

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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EDITED BY DR. JOHN WHITE

The Centenary Festival is now only a few weeks away. Please do all you can to make it a success by attending as many performances as possible and also encouraging others to do so.

Members will be disappointed to learn that there has been a complete change of programme for the John Bingham recital on November 3rd in the Wigmore Hall (see bulletin No. 34) and that there will be no Alkan works included. The original programme of works by Alkan, Chopin and Liszt has been changed to works by Haydn, Schubert, Schubert/Liszt and Beethoven.

Finally our former secretary and vice-president, John White, has kindly volunteered to take over the editorship of the bulletin for the time being. If any members have items of news for inclusion in future bulletins please send them to John at 35 St. James Drive, London, SW17 7RN.

BRIAN DOYLE

ALKAN CENTENARY PIANO COMPETITION

This took place at the Fairfield Halls, Croydon on the two days September 7th and 8th. It was splendidly organised by Stephen Hope (the Competition Director) and, although a success artistically in that it produced three worthy finalists, the disappointingly small audiences cast doubt on whether there can be any future Alkan piano competitions. It also meant that there was a considerable financial loss.

There were ten entrants:- one lady - Heather Belline, and nine gentlemen - Simon Aldridge, William Fong, Cyril Huvé, Michael Jones, John Lenehan, John Longley, William Moody, Anthony Williams and Steve Warzycki.

The judges were Ronald Smith, Anthony Goldstone, Bryce Morrison, Stephen Hope and Ates Orge.

On the first day (Wednesday 7th) the First Round took place, each candidate being required to play a 15-minute programme consisting of Alkan's 'Le Tambour bat au Champs' Op.50 No.2 and 'Toccatina' Op.75 and a piece by Chopin, Liszt or Alkan as own choice. Two gentlemen were eliminated at this stage.

The eight pianists remaining took part in the Semi-final on Thursday, 8th. This time they were asked to play a 30-minute programme consisting of Alkan's 'Chant d'Amour - Chant de Mort' and 'Allegro Barbaro' (both from Op.35), two Etudes from Op.10/Op.25 (Chopin) of a Transcendental or Paganini Study (Liszt). The programme to be completed with own-choice pieces by Alkan, Chopin or Liszt.

From the eight were chosen three gentlemen to appear in the evening Final Round - William Fong, John Lenehan and Anthony Williams. Each had then to play a 45-minute recital which had to include Alkan's 'Chant in E' Op.38 No.1 and 'Le Festin d'Aesop' (from Op.39). Inclusion of music from earlier stages was permitted.

The other recording is of Alkan's organ works from Op.72 and Op.66 with the eight plain-chant preludes, played by Nicholas King on the organ of St. Peter's, St. Albans Symposium 1059 - Cassette only f5). This recording should be available in time for the South-Bank Festival.

A reminder also of the Anthony Goldstone/Caroline Clemmow recording 'Virtuosos Variations for piano duet' including first recordings of Alkan's 'Don Juan Fantasy', César Franck's 'Variations on God Save the King' and Herzogenberg's 'Variations on a Theme of Brahms' plus works by Beethoven, Schubert and Mendelssohn/Moshelles (Symposium 1037 (CD f10; Cassette f6). Symposium Recordings can be ordered from 110 Derwent Avenue, East Barnet, Hertfordshire, EN4 9LZ at the prices quoted - p. & p. free in the UK; add f1.50 in Europe. Outside Europe an invoice will be sent. Future Alkan recordings on the Symposium label will ultimately depend on whether the sales make a commercial proposition. Therefore it is hoped that Members will help by purchasing these recordings.

Kevin Bowyer is recording, on the organ of Salisbury Cathedral, Alkan's 'Treize Prières' Op.64 and the 'Improptu' Op.69 for Nimbus Records. It is hoped that this recording will be available in time for the Festival. He will be giving an organ recital of Alkan's music during our festival, as also will be Nicholas King. Kevin Bowyer's latest recording has just been released - the world-premiere recording of Sorabji's 'Organ Symphony No. 1' on the Contuum label (Distributed by Harmonia Mundi). Finally, Bernard Ringissen's Alkan recording ('Sonatine', etc.) has been re-released on CD (Harmonia Mundi - Musique d'abord HMA 927).

ALKAN FROM THE ORGAN LOFT.

