

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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Registered Charity No. 2761991

President: Ronald Smith

Secretary: Brian Doyle, 146 Brocks Drive, Cheam, Surrey SM3 9UT
(Tel: 01-641 1763)

Membership Secretary: Eliot Levin, 110 Derwent Avenue, East Barnet
Herts. EN4 8LZ

1988, the Centenary year of Alkan's death and also the 175th anniversary of his birth, is just around the corner. Some exciting events are in prospect which we hope are just the tip of the iceberg.

We have just heard from the B.B.C. that, at long last, Alkan is to be given the prestigious 'This Week's Composer' slot on Radio 3. This will be appropriately in the week beginning March 28th. The programme is broadcast at 9.10 a.m., Monday to Friday. In that week two concerts are announced which I am sure will be a must for all members and admirers of Alkan (see Forthcoming Concerts).

THE 1988 FESTIVAL

In our search for sponsors we have been partially successful. The B'nai B'rith Society have expressed great interest in sponsoring Ronald Smith's recital on Saturday, December 3rd 1988, in association with their Jewish Music Festival. Ronald Smith's previous Alkan recital in July 1986, which was included in their Festival, was a great success. Meanwhile we are continuing in our search for sponsors for the other events. We have been turned down by most of the many companies we have approached. This comes as no surprise as competition for sponsorship is very fierce. Nevertheless we are persevering and remain optimistic.

Donations for the Festival are still coming in and the total in the Fund is now approaching £1,000. We are grateful for the generosity of members who have contributed so far and we hope that other members may be encouraged to also donate.

FORTHCOMING CONCERTS

The cellist Moray Welsh has very enterprisingly organised a concert on the centenary day, Tuesday March 29th in the Wigmore Hall. This will be a unique occasion when we will have the opportunity to hear all three of Alkan's major chamber works:- The Violin Duo op. 21, the Piano Trio op. 30 and the Cello Sonata op. 47. Partnering Moray Welsh will be Ronald Smith and the violinist James Clark, leader of the BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra.

On the preceding day, Monday March 28th at 7.30 p.m. in the Purcell Room, the pianist Santiago Mantas will give the following programme centred around Alkan:-
Le tambour bat aux champs op. 50 no.2, Preludes Nos. 23, 13 & 12 op. 31, Zorcico

- Alkan; three Songs without words - Mendelssohn; Barcarolle op. 38 no. 6, Héraclite et Démocrite op. 63 no. 39, Transcription of 2nd movement of Bach's Flute Sonata BWV1031, La Vision op. 63 no.1, March No.3 op. 37 - Alkan; Waltz in C sharp minor op. 64 no. 2, Nocturne in D flat major op. 27 no. 2, Etude in G flat major op. 10 no.5 (black keys) - Chopin; Deuxieme Nocturne op. 57 no. 1 and the Sonatine op. 61 - Alkan. This recital is promoted by Eliot Levin.

The pianists Anthony Goldstone and Caroline Cleemow have been touring the U.K. this Autumn with a varied programme of duets including the first performance in this country (and probably the world) of Alkan's 'Fantasie sur Don Juan' for four hands. This work will be included in their programme on Sunday 20th December, 1987 at 6.30 p.m. in the Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. On 2nd December, 1987 at 7.30 p.m. at Millichope Park, near Munslow, Shropshire, they are playing Alkan's Benedictus op. 54 in the Roger Smalley arrangement for two pianos. On March 17th 1988 at 8.00 p.m. in the Theatre Clywd, Mold they are performing Alkan's Impromptu on a Lutheran choral op. 69 arr. Smalley for two pianos.

