

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered Charity number 276199)

<http://www.alkansociety.org>

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BULLETIN no. 68 December 2004

Editor's notes

We wish a Happy New Year to all our members –

We are hoping to combine our **2005 AGM** with a recital by **Thomas Wakefield** and we will be circulating members separately on this as soon as location and timing have been settled.

The autumn concert tour of **Marc-André Hamelin** has brought Alkan's 'Symphonie' to many European cities. In England his sole appearances have been at the University of Surrey on November 28th and in Leeds on December 14th. Your editor caught his concert in Paris on December, which was conveniently is to be held on the same evening as, and immediately following, the AGM of the Société Alkan – these are reported on in this issue.

In the meantime we have seen other **recitals and concerts** including the music of Alkan at the Royal College of Music, London, at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, in Zwolle (Netherlands) and in Paris. Notes on Thomas Wakefield's heroic Cambridge recital can be found herein, and references and reviews of other concerts can be found on our website.

Don't forget to use the website for all your Amazon purchases – books, records, electrical goods, whether related to Alkan or not! The Society gets a small commission every time you access Amazon through the site for a purchase, and every little bit helps to fund our activities.

The Society is considering producing a **CD of the Ronald Smith Celebration Concert** held in September – details of this exciting initiative can be found on the enclosed flyer and will be posted on the website.

The Society's **website** continues to attract readers and surfers and the open forum has led to a number of interesting comments and enquiries.

Last – but not least – we remind members that **contributions to the Bulletin** are always welcome – please let us have your views and comments!

The Alkan Society Piano Scholarship 2004

Competition

The fourth annual Piano Scholarship Competition was held on Friday 12 November in the new Auditorium of Fitzwilliam College. For the set work by Alkan the examiners had selected *Song of Songs*, Op.31 No. 13. The judges were Mr Thomas Wakefield (Alkan Society Nominee), Dr Kenneth Smith (Fellow) and Dr Peter Tregear (Director of Music).

There were four candidates whose free-choice pieces were as follows:

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Roderick Morris | Faure, Nocturne No. 4 in Eb |
| Eleanor Goodfield | Poulenc, Improvisation No. 13 in A minor |
| Malcolm Moffatt | Haydn, Sonata in C, Hob. XVI/50, 1 st movement. |
| Jonathan Hill | Ravel, <i>Jeux d'Eau</i> |

The Scholarship, which this year carried a cash value of £100, was awarded to Jonathan Hill. Malcolm Moffatt's Haydn was considered by the judges to be of special merit.

Recital by Thomas Wakefield and Reception

On the following evening the Fitzwilliam College Music Society in association with the Alkan Society presented a piano recital in the Auditorium as a tribute to the late Ronald Smith. Thomas Wakefield's electrifying performance and entertaining comments were greatly appreciated. Among his references to the great pianist he recalled the occasion on which he had consulted him concerning the performance of Alkan's transcription of the Beethoven Piano Concerto Op. 37, and had broken a string on Ronald's piano. This had elicited the cryptic comment: "You naughty boy!" He would surely have been forgiven had Ronald heard the truly magnificent rendition of the Concerto we were given on this occasion.

Thomas's tribute included the following works:

| | |
|---|-----------------|
| Fantasia and Fugue for Organ in G minor | Bach/Liszt |
| Concerto in C minor, Op. 37 | Beethoven/Alkan |
| Transcription of First Movement for Piano Solo, with cadenza by Alkan | |
| Minuetto alla Tedesca, Op. 46 | Alkan |
| Andante Romantique, Op. 13 No. 2 | Alkan |
| Saltarelle, op. 23 | Alkan |
| Nocturne in D flat major, Op. 27 No. 2 | Chopin |
| Grande Valse Brillante, Op. 18 | Chopin |
| Liebestraum No. 3 | Liszt |
| Nuages Gris | Liszt |
| Les Regrets de la Nonnette | Alkan |
| Overture: "Le Prophète" | Meyerbeer/Alkan |

The recital was followed by a reception at which the results of the Scholarship Competition were announced. Each competitor received a CD featuring the works of Alkan (Symposium Records CD 1062). Professor Brian Johnson, Master of Fitzwilliam College, warmly welcomed the many members of the Alkan Society who had travelled from distant parts to attend this occasion.