This was the inviting title of the meeting of the Society at the Royal College of Music in Kensington, W. London on the evening of Monday 16th May. The programme was presented and played by Nicholas King, the Assistant Director of Studies at the College, a member of the society and a former piano pupil of Ronald Smith. The organ, rising above the platform like a citadel, is basically a Harrison instrument of 1901 with a case presented by Sir Hubert Parry (1848-1918) when Director of the College. It was rebuilt in 1955. The action is electro-pneumatic and the console is detached. It was warm evening and members enjoyed tea thoughtfully provided by Nicholas upon entering the great concert hall. A sparrow had entered via an open window and sang piercingly above the organ throughout most of the programme. Nicholas prefaced his programme with a talk about Alkan's music for organ and pedal piano, with another talk after the interval. This was the programme:

Huit Petits Préludes.

- Treize Prières, Op.64: Nos. 1 in G, 2 in A, 6 in D, 8 in B flat (Dieu des Armées), 9 in E, 10 in B flat, 13 in G.
- Onze Pièces dans le Style Religieux, Op. 72: Nos. 1 in C, 2 in A, 3 in D minor, 4 in G, 5 in D minor, 7 in F, 9 in E flat, 10 in D minor, 11 in A minor.
- Onze Grands Préludes, Op.66: Nos. 9 in B flat, 11 in F sharp minor, 1 in F.

The registrations were by Nicholas and much of the music was adapted by him for organ from two staves. The evening was, as is so often the case with Society events, probably unique as devoted entirely to the organ works of the Master and one hopes that Nicholas will make them all more permanently available on record one day. During the interval members were able to inspect the console and the music, together with the score of some pedal works - which Nicholas described as possibly unplayable - including black bunches of thirds moderato and marked leggiermente. The evening's music was a revelation, particularly in the grand brilliantly played pieces in the heroic style which should take their place along with Franch, Widor and others in cathedrals and concert halls. A comprehensive vote of thanks was given by the writer and heartily endorsed for the painstaking preparation, transcriptions and fine registrations so eloquently and meaningfully exhibited.

CHARLES HAILSTONE

(For further interest members are referred to Chapter 14, 'Organ or Pedal-piano', in Ronald Smith's 'Alkan, Volume Two. The Music.', 1987, Kahn & Averill.)

The Prizes to be won were:-

- FIRST: - f1000
- Recital at the Purcell Room (December 2nd at 8 pm)
- Lunch-time Recital at Fairfield Halls
- Recording contract with Symposium Records
- SECOND: - f300
- Recital engagement with the Alkan Society
- THIRD: (Generously given by H. Lane & Sons Pianos)
- f200
- Recital engagement with the Alkan Society

The programmes chosen by the finalists were as follows:-

- WILLIAM FONG: Alkan - 'Chant in E' Op.38, 'Le Festin d'Esopo'. Chopin - 'Scherzo in B flat minor' and Liszt's 'La Campanella'.
- JOHN LENEHAN: Alkan - 'Le Festin d'Esopo'. Chopin - 'Berceuse' Op.57. Liszt - 'Valse oubliée'. Chopin - 'Nocturne'. Alkan - 'Chant in E' and Liszt's 'Spanish Rhapsody'.
- ANTHONY WILLIAMS: Alkan - 'Chant in E'. Chopin - 'Polonaise-Fantaisie' Op.61. Liszt - 'Tarantella' and Alkan's 'Le Festin d'Esopo'.

The Judges were unanimous in awarding the First Prize to John Lenehan. They could not separate the two other finalists and so they were awarded joint Second Prizes of f250 each.

John Lenehan's stimulating performances whetted the appetite for his forthcoming recital in our Alkan Centenary Festival on December 2nd when he will play an all-Alkan programme.

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

This took place at the Abbey Community Centre on Wednesday, July 13th at 7 pm. The attendance was the smallest on record - a strange way of marking the Centenary Year! Some might be tempted to think that a small attendance indicates that everyone is satisfied with what is going on - but this would be a mistaken view. An Annual General Meeting should give Members a chance to air their views; to suggest new ideas for meetings, for artist(s), for venues; to indulge in constructive criticism - even complaints: to offer help in running the Society and generally encourage those whose duty it is to make the Society as efficient as possible. A lively Society should be capable of producing a lively A.G.M..

However, the report given by the Hon. Secretary/Treasurer showed, on the whole, a quite satisfactory year. At end-May subscriptions, donations etc. were down on the previous year - f574 as against f713 - but expenditure was also down - f488 as against f551 - thus giving an excess of income over expenditure for the year of f86 as against f162. The lower figures for 1988 are explained by much more money going into the Festival Fund. This Fund increased from f1312 (1987) to f2233 (1988). After the Report there was some discussion, mainly concerned with the Festival events still to come.

