thomas Wakefield at the Coram Foundation last November will be interested to read the following account, kindly sent to us by Peter Hick:-

Alkan is (still!) rare in recital. It was therefore good to see the inclusion of two items in a typically adventurous and uncompromising programme by Tom Wakefield, given as a lunchtime concert in Dewsbury Town Hall on January 26th.

First, the Andante Romantique in C sharp major Op. 13 no 2, which may have formed the slow movement of an early Piano Concerto (the other movements now being lost). The dynamic scale (ppp to fff) throughout its 10 pages is crucial. The chaste, chorale-like chanting of the melody through the different registers of the keyboard at the start of the piece, produced an effect of great calm. The difficult senza pedale arpeggios, delivered with great clarity, paved the way for the central climax where the opening idea returns triple f. A sudden return to pianissimo, and the music gradually evaporates into nothing. Beautifully controlled dynamic shading, whilst keeping the piano figurations always alive, was noteworthy, the closing *piu lento* bars exquisite. There is a classical poise and grace, an air of restraint, about the piece which belies the appearance of the printed page, so that it was easy to see why it remained such a favourite with its composer (indeed, it featured in several of the late "Petits Concerts").

The world of this peaceful oasis was dashed aside, at a stroke, as the helter-skelter of the Saltarelle Op. 23 followed immediately, played at a true Prestissimo. The final stretto capped a fine performance of strength and tonal finesse - no mere piano-bashing here.

PETER GROVE (Salisbury)

writes that in January he put on a performance of Marcia Funebre Sulla Morte d'un Papagello with some members of the local choral society, the oboists coming from a local girls' school. He set up a display of Alkan record sleeves, music and books, including our information leaflet and says that much interest was expressed.

John White is awaiting with interest some response to a letter about Alkan which he recently sent to the Jewish Chronicle. We hope to report on this in the next bulletin.

12th BIENNALE DE PARIS AND 'JOURNEE ALKAN'
(FRANCE-CULTURE), NOVEMBER, 1982.

As reported in our last Bulletin, Ronald Smith, standing in for Jack Gibbons, gave an Alkan recital on November 2nd, 1982 at the Musée d'Art Moderne which formed part of a programme of 10 concerts organised for the 12th Biennale de Paris by Daniel Caux, who also devised the radio programme on Alkan broadcast by France-Culture on November 24th. The series of concerts was intended to implement a programme presented by Daniel Caux at the 11th Biennale on a new tendency in music, which might be called a 'post-modernist' movement.

One of our members in Paris, M. Ernest Trismégist, was kind enough to send copies of two articles by Daniel Caux written in connection with both these events in November. The first appeared in the September issue of Art Press, and concerns the theme of the 12th Biennale programme. In it M. Caux describes the new movement as a kind of counter-movement to the preoccupations of the 'avant-garde' - the serialism of the fifties, the problematical aesthetics of John Cage and the 'free' jazz of the sixties, and the repetitivism of the seventies. Among the pioneers of the new movement, all of whom have evolved from the so-called 'minimal' or 'repetitive' school, M. Caux mentions the English composers Gavin Bryars, Christopher Hobbs, Simon Jeffes, Michael Nyman, Dave Smith and John White, as well as the French composers Joseph Racaille, Hector Zazou, Patrick Portella and the Americans John Adams, William Bolcom, Harold Budd, Daniel Lentz, Alan Lloyd and the blind street-musician Moondog (who was to conduct a performance of some of his compositions at the Biennale).

~~These composers, writes Daniel Caux, are avoiding the clichés, of modernism,~~ and turning to more unusual clichés rejected by the 'avant-garde' which they find in the music of the tea-room, of Hollywood Technicolour films and - perhaps unexpectedly - in the works of 'respectable' composers like Brahms and Mendelssohn. Their idea is not to parody, but rather to decode and deliberately take material out of its context to be used as a fresh stimulus to the musical imagination. Alkan, equally with Erik Satie, is acknowledged to be one of the precursors of the new movement, hence the surge of interest in him by contemporary composers and his slot in the 12th Biennale programme, cheek by jowl, as it were, with Moondog.