K. C. A. Smith

Editor's note: I was very pleased to be able to attend Thomas Wakefield's recital in the new auditorium of Fitzwilliam College. Once again he demonstrated the superb technique and musicianship which he had shown at his London recital for the Society in September, and applied them as successfully and convincingly to the music of Liszt and Chopin as to that of Alkan. This was in fact the first time I had heard Alkan's Beethoven transcription, truly astounding both in its conception and in Mr. Wakefield's execution. The Society as always is greatly indebted to Ken Smith for his part in organising the Scholarship and the concert, and to Fitzwilliam College for hosting them.

Homage to Ronald Smith

This tribute by François Luguenot appeared in the recent edition of the Bulletin of the Société Alkan, and is printed with his kind permission (translation, with apologies, by the Editor).

Ronald Smith departed from us on the 27th May, at the age of 82, a few days after his last concert. We will carry a more detailed article in a future issue on this pianist's career, but here we must at least recall what a great artist he was. For many of those who today admire the music of Alkan, Smith was the conduit. For those across the Channel, who had the frequent opportunity to attend his recitals, he will remain an unsurpassable inspiration.

Ronald Smith was far more than a great pianist: he was a man of exceptional character, who found in Charles-Valentin Alkan a cause worthy of his scope. I am convinced that the élan with which he was able to share his insights and analyses – for he was a consummate expert in the art of oral introduction to the works which he played – could not have blossomed so well in a more mundane repertoire.

There are many who may say: Ronald Smith is great (*formidable*), but Raymond Lewenthal had more brilliance. I sometimes share this opinion. In everything that this 'other' Alkanian touched, there is an almost unique visionary quality. Whether he played the Reubke sonata, the 'Hexameron' or even Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue', he aimed from the first at the highest level of interpretation. On the other hand, what Lewenthal cruelly lacked and what will give Smith the edge in the eyes of history, is the energy, the method, the will to make a reality (*concrétiser*) of his intentions. In this sense, the British pianist's actions in support of Alkan will have had much more effect than that of the brilliant American. Ronald Smith was not a historian, and certainly his biography of Alkan is not up-to-date. But it *exists*, he made it come to pass. The sketches for the work which Lewenthal projected are intensely fascinating. But they remain more or less unusable, having never passed the stage of sketches. As for the volume which Smith dedicated to the music of his hero, it is full of analyses of richness and warmth, informed by an immense musical culture, which still have much to say to us.

This musician was in every way out of the ordinary. Bear in mind that, when he performed the 'Grand Sonate' op. 33 in 1974 (perhaps indeed *première* the work!) Ronald Smith had to reinvent a completely unprecedented style, aesthetic and technique without any supporting tradition. And that, far from undertaking a makeshift interpretation, he raised himself to the veriest heights so that his recording of the work remains a bench-mark. Smith was not one of those amateurs of spectacle, who seize on some such work more or less mythical in status, more or less interesting, but above all little-known, just to enter the record books. In this respect his recording of the '12 études dans tous les mineurs' op. 39 is also exemplary. So

many pianists would be satisfied with an approximate 'shot' (*mise au point*), convinced – with reason – that in any case interested fanatics will fall over themselves for the recordings, regardless of competition or comparison. But here again, Ronald Smith is objectively at the peak.

It is customary to end a funeral oration by saying how much we have lost with the departed. And surely Ronald Smith is a great loss. His departure, like that of Raymond Lewenthal in 1988, has left me feeling that a mentor, a guide, a trustworthy support, a point of reference, has abandoned me, left me a sort of orphan. Those who knew him better than I are even more bruised by his death. But such feelings, which are the expression of our self-centeredness, will soon pass. Ronald Smith has left us with marvellous performances which continue to delight us. He shows us how perseverance and even temper can achieve great beauty. Lastly, he has passed us a torch. And merely to mourn his passing is to betray his legacy. It is in continuing his tremendous efforts that we will truly honour his memory, that we will keep his work alive. Ronald Smith expects much of us and together we will have the strength not to disappoint him.