ALKAN RECORDINGS

It is heartening to see the recording companies honouring Alkan's Centenary with many new recordings, especially as most of them are of works recorded for the first time. Ronald Smith's long-awaited recording of the 'Trois Grandes Etudes' Op.76 and the 'Trois Etudes de Bravoure' (Scherzi) Op.16 is now available on EMI Studio (CD f8.50; LP and Cassette f5). The first of the planned re-release of all of Ronald Smith's EMI Alkan recordings on CD is now out - the 'Grande Sonate' Op.33 and 'Sonatine' Op.61 EMI Studio (CD only f8.50).

Symposium Records announce two new Alkan recordings of previously unrecorded works. Robert Rivard, the distinguished American pianist and scholar who has made a considerable study of Alkan's music, has recorded the 'Trois Etudes de Bravoure (Improvisations) Op.12, the 'Trois Andantes Romantiques' Op.13 and two 'Chants' from Op.38 - 'L'Offrande' and 'Barcarolle en Choeur' (Symposium 1057 - Cassette only f5).

A LETTER FROM FRANCE

The Hon. Secretary has received a long and interesting letter, written in good English, from M. Ploquin Florent of Douarnenez. It is mainly an apologia for the attitude of the French people to Alkan. We cannot reproduce the whole letter so I have tried to summarize below the most important points.

He does not feel that any hostile feeling from his fellow-citizens - e.g. antisemitism - was involved but just absolute ignorance. During the revival of the French school, which began in the early 1870s, Alkan was not yet forgotten and he returned to the musical life of Paris in 1873 with his concerts at the Salle Erard, but no-one defended his cause with sufficient determination to arouse a durable interest. César Franck and Isidore Philipp did what they could but if Alkan's name had been known to professional musicians for half a century it was not so with the general public. Up to the year 1900 there was still a chance of revived interest in Alkan's work. The 'Schola Cantorum' with its director, Vincent d'Indy, had a considerable influence in restoring interest in the ancient music of France. The special interest in Rameau, backed by d'Indy, St-Saëns and Debussy was an unparalleled event in the revival of neglected composers. In 1902, mainly through the influence of St-Saëns, another French composer was brought into prominence - Alexandre Boëly (1785-1858). In 1851 he had been dismissed from his post at the 'St Germain l'Auxerrois' church because he performed music that was too serious! At that time the public fancied opera paraphrases, improvisations with descriptive effects (storms in particular) which attracted a 'numerous and unruly public'. He was not a first-rate composer but he was, nevertheless, an example in his struggle against the decadence of religious music in France and his efforts on behalf of great composers in an unfavourable artistic climate.

It is easy enough to explain the reasons why Alkan was not rehabilitated during this epoch. There was no real interest in this composer and his music. He represented an interesting figure but not a legendary one like Berlioz, whose music was just beginning to be played regularly in France. In the whirlwind of the Parisian musical life (especially the first public performances of 'Pelléas' and the 'Sacre du Printemps') Alkan had passed completely unnoticed.

In these conditions only a great pianist would have been able to arouse the curiosity of musicians, critics and, finally, the public. This fact brings us round to talk about Busoni. We know that he played several of Alkan's works in Berlin during the early 1900s in his famous 'Historic Concerts', which he gave in all the capital cities of Europe. Although the critics were hostile, Busoni persisted in playing Alkan's music in the German capital where his fame was considerable. Each time the reaction was negative but one must remember the political context of this epoch, namely the fierce Franco-German rivalry, particularly since 1870. Seemingly, Busoni never played Alkan's music in any other country than Germany. One can imagine the impact had he played these works in France, seeing that his concerts in Paris during the same period were a triumph. The reason why Busoni did not play Alkan in Paris remains an enigma, but Alkan's posthumous fate in France was sealed in this period.

The first World War was a cataclysm. After the armistice the aristocracy were ruined. Even Debussy's death passed almost unnoticed. In the early 1920s France lost Saint-Saëns, Fauré and Satie, but there were new artistic events; the triumph of Milhaud and his friends ('Groupe des Six'), the Surrealist movement, the creation of the 'Ecole de Paris' consisting of expatriate musicians from Eastern Europe - Martinu, Tansman, Mihalovici, Beck, Tcherepnine. The new artistic circles were severely criticising impressionism and romanticism. Under such conditions it was not possible to rehabilitate a composer of the past and a romantic one at that! Even the musicians began to forget the name of Alkan - no-one was talking about him. In 1931 d'Indy, who had met Alkan when he was a student sixty years earlier, died. Debussy and Ravel had known and liked Alkan's music. By 1930, however, Alkan had been so misunderstood that he had become almost unknown in his own country, and the position is much the same today. Alkan was a victim of the concurrence of events and not of musicians themselves, even if their attitude helped to relegate him to history's dungeon. In 1930 Alfred Cortot, in his book 'La Musique Française de Piano' describes Alkan as "an organist by profession! A lover of the keyboard and its resources, a composer sometimes genial, sometimes detestable, whose compositions for the piano in his best moments seem to have kinship with certain passages of 'Les Djinns' by César Franck! Cortot never played Alkan's music in public and was, to some extent, a party to the oblivion into which the composer fell.