The second article by Daniel Caux, exclusively on Alkan, appeared in the November issue of Le Monde de la Musique, giving a brief account of his life and work and elucidating his presence on the programme. Here, the 'modernism' of Alkan is pursued in greater detail. M. Caux likens his music, with the incredible contrasts which arise from the juxtaposition of totally dissimilar elements, to the collages of the Dadaists and the Surrealists, instancing Le Festin d'Esopé, with its unusual structures of sound interspersed with bold snatches of military marches and hunting-tunes.

There are two different ways of approaching Alkan, writes M. Caux, equally justifiable and, in the end, complementary. The first is to re-situate this music in the context of its time, taking account of influences and similarities. The second is more concerned with the unfamiliar, the individual aspect of the music, and seen in this light, Alkan relates much more to the 20th than to the 19th century. The Grande Sonate reminds Raymond Lewenthal of Charles Ives, and Ronald Smith sees Gershwin in the G Minor Barcarolle and the clusters** of Henry Cowell in Les Diablotins. M. Caux, himself, would venture still further afield, and suggest affinities with the white jazz pianist Lennie Tristano, or with Conlon Nancarrow, the composer of rolls for mechanical - or rather pneumatic - piano, even with 'repetitive' composers such as Phil Glass, Charlemagne Palestine and Terry Riley. In the final passages of the 1st movement of the Concerto for Solo Piano for example, all

the notes played are repeated in the manner of an electronic echo. M. Caux singles out, in particular, Alkan's characteristic procedure of using a 'bunch' of notes articulated in ultra-rapid tempo and enclosed within a kind of halo of sound provided by the prolonged use of the sustaining pedal, a kind of 'machinistic' effect, and his comparable habit of relentlessly repeating - this time at a slow tempo - just a few notes, as the Marche Funèbre, op. 26, which M. Caux describes as a "relentlessly 'minimal' piece".

He goes on to compare Alkan with Satie, in the starkness of some of his very short pieces, but also on a rather deeper level: where Satie succeeds in expressing something unique through his very limitations, Alkan achieves a comparable result by bringing to his immense musical erudition all the freshness of the self-educated man. Humour is another shared characteristic: like Satie, Alkan likes to 'shuffle the pack', going from parody to the grotesque, even the absurd, expressing himself through contrast, asymmetrical effects or an unusual flight of fancy to which he suddenly gives free rein. Sometimes the most overwhelming emotion develops from a comical beginning, as in Le Festin d'Esopé or the Funeral March for a Dead Parrot. M. Caux likens his taste for eccentricity and the absurd to that of Raymond Roussel.

Finally M. Caux surveys the possibilities open to Alkan neophytes in France: of all the various recordings available, the choice seems to lie between an interpretation such as that of Pierre Reach, underlining the 'romantic' character of the music, and other versions that stress above all the individuality of the ideas of this wholly original composer.

The Journée Alkan, amounting to several hours in all, comprised three parts, dealing with Alkan and his times (Jean-Yves Bras), aspects of his music, (Gerard Auffray) and Alkan as the precursor of present day tendencies in music (Daniel Caux). The programme included a street 'walkabout' with random questioning of the public ('Qui est Alkan?') - and a predictable response! - and the dramatisation of one or two episodes from Alkan's life. Bernard Ringeissen discussed Saltarelle and Sonatine Op. 61 before his recordings were played, and there was a fascinating interview between the Curator of the Musée du Conservatoire de Paris, and Ronald Smith, who was introduced to Alkan's pedal-piano (he said it looked like a wardrobe). After a discussion of the various technical and physiological difficulties involved, the Curator played the 'pédalier' version of Cantique des Cantiques, after which Ronald Smith played it without pedals and at a quicker tempo. Ronald Smith then played, with pedals and much courage, La Vision, Les Cloches and La Chanson de la Folle au Bord de la Mer. The programme also included his recording of the 3rd Petite Fantaisie and finished with his comments on and playing of Le Festin d'Esopé and the 4th movement of La Grande Sonate.