Alkan, Rubinstein and the 'Ancienne mélodie de la synagogue'

2004 marked the 175th anniversary of the birth of the great pianist, composer and musical educator Anton Rubinstein. Your editor was invited to give a talk on Rubinstein at the Conservatoire in St. Petersburg and the following article is in part based on this. However, as will be described, the musical celebrations gave rise to a surprising insight into one of Alkan's most celebrated pieces.

My talk discussed Rubinstein's early circle of acquaintances and pointed out how this included many of the leading Jewish musicians of the period, who assisted him and his brother Nikolai when they were establishing their careers, and formed a close acquaintance with Rubinstein that often lasted for many years.

Although born to a Jewish family, Rubinstein of course at no time practised the Jewish religion. In 1831, when Anton was 2 years old, and following anti-Jewish disturbances in the region of his birth, his grandfather arranged for all the family to be converted to the Russian Orthodox Church, so presumably Anton's parents were married in synagogue - although I know of no documentary evidence for this. And yet, Rubinstein was very conscious of his 'otherness'. He once noted dolefully that

To the Jews I'm a Christian, to the Christians a Jew, to the Russians I'm a German, to the Germans a Russian, to the classicists I'm a futurist, to the futurists a reactionary, and so on. Conclusion: neither fish nor fowl, a pathetic fellow.

Amongst Rubinstein's Jewish patrons and friends were Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn, Hiller, and Moscheles, whose son Felix painted a portrait of Rubinstein which is owned by the Royal Academy of Music in London.

Alkan was one of this number. Alkan and Rubinstein must have met in the 1840s, as Alkan was a constant concert-goer at the time, when he was not performing himself. The example of Alkan, who was at the peak of his fame in the 1830s and 1840s, may have been in the mind of

Rubinstein's mother, Klara, when she tried to have Anton enrolled in the Paris Conservatoire in 1841. For the Conservatoire was at that time the only musical institution in Europe which selected its pupils only on the basis of their abilities, regardless of their religion. Alkan was not the only poor Jewish pupil to benefit from this: other examples included the Herz brothers, also virtuoso pianists, the opera composer Halévy, and the cellist, and later operetta composer, Offenbach, whom Anton accompanied at the latter's début concert in Paris in April 1841. It was undoubtedly the example of the Paris Conservatoire, and memories of his own poverty and struggle, which led Anton to the establishment of the St. Petersburg Conservatoire (and his brother Nikolai to found the Moscow Conservatoire). By these actions they revolutionised the future of Russian music.

In 1857 Alkan writes to Hiller:

A lion passed though here last year: Rubinstein. He is really a man with wonderful powers of execution and some interesting compositions. It is however impossible to take these as seriously as he and some of his fanatics would like us to do.

In 1860 Alkan writes:

I recently met a brother of Rubinstein [*Nikolai of course*], who they say also plays the piano very well, who told me than Anton has just finished a work for Vienna [*probably the opera 'Die Kinder der Heide'*] [...] I highly value the merits of Rubinstein; but it seems to me he is not strong on ideas, at least when it comes to writing an interesting stage work.

Nevertheless Anton remembered Alkan with sufficient affection to dedicate to him his Fifth Piano Concerto of 1874. And a further memento is a curious letter in the manuscript archives of the St. Petersburg Conservatoire. It is dated October 1882, from the French virtuoso pianist Delaborde to Anton Rubinstein apologising that he cannot accept Rubinstein's invitation to give concerts in Russia. Now Delaborde was of course the illegitimate son, and the pupil, of Alkan. An intriguing aspect of this letter is that it is on black-bordered notepaper – in other words, Delaborde was in mourning. Is this perhaps a clue to the identity of his mysterious mother?

