

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Reg. Charity No. 276199)

BULLETIN - JANUARY, 1984

REPORT OF JOINT MEETING with the Chopin Society on Sunday, November 20th, 1983, at the Polish Institute, 20, Princes Gate, London S.W.7.

Richard Shaw writes:-

"We were delighted and privileged to be able to hold a joint meeting with the Chopin Society. The event was well attended, with about forty members and guests of both societies comfortably seated, in an elegant room overlooking Hyde Park. Mrs. Swiatek, Hon. Secretary of the Chopin Society, opened the proceedings with warm words of welcome, but with the sad news that Grazina Maciejko, the opening pianist, had only days before injured her right hand. In spite of her many stitches and, no doubt, considerable pain, Miss Maciejko insisted on performing, giving a spirited, impassioned account of Chopin's second Scherzo and sensitive performances of the Andante spianato and Polonaise, and the charming Nocturne in C sharp minor (the one which Chopin wrote in his sister's album and which contains references to a number of his well-known works).

For the main part of the second half of the programme we were treated to a rare performance of Alkan's Piano Trio Op. 30, played by Andrew Ball (piano) and two advanced students from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Brian Wilson (violin) and Sarah Butcher (cello). Richard Shaw prefaced this with a few remarks on the links between Alkan and Chopin, quoting one or two letters illustrating their close friendship. By way of an introduction to Alkan's music, Andrew Ball played and introduced three distinctive works for piano solo, the familiar Barcarolle from the third book of Chants (Op.65), Fa, with its unnerving repetition of the note F, mostly in conflict with the surrounding harmonies, and the haunting Song of the Mad Woman. He played (on Moiseiwitsch's piano, incidentally) with great conviction and clarity.

The Piano Trio itself proved fascinating for many reasons, for the curious and idiosyncratic use of the violin and cello, for its position in Alkan's oeuvre - a lengthy work written at a time when he was developing his distinctive voice - and, not least, for the lively, energetic performance it received. One would hardly believe that the players had less than a fortnight to get to know the piece, following the indisposition of some colleagues!

The meeting was closed after Mrs. Swiatek had graciously invited our members to attend the Chopin Society meeting in early December, and Richard Shaw, on behalf of the Alkan Society, had thanked the Chopin Society and the Polish Institute for their kind hospitality on this occasion.

Our thanks also go to John Newing for helping to organise our part of the concert".

ALKAN SOCIETY LEAFLET

In an effort to continue building up our membership numbers and to publicise the activities of the Society, we have just had a fresh batch of leaflets printed. Thanks to the efforts of all concerned the first leaflet easily paid its way, bringing many more contacts and gaining us new members. Please ensure the new leaflet enjoys a similar success. A few are enclosed with your copy of this Bulletin. Would you see if libraries, colleges, music and record shops in your area will display them? They could also be used to encourage your friends to join. If you would like more copies, please contact the Secretary.

Back in July the Secretary received a most interesting letter from Dave Smith, one of our recent members. He comments on our resume of a couple of articles written by Daniel Caux which was printed in the Bulletin for April 1983 (the green one). As well as being keenly interested in Alkan's music, Dave has also written about the piano sonatas of John White. His lengthy essay on the subject appeared in the Autumn 1980 issue of Contact a magazine devoted to contemporary music. Apart from John White (the British composer and pianist, that is) who shares our founder's name, there are further links between himself and Alkan.

Dave's essay reveals how many of White's hundred-plus piano sonatas reflect different aspects of his response to a whole host of 19th-century composers, Alkan included. One quotation which is particularly striking is White's comment on the different ways in which Brahms versus Alkan handle musical material:

'Brahms would draw things to a satisfactory conclusion: everyone is comforted and made at home by means of the argument. With Alkan everyone goes home highly disturbed by the way the argument has gone'.