A REPORT OF THE MEETING ON MAY 6TH

THOMAS WAKEFIELD in Recital by Charles Hailstone

The recital which Thomas Wakefield, the Society's member from Manchester, gave on Wednesday 6th May in the City of London School, was explicitly memorable in that on writing this piece three weeks after the event the memory instantly obliges in the recreation of the excitement and enjoyment of the evening and its abundant splendours. There were two concert grands in the music room overlooking the Thames. Thomas chose the Yamaha, a glittering black and challenging engine of sound, which exactly responded to the architectural demands of his opening piece. This was Liszt's concert arrangement of the Sarabande and Chaconne from Handel's Almira, in which the former's enrichments are soon brazed upon the latter's classicism in a wholly admirable manner. Here was one of the generally unknown and certainly unrecorded works of the evening. There followed an Alkan group, the Minuetto allo tedesca, and Une Nuit d'Hiver, Carnaval and La Retraite from the first suite of Les Mois. Admirers of Liszt, such as the writer, tremendously enjoyed Lyon from Album d'un Voyageur, the Romance and Marche Heroique, the last named "dans le style Hongroise", probably receiving its first exhibition in a great many years. After all these intensities the second part of the evening opened with the rich bucolic Larghetto from the Concerto in F Minor, op. 16, of Adolf von Henselt (1814-1889) one of whose pupils was John Field, the Irish composer and pianist. This was a splendid realisation by Thomas himself who has combined solo and tutti and it stands well. Busoni's celebrated pupil Petri considered the Concerto one of the most difficult to play. The complete Concerto has been recorded by Raymond Lewenthal, the Society's member in New York, on CBS MG-35183 (Charles Mackerras and LSO). Alkan Society recitals are now noted for first performances and this was the case with Alkan's Scherzo focoso, op. 34, which received its first public exhibition in the kingdom. A dazzling piece which must one day find its way on to disc. There are episodes with glimpses of the master in one of his expansively happy and contented moods, of the sort experienced in his Grande Sonate (first movement). A fragile drawing room Nocturne, op. 16 no. 4 of Paderewski followed. The evening concluded with an immense piece by Carl Tausig (1841-1871), his Fantasie on themes from Moniuszko's opera Halka, in which Thomas and the Yamaha, like a well matched rider and mount, produced an

astonishing and invigorating effect of the sort always expected and received. Of course, one could journey through remaining life and never hear such works again were it not for the likes of Thomas. One is reminded of accounts of the great lions of the last century who always seemed to be an extinct kind, but this is not the case as Thomas unfailingly shows. In a vote of thanks the writer expressed the hope of many returns of Thomas and that his own special art would eventually be in permanent requisition on disc.

REPORT OF THE MEETING ON 29TH MAY, 1987 at the Guildhall School of Music.

Our President, Ronald Smith, introduced and played Alkan's *Trois études de bravoure* (Scherzi) op. 16, and the *Trois grandes études* op. 76. The following is a summary:-

In his introduction to op. 16 he began by placing them in the context of Alkan's output. "Alkan wrote a lot of juvenilia, rondos, sets of variations etc. of which none show any great originality. The 1st *Concerto da camera* op. 10 of 1832 shows the influence of Hummel, Weber and perhaps Moscheles. In the 2nd *Concerto da camera* op. 10 written two years later, there are hints of the Alkan we know. Then there is a gap in his publications, although he obviously continued composing. Hearing performances of the Beethoven Symphonies obviously had a great influence on him. In 1837 he published 12 pieces which became known as 12 *Caprices ou Etudes*. They were published in sets of three, the *Trois études de bravoure* (Improvisations) op. 12, *Trois andante romantiques* op. 13, *Trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique* op. 15 and finest of all, the *Trois études de bravoure* op. 16. They are shorn of all early Romantic clichés and epitomize his change of style. They are completely Alkan and could not be by anybody else. The missing op. 14 could be the *Trois grandes études* which existed without an opus number throughout most of Alkan's life. They are much bigger works and would not have fitted into the set of 12. We do not know when they came out, but it was probably 1838 or 1839."

To give us an idea of how Alkan's style has changed he spoke briefly about the *Scherzi* op. 16 focusing particularly on the remarkable trios of these works.

In the 1st Scherzo he mentioned an ostinato passage early on which has pre-echoes of Mahler, a generation before that composer was born. Of the trio he said "it is a captivating evocation of bells with a haze of peddle-held sound all the way through, with the harmonies out of focus".

"The second piece is a minuet with an extraordinary middle section - an innocuous little tune marked 'dolce'. He repeats each train with an extraordinary inflection which nobody else thought of doing - playing at the same time, all the notes of the tune and then making the tune emerge from a spiders web of ties."