Rubinstein's anniversary was celebrated in St. Petersburg by a number of concerts, including a performance of his enormous and forgotten oratorio '*Das verlorene Paradies*' after John Milton (a long way after, as music-hall comedians used to say). The curious can read my internet review of this concert at

<http://www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk/blog/archives/000224.php>

But what will be of most interest perhaps to readers of this Bulletin was a performance of the piano-duet arrangement of Rubinstein's concert overture '*Rossia*', written for the opening of the grand exhibition in Moscow of 1884. This is not one of Rubinstein's better compositions although no doubt it suited its purpose well enough. It starts off with some symphonic rhetoric but eventually dissolves into a series of musical sketches of all the different nationalities of the Russian Empire, concluding inevitably with the Tsarist National Anthem written by Lvoff, which we all know from the '*1812 Overture*' of Rubinstein's pupil Tchaikovsky. The list of Russian nationalities is, of course, extremely long, and right at the end (which may perhaps in itself be a 'political' comment) we get the Jews and the gypsies.

ЕВРЕИ. Hebreux.

Secondo.

Moderato assai. =♩.

mf con espressione.

mp pp

ЦЫГАНЕ. Tsiganes.

Con moto. =♩.

rit. a tempo. mf

mf f

Primo.

ЕВРЕИ. Hebreux.

Moderato assai. =♩.

ppp

pp

f

rit. a tempo

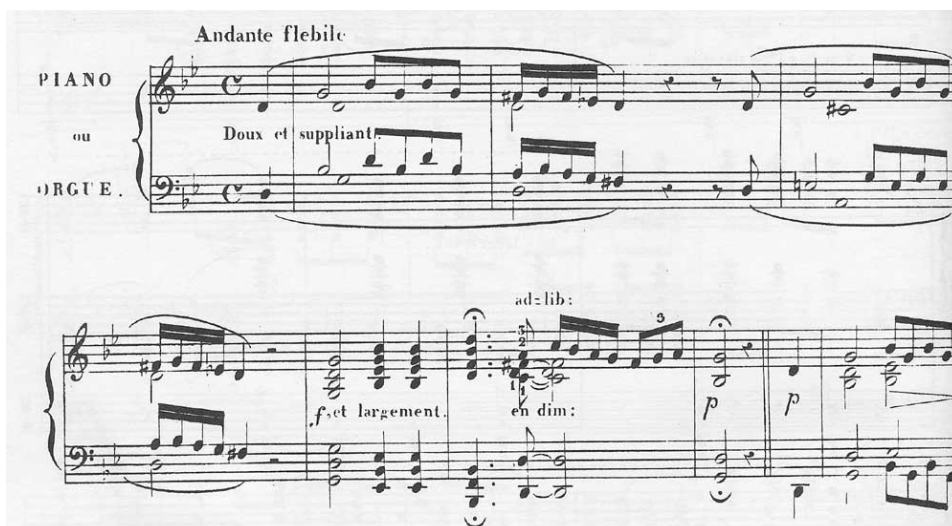
ЦЫГАНЕ. Tsiganes.

Con moto. =♩.

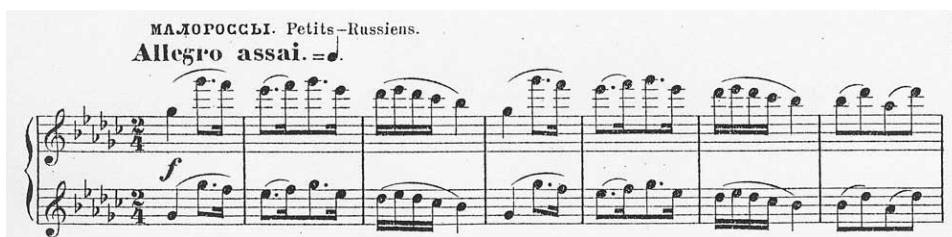
p cresc. f

The secundo of the Jewish section is the well-known prayer for the Day of Atonement, 'Kol Nidre'. The most famous setting of this melody, for 'cello and orchestra by Max Bruch, had been published in 1882. (Bruch, who was not himself Jewish, was a pupil of Hiller and had obtained the melody from the Berlin cantor, Abraham Lichtenstein). But Rubinstein's version is not Bruch's. The latter had made the tune rather more four-square to suit his purposes: Rubinstein's 'Kol Nidre' more accurately reflects the syllabic structure of the prayer itself. I assume therefore that he had consulted an authority on Jewish music or maybe had even recalled the tune from a visit to the synagogue at some time. As far as I am aware, this is the only evidence in Rubinstein's music of him using a specifically Jewish tune (although he wrote a series of operas on Old Testament themes which were, inevitably, dismissed by Wagner as 'horrible Jewish stuff').