In the late 1960s there were signs of an Alkan revival Georges Beck's selection of Alkan pieces published by Heugel recordings by Ringelissen and Pierre Reach and several critics and musicologists showed their interest. However, for the general public there was still complete ignorance. French music-lovers still prefer to listen to the last discographic version of Beethoven's 5th Symphony and they cannot be attracted to a concert unless the programme includes a 'great classic'. The last Ronald Smith recording (25 short pieces) seems to have made a great impression in the UK. In France this LP has passed completely unnoticed and was suppressed in the French market as early as 1987! Alkan's situation is almost the same as it was fifty, even a hundred, years ago. To the French public, a composer fallen into oblivion is not a great musician. This attitude has been adopted in the music schools of France.

REVIEW OF THE ALKAN SOCIETY by Dr. John White.

Part I
HOW IT ALL BEGAN

It must have in the autumn of 1976 that I went to the Queen Elizabeth Hall to hear Ronald Smith play 'Symphonie' from the Op.39. I had under my arm a copy of Lewenthal's selection of Alkan music and a young man asked me what it was and where he could obtain one. He was obviously an enthusiast and, on the spur of the moment, I said "I am thinking of starting an Alkan Society". He said that, if I did, he would be one of the first to join. I knew that, to be successful, the venture would need the blessing of Ronald Smith so, not long afterwards, I wrote to Ronald, whom I did not then know, in order to seek his support. (I had long thought it extremely unfair that such an undoubted genius as Alkan should never have had proper recognition from the French people, the Jewish community or from musicologists anywhere.) I received a very cordial letter in reply and Ronald promised to do all he could but, obviously, he did not wish to become involved to such an extent that his very busy programme would be threatened. He gave me the names of three enthusiastic supporters - Robert Collet, Martin Ball and John Snelling. A meeting was arranged for all five at my home on January 18th 1977 and we discussed the ideas that I had previously outlined to Ronald number of meetings per year, classes of Members, Bulletins, Subscription rates, etc.

Robert Collet was about to retire from a professorship at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He has always been a stalwart and generous supporter of the Society. He introduced me to the Librarian of the Guildhall School and ever since then we have had wonderful support from the staff there including the development of our library, provision of rooms for meetings and so on. Robert himself gave us a talk on his personal relationship with the Hungarian pianist Isidore Philipp. Philipp died as recently as 1958 and he had lived in New York, where Robert Collet had worked with him, from 1941 to 1955. Robert wishes now that he had asked far more questions about Alkan whilst he had had the chance. His talk to the Society was fascinating because Philipp had taught at the Paris Conservatoire and, with Delaborde, had edited much of Alkan's output, thus giving us a direct link with the past. Robert Collet became one of our Vice-Presidents - richly deserved.

Martin Ball was organist at Chelsea Old Church and taught the piano at Westminster School and Dulwich College. He did much for the Society and took part in several of the programmes arranged. I remember him giving a very professional rendering of Alkan's 'Fourth Nocturne' - 'Le Grillon'. He served on our committee for three or four years. On one very interesting evening at Chelsea Old Church he performed some of Alkan's compositions for the pedal-piano partly on the piano (three hands) assisted by one of his pupils and partly on the organ itself. Martin and I performed the duet for four feet and Professor Hugh MacDonald came to hear this item. Eventually Martin left the Society because, he explained to me, he was also interested in other neglected composers and felt that he was giving a disproportionate amount of time to Alkan.

John Snelling was a very keen young man who lived at Blackheath. For a year or two he acted as treasurer for the Society but then went to Japan for a year to teach English. He soon became enraptured with the country and, marrying a Japanese girl, made his home there. In John's part of the country no-one had heard of Alkan and the last time I heard from him he was doing his best to put things right.

After this initial private Meeting it was agreed that there must be a public meeting when the Society could be formally launched. Eventually Ronald Smith arranged this to take place in the Waterloo Room at the Festival Hall on May 18th 1977 at 6.30 pm.