"In the third Scherzo the trio is marked 'prestissimamente' and is in 2/8 time. In a footnote Alkan says that two of the 2/8 are to be exactly equal to one of the 3/4 bars. There is a very tricky passage when he comes back to the opening 3/4 bar against two of the 2/8 bars of the trio, to be played at the same time". Towards the end of this piece there is a passage which foreshadows the final movement of Chopin's B flat minor sonata.

Then of the *Trois grandes études* op. 76 he said. "These studies are far more

expansive and sophisticated works. The Left hand study takes about 10 minutes. There is a special kind of writing for left hand as exemplified by the Ravel Concerto. Strange to relate, a copy of Alkan's left hand study has been recently discovered in the Ravel archives. Even stranger, the end of the Ravel Concerto sounds like the end of Alkan's Right hand study - D major arpeggios spliced with B flats. The first part is a kind of expansive introduction, very romantic and voluptuous. A staccato base leads to the second part which forms the basis of a variation like finale."

"The second Study for right hand alone lasts for 22 minutes. A huge monumental work which stands alone. It has an even more grand, expansive opening introduction which leads to a set of four variations on an original theme. The theme is in two halves the second of which is repeated in order to incorporate a very touching and distant modulation. The first variation is a kind of scherzando, the second modulates to F major. The third and fourth variations are very elaborate. The third has remarkable writing for one hand. Although very pianistic it sounds like a paraphrase of special effects on the fiddle. The fourth and final variation is slow and mysterious, darkly coloured and very beautiful. This leads to the fearsome finale in which Alkan returns to the home key of D major. He brings back the opening which modulates through many different keys. Some parts are marked to be played 'arrogantly' others 'courageously'. This leads to the real climax of the piece when Alkan combines the opening theme with the variation theme, with timpani rolls, all to be played at the same time and building to a huge climax. It is a very serious and imposing work. A lot of the pianistic effects are so new and extraordinary and yet the overall shape of the piece is classical."

There was not enough time to say anything about the third study for the two hands reunited, but Ronald reminded us of the vast technical problems any performer of these three Studies will have to overcome. "After playing the right hand study, the left hand has been left out on a limb for 22 minutes and is not quite ready for all the very, very fast filigree work of the final study, and the right hand is utterly worn out, like a piece of chewed up boot lace".

That said, Ronald rose to the occasion magnificently, playing with great technical command and sensitivity. He received rapturous applause from the large audience, many of them pianists. Not only an aural experience to remember but a visual one to, watching the performer tackle the almost superhuman technical problems posed. Of the three Scherzi op. 16, the third stood out as probably Alkan's finest work up to that date.

Ronald's recording of op. 16 and op. 76 will be released in February of next year on E.M.I. records.

ALKAN VOLUME II BY RONALD SMITH

To date there have been two published reviews of Ronald Smith's book on Alkan's Music Volume II (Kahn & Averill). Both are deservedly most enthusiastic.

Wilfred Mellers, the distinguished composer, writer and teacher, makes it clear in his review in the Times Literary Supplement (October 16-22) that he has long been an admirer of Alkan's music. He begins by relating the familiar story of Alkan's youthful successes followed by his gradual withdrawal from public life. He then mentions those musicians who have promoted Alkan's cause since his

death. He continues:-

'On the whole the academic fraternity has treated Alkan with a frosty disdain spawned of fear and ignorance. Familiarity with the music is now inducing a thaw, for the work is substantially recorded, if still inadequately available in published score. We must hope that the flourishing Alkan Society will promote a complete, authoritative edition. Ronald Smith's first book on Alkan, a biographic volume, came out as long ago as 1976. Since the composer's psychological abnormalities are interesting mostly for their bearing on the music, it is regrettable that the second volume has been so long delayed. Even so, it is enthusiastically to be welcomed, for it is well written, well produced and, with the help of nearly 300 music type examples, offers technical analysis of the kind that promotes experiential understanding. And it is cheap at the price.'