Now there's a stimulating and provocative idea! For an expansion of this and other points we are happy to quote much of Dave's letter below:-

"I was somewhat surprised to find my own name mentioned in the context of articles by Daniel Caux. M. Caux is correct when he states that a number of present-day composers represent 'the countermovement to the preoccupations of the avant-garde' although it should perhaps be noted that at least two of the musicians named (John White and Moondog) have been active since the 1950s. Judging by the report in the Bulletin it would appear that ~~some of the other things he has written about both Alkan and present-day composers is misleading or mystifying...~~

...I am willing to bet that there are Alkan Society members who share many of White's enthusiasms (Schumann, Busoni, Satie, Reger, Scriabin, Medtner, Bruckner, Van Dieren, Fauré, Godowsky, Liszt, Martin, Rachmaninov, Sorabji Szymanowski). Notice the absence of Brahms and Mendelssohn - and by the way, I wonder what M. Caux means by an 'unusual cliché', if that is his expression. In an article entitled 'Satie and the British' (Contact, Autumn 1982), Gavin Bryars writes: "White fulfills quite perfectly the requirement that Jean-Aubry maintained was essential in the well-being of English music." Jean-Aubry wrote 'When shall we see a campaign opened in England against Brahms?' ('British Music through French Eyes' in Musical Quarterly, 1919). The musical sound that White finds the least palatable is the kind of earnest rumbling, 'the development noise, that proliferates in Brahms, both in and out of development sections.'

As far as Alkan is concerned, I feel it's dangerous glibly to relate a composer's 'modernism' to later phenomena without supporting evidence. It only spreads confusion and misinformation. Take the apparently innocent issue of clusters, for instance. Why does M. Caux relate Alkan's 'clusters' to those of Henry Cowell - to make Alkan's achievement seem more impressive? Cowell uses fists, palms or forearms to play clusters of white notes, black notes or both together in order to produce a whole range of effects, often programmatic, as in evocative pieces such as The Snows of Fujiyama and Tiger but he did not 'invent' the device. Alkan's clusters in Les Diablotins are arpeggiated, fingered, are harmonically and melodically consistent with the key, and they sound more like a mass of grace notes. Only at the end of the piece (where the arpeggiation has to be swift) do they sound at all like real clusters and even then not like the percussive, white-noise type of clusters found in American music at least as early as 1861.

The amazing thing is not that Alkan anticipated Cowell. The amazing thing is that Alkan should have employed the effect he did. I'm not against comparisons - M. Caux points to some quite sensible relationships with Satie, for instance - but discussing Alkan in the same breath as Dadaist collages and Nancarrow's player-piano studies is implausible and quite unscientific. More fruitful is to compare Alkan with Gottschalk, another 19th-century composer, whose employment of repetition as an echo-effect (in The Banjo, for example) is just as unique as Alkan's."

Readers' comments, for possible publication in the forthcoming Bulletin are invited. Please address them to Richard Shaw, 45a Cannon Hill, Southgate, London N14 6LH

This time last year we published an extract from Frederick Niecks's engaging account of a meeting with Alkan in the summer of 1880. We are continuing this series of sources relating to Alkan's life and musical activities with another eye-witness account, this time by the Hungarian composer, pianist, and writer on music, Alexandre de Bertha*. This is taken from his article 'Ch. Valentin Alkan aîné - étude psycho-musicale' which appeared in the Bulletin français de la société internationale de musique, 1909. Further excerpts from this valuable source will appear in subsequent issues of the Bulletin; but for now, let the author speak of his connection with Alkan:

"It was at the beginning of 1872 that M. Elie Delaborde, the splendid pianist and eminent professor at the Conservatoire, introduced me to Alkan, doing so with an eagerness which is, unfortunately, all too rare among colleagues.

I had first met Delaborde the year before in London, at the home of Walter Bache (...) (Bache and Bertha were fellow students of Liszt in 1864-5). My introduction to Alkan took place in one of the composer's apartments at 29, rue Daru - he had two so as not to be disturbed by the noise of neighbours. One was on the first floor, where he slept and worked, and the other, above it, served as a dressing-room, library and spare-room.

I was told later that originally he had a bell on his front door consisting of three chimes tuned to C, E and G. This was intended to delight visitors, but instead frightened them away with the noise. By my time, it no longer existed.