(To be continued)

NEWS ITEMS

La Societe Alkan in Paris is still making steady progress. Its membership now totals 55. In its September Bulletin M. Luguenet pays generous tribute to the work of our Society, which he refers to as 'Une association exemplaire'. He summarises, with evident pleasure, the events that have been going on here and also in other parts of the world. (When the Centenary Year is over we hope, in the next Bulletin, to record all that we know has been happening world-wide to extend the knowledge of Alkan's work during 1988.) Another French pianist, Laurent Martin, has been including compositions by Alkan in his Recital programmes.

On Sunday September 4th Nicholas King gave a Recital of organ music at St. Giles, Cripplegate (Barbican). The programme included Alkan's 'Grand Prelude in F' and 'Grand Prelude in B flat' (from Op.66) and 'Priere in G' (from Op.64). With these he performed Cesar Franck's 'Grand piece Symphonique' Op.17, which was dedicated to Alkan. On Wednesday, August 24th he played the same Alkan pieces at Holy Trinity Church, Folkestone.

We were delighted to learn that Nicholas King, at the Royal College of Music, has been appointed Vice-Director and Director of Studies.

Stephanie McCallum has been continuing her splendid work in Australia. For the Festival of Sydney she played the Alkan 'Concerto' from Op.39 and also played this work at a lunchtime concert in Newcastle. In July she played the same work for the Canberra School of Music. She has also been recording two 1½-hour programmes of Alkan (with an introduction by husband Peter) for the ABC to be broadcast in November. She will include either the 'Concert' or the Op.76 'Trois Grandes Etudes', with the Op.70 'Chants' and perhaps some miniatures. There is also a likelihood that she will be playing the 'Cello Sonata' with Georg Pedersen sometime in the future.

The conductor, Mark Starr, has very generously donated to the Society's collection of music and literature on Alkan in the Reference Library of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, a copy of his orchestration of Alkan's 'Concerto' for solo piano and a reduction for two pianos. They also contain a compendium of critical comments on the concerto from 1899 to the present day and a well-researched and informative essay on the work by Mr. Starr. We are grateful to him for this valuable addition to our collection.

There will be an extensive feature on Alkan in the Jewish Chronicle for the week of November 25th.

OBITUARIES

Just before going to press we have learned of the death of the eminent composer, pianist and a Vice-president of our Society - Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji - at the age of 96. He was born in Chingford, Essex, the son of a Parsee father and Spanish mother. His large output of compositions include five piano concertos, three symphonies for organ, chamber works, piano sonatas and numerous works for solo piano. His most famous work, 'Opus Clavicembalisticum' (listed in the Guinness book of records as the longest work for solo piano) was recently performed in London and recorded by John Ogdon. For many years he banned performances of his works but he recently relented and gave permission to perform and record his works. He published two volumes of essays, one of which - 'Around Music' (1932) - included a chapter on Alkan which showed his enthusiasm and understanding of that composer's music. He was also a great champion of Medtner.

We also report the death of Vera Tompkins of Kings Caple, Hereford who had been a loyal member of the Society from its earliest years. Vera had been retired for many years but always took a keen interest in all the Society's activities. She was herself a pianist and studied for many years with Angus Morrison.

NEW MEMBERS

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|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| A.R. KAUCZ, London, SE13 | JUN KINOSHITA, Tokyo, Japan |
| KEITH LEWIS, Worthing, Sussex | Prof. W. MATHESON, St. Louis, USA |
| RICHARD MAYLAN, Harrow, Middlesex | GREGORY PORILO, London, SW17 |
| LORD ROGERS, Pudsey, W. Yorks | Dr. & Mrs. SALMON, London, NE1 |
| Prof. S. SCHWARZSCHILD, St Louis, USA | Mr. & Mrs. J. SLOAN, Hertford |
| DAVID SMITH, Ashwell, Herts. | VICTORIA STEC, Worthing, Sussex |
| KLAUS TISCHENDORF, Cologne, W Germany | ROBERT WARWICK, Taunton, Somerset |

Vice-President Hugh Macdonald has obviously been infecting others at St. Louis with his enthusiasm for Alkan's work!

Alkan is the answer to a question in the Symposium Records MUSIC QUIZ CASSETTE No. 1066 £4 p. & p. free UK; outside UK 60P. Available mid-November.

There will be no Society meeting this Autumn because of the Alkan Festival. News of forthcoming meetings will be in the next bulletin and will include recitals by two of the Alkan Piano Competition finalists - William Fong and Anthony Williams.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

£6 for London members.

£4 for members out of London and students.

£7 for overseas members (payable in sterling).

All rates cover husband and wife membership.

PLEASE NOTE all subscriptions are to be sent to the Hon. Secretary/Treasurer:-

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