'Ronald Smith discusses Alkan's oeuvre by category rather than chronology; and doesn't evade the problems created by Alkan's being musically as well as psychologically enigmatic. He composed with immense fecundity, and some of his music looks, and even sounds banal. All of it, however, is tinged with sudden startlements that make the scalp prickle; and with the major works one accepts Smith's case that Alkan - a "subversive conservatism" - is at once the most wildly revolutionary and the most traditional of the great Romantic piano composers. For Alkan is no feather-brained keyboard exhibitionist, but a powerfully professional composer of formidable skills. He is a superb contrapuntist in baroque tradition, and is an heir to Haydn in his classical command of "symphonic" argument; more directly, he shares Beethoven's large-scale, "morphological" approach to form - as well as his partiality for gritty textures and for the abrupt punchline or sudden reversal. Among his immediate contemporaries he is closest to Berlioz, who also "does coolly the things that are most fiery"; it may be the fusion of this aristocratic French poise with Jewish cabbalistic fervour that defines Alkan's unique savour - simultaneously wry and visionary, acrid and sumptuous, religious and mephistophelean. Berlioz described his own large-scale works as "Babylonian", and one could say as much of Alkan's *Grande Sonate* describing the four ages of man, which he wrote in his thirty-fourth year, predating the Liszt Sonata by four years. The scherzo comes first, in D major, followed by a vastly intricate Sonata allegro in D sharp minor; the third movement is in G major, the finale in G sharp minor, "extremement lent". The implications of this weird key scheme are profoundly explored, as are the Lisztian metamorphoses of themes between Faust and the Devil. The gigantic sonata movement climaxes in what Smith calls "exorcism by fugue" involving "six parts in invertible counterpoint plus three extra voices and three doublings - eleven parts in all!" Throughout, the music justifies its Beethovenian references to Faust, Atlas and Prometheus, for it exists at a level of apocalyptic imagination - and technical control - compared with which Liszt seems a pygmy. Nor does Alkan necessarily require vast dimensions to achieve such effects, which characterize, hardly less tellingly, the later and deceptively titled *Sonatine*, which lasts a mere twenty minutes, and is electrical in agility yet classically taut in texture - at least until the final cataclysm, which Smith likens, in one of his precisely revelatory metaphors, to a mass-precipitation of lemmings over a cliff'.

'Alkan's best-known work is the immense set of *Etudes* in all the minor keys, by now established as a masterpiece, even within the conservatory curriculum. They incorporate a *Symphony* in four movements in "progressive" tonality, declining

down the cycle of fifths: wherein authentic piano writing sounds convincingly orchestral. The even vaster three-movement Concerto for solo piano manages to differentiate between solo and tutti, and even illusorily to suggest their interlacing. Smith demonstrates that what is most remarkable about these literally breath-taking works is not the originality of the conception, but the irresistible momentum with which the material is deployed over vast spans - especially in the first movement of the Concerto. They demand more of the listener, as well as the performer, than does the dazzling variation-set, *Le Festin d'Esope*, with which Alkan's Opus 39 ends; yet that immediately "effective" work proves especially in the context of the complete set to have its own tragic monumentality, for its veerings and tackings between crazy comedy and fearful frenzy climax in a coda which Alkan justly labels "granitic". Perhaps these almost surreal oscillations of mood and manner are related to the imperial glamour of the Parisian world outside the recluse's study; that royal fanfares should be metrically (and hilariously) punctured by barking dogs anticipates Mahler's parodies of militarism.

But the great Etudes are fairly well known; the most useful part of Smith's book may be his charting of paths through the jungle of short pieces, some of which don't claim to do more than charm, though many are fraught, lyrically, harmonically and of course pianistically, with Alkan's necromancy. They may be strikingly prophetic of Bartok, whose famous *Allegro barbaro* is both less barbarous and less disciplined than Alkan's Lydian mode piece with the same title; of Faure in the modal linearity and dreamy figurations of the *Barcarolles* and *Nocturnes*; of Debussy in the sensuously static harmonies of *Les Soupirs*; of Prokofiev, in the metallic, march-like *Marchen* of the *Trois Petites Fantaisies*, which are fantastic certainly, but rigorously controlled and not at all petites; of Mahler and Shostakovich in the sinister nightmare of a small tone-poem like *Le Tambour bat aux champs*; of Ives or Henry Cowell in the savage-ludicrous tone clusters of *Les Diablotins* (which Alkan possibly adapted from Scarlatti's "Spanish" acciaccaturas). The "futurism" of these pieces is indeed remarkable; yet what, really, do they anticipate but themselves? They are "news that stays news" - most of all the wondrous *Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer*, wherein the mad woman wails her disconsolate folk-like lament high in soprano register, while the ocean sighs surlily in the bottom range of the keyboard.