His home was eccentric in many other ways. When Delaborde and I visited him at one o'clock in the afternoon he was still having lunch at a small neatly-laid table next to his piano. He informed us that he cooked for himself, using butter which he bought at his usual greengrocer's in the Halles-Centrales market. He did so because his digestion was poor and he had a poor stomach which he thought would play tricks on him should the ingredients not be of the highest quality. He was convinced that all servants were cheats..."

*A brief biography of Bertha appears in the New Grove under 'Bertha, Sandor'.

Contributed by Richard Shaw.

PERSONALIA

We are pleased and honoured to announce that Roger Smalley, the distinguished composer, pianist and teacher, has recently joined the Society. Stephen Walsh's lengthy article in the New Grove examines his many compositions. But in addition to his activities in this field, Roger Smalley has also spent much time pursuing his interest in Alkan. In a recent letter to the Secretary he writes 'Time does nothing but increase my admiration of Alkan's unique genius'. He also mentions performing Beethoven's Third

Piano Concerto with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra (conducted by David Measham) in November 1981. On that occasion he played Alkan's mammoth cadenza. Incidentally he wrote about this cadenza in 'Two Virtuosos' Cadenzas for Beethoven' in Music and Musicians in 1972. He has also performed the Cello Sonata a couple of times in Australia with Rohan de Saram, has arranged Op. 54 and 69 for 2 pianos and recorded them for Australian radio, and has arranged several Esquisses for string quartet. 'The Impromptu Op. 69, he writes, 'emerges as one of the major works for two pianos of the 19th century. Only things like Brahms - Haydn and Reger's Beethoven Variations can be compared with it'.

As a foot-note, he comments on his interest in playing the Piano Trio but inability to locate a copy of the score and parts. Alas, although many musicians have expressed similar feelings, the work is currently out-of-print. There is a copy in the British Library (h.557.b.(6)) but this can only be photographed on to microfilm, making its later conversion to photocopies for performing use rather expensive and unsatisfactory. If any member finds a copy in good condition, with the score and both parts (whether the early edition with no publisher (just 'Paris 1841' on the title-page) and the distinctive plate-number 'A', the Richault or the later Costallat one (plate '9541 R')) please purchase it (if less than about £15) and contact the Secretary for reimbursement. It could then be put in the Guildhall Library and photocopied as required.

ALKAN LIBRARY

Dr. John White has very kindly donated to the Library a first edition of Op. 23, Saltarelle.

DISCOGRAPHY

Brian Doyle informs us that the Malcolm Binns recording of Alkan's Capriccio alla Soldatesca, Le Tambour Bat aux champs and Op. 39 No. 10 (last movement of the Concerto), first issued in 1967, is currently being re-issued on Concert Artist Records, No. FED-TC017. The record also includes a performance of 6 concert Études by Rubinstein. Brian also draws our attention to the present Wigmore Hall series of Concerts devoted to French composers and consisting mostly of music for voice, piano and chamber ensemble. They include rare performances of Dukas's Piano Sonata in E flat Minor, Roussel's Sonatine Op. 16, the Liszt transcription of Berlioz's Harold in Italy and pieces by Rameau, Chausson, Chabrier, Séverac, Saint-Saens, Francaix, Reynaldo Hahn and Dutilleux -works by 20 French composers in all, 'in fact (Brian writes), every French composer one can think of, except one - guess who?'

PIANO ROLLS OF MUSIC BY ALKAN

In the October Bulletin it was mentioned that Elliot Levin had made recordings of four Alkan piano rolls at the Musical Museum. Elliot has written the following note to accompany the tapes:-

On October 22nd 1983, the four known piano-rolls of music by Alkan were transcribed at the National Musical Museum, Middlesex, with the kindness and assistance of its Director, Mr. Frank Holland, MBE.

Reproduction of music by piano-roll is a very complex process, of which an excellent description by John Farmer is to be found in the Journal of the British Institute of Recorded Sound, Numbers 25,26 and 28. Here it is sufficient to say that accurate reproduction requires not only that piano, player mechanism and roll are in excellent condition, but also that the controls are set properly.

Those who have been personally involved in detailed restoration work, who have "got their hands dirty" will appreciate the benefit to the Society of being allowed to use the Museum's instruments. In control the most important factor is roll speed. For this recording the machines were specially re-calibrated.