**(Editor's Note)

In the radio programme, Daniel Caux enlarges on the comparison. Henry Cowell was born in 1897, almost 10 years after Alkan's death. His 'clusters' are produced by striking the keyboard with the flat of the hand, or the fist, producing a 'machine-like' effect. The Sonatine of Conlon Nancarrow, who perforates his own piano-rolls, also displays this 'machinique' quality, seeming to demand far more than the usual capabilities of the pianist. M. Caux makes a direct comparison in this respect, between Alkan's Gigue, Op.24, composed in 1844, and the Sonatine of Nancarrow, 1941. In no other music of the 19th century is this 'machine-like' quality (e.g. the use of repetition as an echo-effect, as in the Concerto and the end of the Allegro Barbaro) to be found.

As a postscript to the above account, our member Tony Webster, at present living in France, sends the following letter:-

"Some Alkan News from France

On 13th January, Pierre Reach, interviewed on "France Musique" spoke of Alkan

and said that he hoped to record some more of his works. He signed off by playing the Petite Fantaisie in G (from Op. 41).

On 17th January "France Musique" broadcast a performance of the Alkan Piano Trio played by an American ensemble, the Trio Mirecourt. This came from the German Sud-Ouest Funk (Saarbrücken) whose programmes are often relayed by France Musique.

Could it be that Ronald Smith's work with "France Culture" has started a long-delayed French interest in their forgotten composer?"

MEMBERSHIP

We are pleased to report that we have 25 new members, including our first member in New Zealand.

Frederick Scott, who recently joined the Society, is giving a recital of works by Haydn, Busoni (including his Fantasia Contrappuntistica) and Beethoven (Op. 110) at the London Oratory School, Seagrave Road, Fulham, London SW6 on Sunday, June 12th at 7.00 p.m.

Following the resignation of Martin Ball, whose departure is much regretted, the Committee decided to invite John Newing to join them as a co-opted member for the rest of the current year, and was pleased to receive his acceptance.

Members are reminded that nominations are invited in time for the next Annual General Meeting in July, and should be sent to the Hon. Secretary.

The Committee meets on three Sunday afternoons per year, at the Hon. Secretary's house, for 1-2 hours, followed by tea.

We are pleased to report that Wallace Lafferty (see under News Items) of Richmond Va., is in the process of setting up a U.S. branch of the Alkan Society. We wish him every success, and have promised him all possible support.

UNIVERSAL EDITION

Universal Edition are continuing to offer members a 15% discount on all Alkan's music, as announced in the January Bulletin. As these publishers are the British distributors of most of Alkan's works currently available, this generous offer should be of interest to all of us.

A quantity of music will be available for purchase at the reduced price at each of our meetings, and orders for items not to hand can be placed then too. Members wishing to take advantage of the offer, but unable to attend meetings, should send their orders not to Richard Shaw, as indicated in the last Bulletin, but direct to Universal Edition (London) Ltd., 2/3 Fareham Street, Dean Street, London W1V 4DU (tel: 01-437 5203). Don't forget to claim the discount. If available, the music will be set aside for collection or sent out (as you wish) by U.E., whose (reduced) bill should be paid in the usual way. As the cost of postage and packing will have to be added it makes sense to order more than one piece at a time.

SUBSCRIPTIONS, which are now overdue, should be sent to the Hon. Treasurer

Brian Doyle,
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FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

May Meeting - the date of the visit to the Musical Museum, Brentford, has been confirmed as Friday, May 13th, 1983, at 7.00 p.m. The Museum at 368, Brentford

High Street, next to the giant gasholder and near Kew Bridge.

Nearest Underground: Gunnersbury (District Line, Richmond Branch)

British Rail: Waterloo - Kew Bridge.

Buses: 237 or 267 pass the door
65 from Richmond Station and Ealing Broadway.

Short walk from E1, E2 terminus, Brentford.

Car Parking: North Road, first turning off Brentford High Street to the West of the museum.

Coffee: will be available.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Wednesday, July 13th, 1983 at 7.00 p.m. at the Abbey Community Association, 29 Marsham Street, S.W.1.

November Meeting: Sunday, November 20th at 3.00 p.m. Joint meeting with the Chopin Society (details to be announced).

HON. SECRETARY'S ADDRESS:-

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