But what immediately struck me was Rubinstein's counter-melody to 'Kol Nidre', in the primo part. For it is about as close as you can get to the theme of Alkan's 'Ancienne mélodie de la synagogue' in his op. 31 'Préludes'. No one has yet succeeded in identifying the source of this melody and the assumption has been that Alkan wrote it himself in imitation of the spirit of synagogue music.



Rubinstein's use of this melody, or a very close trope of it, raises a number of questions. Alkan's 'Préludes' were published in 1847, although many of them, including the 'Ancienne mélodie' may date from the previous decade. Might Rubinstein have heard it and remembered it? Another page in the 'Rossia' overture sheds some light on this. Immediately preceding the Jews are the 'Malorossii' or 'Little Russians'. 'Little Russia' was the name given to the western part of the present Ukraine, including the area where Rubinstein was born, near the town of Berdichev. This is the tune Rubinstein gives them:



In fact, the same tune as the descant in the 'Jewish' melody. There seems to me to be a clear implication in this juxtaposition. The suggestion – and one which is perfectly justified by the

facts – is that the Jews of the region used in their folk music not only their own traditional music but also adapted and adopted that of their neighbours. As can be seen, the ‘gypsy’ theme following the Jewish section is also allied to this theme, perhaps drawing on Liszt’s equation of gypsy and Jewish music.

In this perspective, it is more likely that Rubinstein picked up both the ‘*Kol Nidre*’ tune and the descant which he gives to it from knowledge of practice (and folk music) in his native region than from, respectively, Bruch and Alkan. Although the family converted when he was two, there is some evidence that this conversion was not whole-hearted, at least in the case of Anton’s domineering grandfather. A family tradition tells that the latter was in fact forced to convert and to endow a church in order to evade a prison sentence for smuggling, but arranged also to endow a synagogue opposite the church in Berdichev to show his contempt. So it is not impossible that the young Anton may have heard synagogue music there before the family moved to Moscow in his later childhood.

Which leaves the question of Alkan’s version of the tune. My guess is that, rather than the tune having been communicated between the two composers, they both knew it from a similar source. The nature of the tune is in the style of a ‘*nigun*’, a melody (often wordless) chanted by the Hassidic sect (which originated in the Berdichev area). Hassidim could well have brought this tune in their westward migrations to the communities of Alsace and Lorraine, whence the Morhange family originated. Doubtless this is not the last word on the matter, however.....

Paris December 6th: Société Alkan Assemblée Générale / Hamelin Recital

The annual meeting of our French colleagues was held in Paris on 6th December at the premises of M. Billaudot, chaired by their President Laurent Martin. A lively discussion was led by François Luguenot as to the Société’s principal future activities and objectives, paralleling the similar considerations within our Society which we hope to discuss at our own Annual General Meeting. We hope that the present year can see a deepening of cooperation between the two Societies.

Those present – about a dozen of us - then set out for the Théâtre Le Trianon where Marc-André Hamelin was giving his Paris recital. Beginning with a well-articulated account of Haydn’s late C major sonata – in which Mr. Hamelin took great care to handle the notorious ‘open-pedal’ passages to give us maximum sound-effect with minimum, and gave us a warm performance of the beautiful slow movement – the other items included Schumann’s ‘*Fantasiestücke*’, Liszt’s ‘*Ernani*’ paraphrase, and Alkan’s ‘*Symphonie*’. The Schumann perhaps lacked the necessary quantum of *Gemüthlichkeit*, and the Liszt is not in any case amongst the composer’s best inspirations, although needless to say the player’s technique held me enthralled even if I had doubts about the interpretation. The Alkan however magnificently welded technique, passion and intellect and was a true paragon of performance.

The concert ended with a generous selection of encores, including, wittily, both ‘*Reflets dans l’eau*’ and a transcription of ‘*Singing in the Rain*’. A memorable evening, made no less so by Mr. Hamelin’s remarkable embroidered shirt.

DC