This cassette is a faithful copy of the transcription; no attempt has been made to mask or remove sounds of the mechanism (rolls against guides, air-compressors, etc.) and the pieces are described precisely as on the rolls themselves.

- (1) Welte-Mignon Library (licensee)
De Luxe Reproducing Roll Corp. NY.
De Luxe Reproducing Player Roll C 7010

Étude a mouvement semblable et perpetuel
Op. 15 No. 3 Alkan-MacDowell
Played by Austin Conradi
at Tempo 80 \$2.00

NOTES:- Also given as Welte-Mignon C 7010
Alkan Society Discography gives Op.30
"At Tempo 80", i.e., at 8 feet/minutes (4.06 cm/sec.)

- (2) Rogers-Welte B-520
Ancient Melody of the Synagogue
(from the Preludes)
Op. 31 Alkan
Played by Egon Petri
at Tempo 75 \$1.50

NOTES:- Discography gives Op. 31 Nr. 6 "Tempo 75"
i.e. 7.5 feet/minute (3.81 cm/sec).

The above two were played on a piano by Rogers of London, c.1923 marked: Rogers-Welte (licensee) and fitted with a system of c.1910.

The following two were played on the "Beatrice" Steinway of c.1926, so called as it belonged to Princess Beatrice, daughter of Queen Victoria, and fitted with the System "Duo-Art" of c. 1913, i.e., Steinway Duo-Art.

- (3) The World's Music - Annotated Series
Alkan's "The Wind", played by Harold Bauer
D-241 Tempo 90
Duo Art "Pianola" Piano

This roll is a correct reproduction of my performance (signed)
Harold Bauer.

NOTES:- Presumably D-241 is equivalent to A 291 and 6446.
Discography gives: Trois morceaux dans le genre Pathétique

- (4) 6144 Perpetual Motion - MacDowell
played by E. Hutcheson

NOTES:- Discography gives Op.30
Pencilled on roll is the date 27/9/23

One hopes that as other rolls are found, it will be possible to return the cassettes, which contain plenty of blank space, for them to be included.

This issue is promoted by a member of the Society for members at cost price (including post, packing and VAT). However, he feels that a contribution to the Museum is meet and hence a sur-charge of 20 per cent is added.

Record Engineer & Distributor: E. Levin
110, Derwent Avenue,
East Barnet,
Hertfordshire EN4 8LZ

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Rates: £5 for London and Overseas members.
£3 for out-of-town members and students.
(in both cases this covers husband-and-wife membership)

Please send outstanding subscriptions to the Treasurer, Brian Doyle, 27 Fawcett Street, London SW10 9EY. All subscriptions expire on 31st July of each year. Members are reminded that it is now possible to pay by Deed of Covenant (forms available from the Treasurer).

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

Thursday, March 15th at 6.45 p.m. at Trinity College of Music, 11/13 Mandeville Place, London W1, when David Gammie will be giving an illustrated talk entitled "Alkan and the Pedal-Piano". In a 'preview' which he has very kindly sent us, he writes that he will begin his talk on this little-known aspect of Alkan's work with a brief introduction to the literature of the pedal piano, playing examples by Schumann and Böely (another fascinating 'fringe' composer who composed prolifically for this instrument). After an illustrated discussion of the extraordinary 'Études pour les pieds seulement', the main part of the evening will be devoted to exploration of the 'Prières Op. 64 and 'Preludes Op. 66, which contain some of Alkan's finest music. Selections from Op. 66 will include the most substantial items, such as the 'Scherzo in B flat minor, No. 10, and the 'Prelude in D flat, No. 9 (a close relative of the Song of Songs from Op.31). The music will be played on the organ (feet only and hands and feet) and (mostly) on piano with an extra hand.

Tuesday, May 29th at 7.00 p.m. at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, when Ronald Smith will be giving a lecture-recital on 'Alkan in Miniature, shortly before recording it. This will be followed by a short open meeting to discuss plans for the Centenary celebration in 1988.

Wednesday, July 11th at 7.00 p.m. The Annual General Meeting at the Abbey Community Centre, 29 Marsham Street, London SW1

HON. SECRETARY'S ADDRESS:-

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