

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

Editor: Charles Hailstone, 7a Alder Road, Mortlake, London SW14 8ER

IMPORTANT NOTICE. Will all members who attended the meeting on January 8th at the Royal College of Music, please note that the date and venue of the March meeting has been changed. It will now take place at the Guildhall School of Music on Monday March 10th at 7.00 p.m. (see Bulletin for further details).

REPORT OF THE LAUDERDALE HOUSE RECITAL on the 19th November 1985. Those members and guests who braved the snow and bitter winds were well rewarded with the performances of the unusual and varied programme that they heard that evening.

The recital began with three songs by Liszt, beautifully performed by the soprano Patricia Wright, accompanied by Richard Shaw. The songs were 'Freudvoll und leidvoll', a setting of a poem from Goethe's play Egmont, composed in 1844 and revised in 1860. 'Im Rhein in schonen Strome' written in the early 1840's to a poem by Heine, and 'Es muss ein Wunderbares sein' composed in 1857. Then followed three of Liszt's Transcendental Studies - No. 12 Chasse-neige, No. 3 Paysage and No. 8 Wilde Jagd, played by Stephanie McCallum with her usual flair and understanding. The first half of the programme concluded with a moving performance by Patricia Wright, sympathetically accompanied by Richard Shaw, of Schumann's Frauenliebe und-leben op. 42.

The second half of the programme was devoted entirely to Alkan and began with a stunning performance by Stephanie McCallum of Alkan's fiendishly difficult Etude No. 2. op. 76 for the right hand alone. It is a great tribute to Stephanie's commanding technique and musicianship, and also to Alkan's ingenious writing, that it was sometimes hard to believe that she was only playing with one hand. She was then joined by Richard in a performance of Alkan's March in A flat op.40 for four hands, one of a set of three Marches which show the lighter side of Alkan's nature. The evening finished with an exhilarating performance of the Saltarelle op 47, an arrangement by Alkan for four hands of the last movement of his cello sonata. It is typical of many of Alkan's final movements with its pulsating, driving rythmes. The ideal piece to round off the evenings music making.

Many members expressed their appreciation of this very varied programme and it is hoped that we may be able to promote more evenings of this kind. We are very grateful to Stephanie and Richard for giving their services free for the Society.

RONALD SMITH. It seems like only yesterday when our President gave an all-Alkan recital on the South Bank to a packed, enthusiastic audience. On that memorable evening he played the Symphony, Concerto and Comme le vent from op. 39. In fact it was nearly nine years ago in May 1977, and so, not before time, we are pleased to hear that he is to give an all-Alkan recital on Wednesday July 9th at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. I am sure all members, who are able, will want to attend such a rare event. Ronald will make a quick return to the Q.E.H. on Thursday October 2nd where in a mixed programme he hopes to include the Trois Scherzi op. 16. He is also giving a recital for the E.P.T.A. at the Guildhall School of Music on Saturday 26th July at 8.00 p.m. when he will be playing Alkan's Symphony for Solo Piano.

Last October Ronald Smith made a concert tour of Russia during which he introduced Alkan to Russian audiences for the first time. Alkan is completely unknown in Russia, and is not even mentioned in their most comprehensive musical dictionaries. In his recitals he included Le Festin d'Esopo and the audiences were wildly enthusiastic whenever he played it. At the Conservatoire the packed audience, after hearing 'Le Festin', chanted "Alkan, Alkan, Alkan". At the end of his tour he recorded a recital for T.V. and included Cantique des Cantiques, Toccatina and Le Festin d'Esopo. There is a strong possibility that he will be returning to Russia where he hopes to play one of Alkan's longer works, such as the Concerto.

On the 24th January our President gave a recital in Utrecht where he played the Liszt/Beethoven Symphony No. 7 and Alkan's Symphony for Solo Piano. Members may recall he gave a recital tour of Holland in November, 1984. The following is a summary of some of the press reviews from that tour:-

(In the Isbreker). **Alkan Recital Shattering in Music and Performance** by Rob Schouter ... In utter contrast to the music (at least in appearance) the trim, intellectual Englishman, Ronald Smith, interpreted the sometimes impossibly difficult and therefore seldom played music with a maximum of virtuosity and feeling for its schizophrenic character. Liszt used to sit during Alkan's own performances looking rather off colour - and extraordinarily Smith played this heavy programme seated on a plastic canteen chair ... After the interval Smith performed the Concerto for Piano alone, probably the most difficult work ever written ... a masterpiece and an attack on one's nervous system - an attack also on the instrument and the pianist...

Wenneke Savenjie also reviewed this concert, commenting "Smith's way of playing might be described with the same words the critic d'Ortique used to depict Alkan's own playing in 1844 - resolute, powerful, brilliant and sober".

(In the Vestzaktheater). **Alkan, Who Was Alkan?** by Leen de Broakert ... The "Amazing Mr. Smith" chatted entertainingly about the composer and the music he is so close to ... After the interval came the gigantic Concerto ... which kept the audience spellbound ... It was an optimal performance of a masterwork.