Smith's comments on these pieces are unerringly perspicacious, the more so because he is not uncritical. When he finds a piece tiresome even in its adventurousness, he is not afraid to say so; occasionally he even admits that a possible parodistic "banal" piece may be simply banal. With Alkan, it is difficult to be sure; and in the last phase of his life another problem intrudes since Alkan, as his hermeticism increased, relinquished the grandiose grand in favour of an instrument virtually obsolete - Erard's pedal-piano. Smith hazards that the compositions Alkan wrote for this instrument contain "some of the profoundest music" for the medium since Bach; and adds that "if such a claim should strike the reader as wildly improbable and wilfully irresponsible ... I can only say to my organ colleagues Search and ye shall find". From all I know of Alkan's music and Smith's integrity I go along with that, and hope tht the Alkan Society may find funds to salvage the music, even if only in compromising versions for piano or organ.

Smith's epilogue is a masterly summary which indicates how Alkan's ambiguities make sense in relation to the "pluralistic" society he lived in but was not of. At once aloof and fierily passionate, Alkan will never be a member of the

Establishment, though Ronald Smith has demonstrated that he cannot again be dislodged from his established position as (in Busoni's phrase) "one of the five greatest writers for the piano since Beethoven". He also composed an aborted symphony and a little chamber music, including a magnificent *Grande Sonate de Concert* for cello and (diabolically virtuosic) piano, the adagio of which - a sublimely strange meditation on a passage from the Book of Micah - seems to me one of the greatest, not merely most extraordinary, movements in nineteenth-century chamber music. Alongside such a tragic fresco we find a mordant jeu d'esprit like the *Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un papagallo*, brilliantly scored for four voices, three oboes and bassoon: music that looks parodistic but sounds, with its squawks and wails embraced within the most ingenious chromatic counterpoint, frightening as well as funny. Clearly this music came from the same "obsessional" mind (Smith's word) that created the adagio of the *Cello Sonata* and the more cabalistic of pieces for the pedal-piano. This reminds us that Alkan's life and death are themselves a cat's-cradle of tragedy and farce; he was killed by pulling a bookcase on top of his then frail body, while stretching to reach the Talmud, bible of Hasidic occult lore.'

The other review, by Max Harrison, appeared in the October edition of *Musical Opinion*. In it he says:-

'No doubt we shall never know the full reasons for Alkan's turning away from the international career that obviously awaited him and settling into a secretive life in Paris. Not in this book but five years ago in an interview in the *Canadian Music Magazine* (June 1982) Smith said, "There must have been something lofty and puritanic about Alkan as a performer." And as a person, one may suspect. It is possible that he saw through his youthful triumph and grasped the illusory nature of what the world calls success? Certainly his isolation is a significant aspect of his greatness, accounting for the recondite areas of expression which his music explores. It is full of strange, eldritch visions, the best of them conveyed so powerfully as to be disturbing even in some of the early works. Smith speaks of "a vein of necromantic fantasy", and it emerges from his often vivid commentary, and from the music examples, that some of the extraordinary pieces remain completely unknown - for instance the *Trois études de bravoure op. 16*.

Similarly, though Alkan's large works have now achieved a certain notoriety, if only because of their phenomenal difficulty, his status as a prolific and highly original miniaturist is largely unsuspected, and this despite the smaller pieces being so much more accessible to performers. Not that they are any less mysterious. Of certain of them Smith writes that "an intangible, almost mystical power seems to invest their apparent naivety". Given Alkan's reclusive existence, the story of his music is far more exciting than the story of his life, and I found this book completely absorbing. I can add only one very small twig to the blaze of Ronald Smith's discourse. He says that the theme of *Le festin d'Esopé* is "one of those maddening tunes one seems to have known all one's life but cannot identify". In fact it is close in type and style to the theme of *Souvenir de Porto Rico op. 31* by Gottschalk, who played extensively in Paris during the 1840s.'

AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY our former Secretary John White writes:-

Through the kindness of a friend, John Lade, I have recently made an interesting and important discovery with regard to Alkan's '25 Preludes' op. 31. With great

generosity, John gave me a first edition, published by Brandus in three parts. To my amazement, at the beginning of the first part was a full-page introduction headed "Advertissement" (Information or Advice) and signed with the date 17 avril 1947. Every number in the op. 31 is marked 'Piano ou Orgue' and one is printed on 3 staves. In this introduction Alkan tells organists how they can modify certain numbers to make them more playable on the organ. They include slackening of pace for the fast ones, holding a chord which is constantly repeated, ignoring accent marks, using single notes for octaves and so on; just the things that an organist would do if called upon. The important thing is that everything he writes is concerned with the organ - not the pedallier. Some people, because certain numbers look so intensely pianistic believe that op. 31 was intended for that instrument. Confusion has arisen because Delaborde and Philipp, when they edited Alkan's work, must have left out this important page - whether by accident or design it would be difficult to establish - and no writer on Alkan known to me seems to have seen it. Ronald Smith is greatly intrigued and Hugh Macdonald described it as "a great find" and "most illuminating". Billaudot's printing of the work now leaves out the work 'orgue' entirely from the title page!

If any organist Member of our Society would like a photostat copy of this important page, I will gladly send him one. (Please address to 35 St. James's Drive, London SW17 7RN)

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS

Symposium Records by arrangement with EMI Records Ltd., is now able to offer all available recordings, LP, Cassette and CD, of music by Alkan from the EMI catalogue. This arrangement has been established in response to difficulties reported in obtaining these items. Symposium Records hopes that members will order recordings for birthday and Christmas presents for their families and friends, as well as to adorn their own shelves, thus generating and demonstrating demand for the music of Alkan.

Symposium Records is directed by our member Eliot Levin who feels that in this pre-centenary year to encourage EMI is extremely important. Re-issues of withdrawn recordings and issues of new ones are under discussion now.

At the moment the only available items are "Alkan in Miniature" and the boxed set (op. 39 etc.), both by our President. Every copy ordered is a quantum of encouragement.

Eliot Levin is also pleased to announce that Symposium Records is itself preparing brand new recordings of Alkan's music for the centenary year. Orders to 110, Derwent Avenue, East Barnet, Herts. EN4 8LZ.

ERIKA FOX

The composer Erika Fox has very kindly agreed to take part in our next meeting on December 8th (see Forthcoming Meetings). Erika is a busy and much played composer. In her childhood she was surrounded by a number of musical and religious influences also shared by Alkan. She will explain the effects of these influences on her own music and go on to talk about Alkan's music. The talk will be informal and should be a marvellous opportunity to hear more about Alkan's music through the eyes of one of today's composers.

MARK STARR

The conductor Mark Starr has very generously donated copies of his orchestrations of Alkan's Symphony, Overture and le Festin d'Esopé, all from Op. 39, for our Alkan collection in the Guildhall School library.

A MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

I will have been Honorary Secretary of the Society for 4 years in July 1988. It has been a very interesting and stimulating experience but I now feel that I would like to relinquish this position at the end of this period in order to devote my spare time to my many other interests. I also feel that it can only be for the good of the Society that there are regular changes in the personalities who run it. In order for the Society to develop fresh ideas are always needed. I would still like to take an active part in the Society so I will remain Treasurer for the time being and also a member of the Committee. If any members feel that they would like to take over the Secretaryship at the end of my term, please contact me. Also if any members would like to help the Society by serving on the Committee please let me know.

NEW MEMBERS

MARK COUGHLAN - Australia
F.R. HEATH - Cardigan, Dyfed, Wales
VERY REV. STEPHEN HOLFORD - St. Augustin Abbey, Ramsgate
DOM. DUNSTAN KEAUFFLING - St. Augustin Abbey, Ramsgate
JULIAN KEAUFFLING - Frinton-on-Sea
FLORENT PLOQUINN - Livoret, France
J.R. SHARMAN - ASCOT, BERKS.

FORTHCOMING MEETING

Tuesday December 8th at 7.00 p.m.:- a talk by Erika Fox at the Guildhall School of Music, Silk Street, Barbican, London EC2. A notice will be posted near the entrance to tell us which room the meeting will take place in.

Details of next year's meeting will be in the January bulletin.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

The subscription rates remain the same as last year:-

£6.00 for London members
£4.00 for members out-of-London and students
£7.00 for overseas members (payable in sterling)

All rates cover husband and wife membership.