HANS VON BULOW In 1857 Hans Von Bulow published an article on Alkan's Op. 35 and we included the first part in our last Bulletin. The following is the concluding part:-

ALKAN'S 12 STUDIES IN THE MAJOR KEYS OP. 35 BY HANS VON BULOW (Part II)

As a composer for the piano, Alkan belongs above all to the so-called French, Romantic School. His imagination is hardly pygmaean, but tends rather to be on a large scale bordering even on the colossal. To some it will probably seem even too cyclopean. But it can be seen, for example, from the 9th Study (C sharp major), especially the Trio Canonico, that finishes with such a considerable profusion of art and subtlety, that Polyphemus can be extremely polyphonous too. There will always be some players who will not fail to be initially impressed, and others even repelled by some of his other idiosyncrasies of style that reveal a somewhat national flavour. The consecutive fifths and octaves that he uses with such deliberate intent (and one really ought to stop describing them as "forbidden", a term coined by would-be erudite ignoramuses). With good will however, and the capacity to become more and more in sympathy with the individual spirit of the music, this antipathy will be but fleeting and will soon give way to an unprejudiced assessment. Only lovers of the "genre ennuyeux" will remain unappeased. There is such an abundance of rhythmic vitality (the last Octave Study in 10/16 time has with all its novelty a particularly natural fluidity), such a wealth of enchanting melody - in parts very long-winded, but almost always distinguished - and such a profusion of surprisingly novel figuration and especially of sound effects that this work cannot fail to make innumerable friends. It is worth the trouble to take at least a quick look at the individual pieces in the sequence.

No. 1 of the first book is a very useful legato study in unhurried tempo. Both hands are evenly weighted and considered in turn. The motif of the exercise is in two voices; to sustain simultaneously one restrained and one turbulent line will be of vital service to the independent movement of the individual fingers. The piece is short and not difficult.

In No. 2 we encounter an exercise that we have never met elsewhere: Every three notes of the motif are repeated in 6/8 time and also in the relation of piano and pianissimo; the third note is sustained, thus complicating the entry of the repetition. We should like to call it the "Echo" Study. The form of the piece has a great deal of merit, and it is brought to a superb end with a stretto in 2/4 time, in which the left hand has the opportunity to display its skill in octave-playing.

Nos. 3 and 4 are delightful pieces, outstandingly suitable for performance and capable of creating a decided furor. Both are very tuneful and deal with the trill, the second in a very original way with alternate fingering on every pair of notes. We must limit ourselves to short comments if musical illustrations are not to become necessary. The right hand plays the principal part in this, but the left is given due consideration, and the whole composition is exemplary. For more modest staying-power there is a possibility of cutting.

No. 5, a kind of octave-study, will impress as much by its title as by its content. "Allegro Barbaro" has a very romantic ring to it! It is written in variation-form with alternating sections. It is very much to our personal taste and no one will deny its great individuality. No one can deny it, because it is based on a very ancient tonality, the Lydian mode with its augmented fourth. And so we have the situation where the accidental flat in the key of F major appears with unwavering consistency disguised by the natural sign as a B.

The last study in Book I, No. 6, is remarkably difficult, although not long. Alternating from below and from above in regular semiquavers, arpeggio octaves with the very useful fingering 4 1 2 5 form the ground-figure of the exercise, on which a very attractive, sympathetic and delicately harmonised motif is based. This Study, also, is very suitable for performance.

The second book, makes on the whole some even more alarming contributions to advanced finger-gymnastics. Here the player, comparatively speaking, must already be capable of performing without a balancing-pole.

The first Study No. 7*, is a kind of fantasy in three movements, of which the middle one leads us onto something of a wilderness. We might suppose that the composer has taken for his theme a sort of story, as in the third movement of the Pastoral Symphony. Instead of the thunderstorm, here there is a fire, if we are not very much mistaken. At least, we think we can safely say that we can hear the tocsin, which interrupts a cosy Duettino. After the somewhat prolonged fire-alarm, to which a quantity of thunder and lightning seems gradually to be added, and in which - pace and composer - an unnecessary abundance of water is splashed around in an attempt to put out the flames, we have Cantica, a kind of prayer of thanksgiving in which, likewise, we can find little to our liking. With the exception of the first five lines, which have the makings of a charming Romance sans Paroles, we frankly advise the player to skip to page 18, where a Study as useful as it is melodious awaits him.

No. 8 (A flat major, Lento appassionato), from which he can derive great benefit in the refinement of his touch. Each hand has a figure in two voices - to be executed first by one hand, then with both hands together - in which a sustained melody is accompanied by rapid staccato notes passing around it on either side, so that the purpose of the exercise consists in combining stillness and movement, with the middle finger resting on the key whilst the outer fingers have to roam about in a moderate fashion, turning to and from on either side. The Notturmo is very graceful and melodious.

No. 9 we have already mentioned, a Study in octaves and double thirds which is particularly valuable because of the use of the upper end of the keyboard, properly speaking a kind of Scherzo and a most superb piano-piece, full of strength, vitality and wit.

No. 10 offers a most imaginative structure, consisting of the alternation of slow and very lively movements. From a musical point of view we prefer by far the later ones and they alone, moreover, confirm to the purpose of the Study. For the rest, the considerable and characteristic power of the composer's imagination cannot fail to be appreciated. The funeral march at the end shows a quite remarkable treatment of the instrument, as well as an unquestionable depth of feeling. But it is quite a problem to put over something completely intelligible in performance, as the composer has not given notice of his intention by means of the requisite programme.

No.11 on the other hand, is a very valuable offering. The exercise itself is without precedent. In the regular movement of triplet quavers a melodic middle voice must be constantly thrown into relief. In the steady, tranquil accompaniment and the movement of the melody, this middle voice becomes, of course, an upper or lower voice in turn, so that only variety of shading can make it perceptible to the ear. Fluency and finger-agility are consequently not essential, but patience is practised and the player's hearing, like his touch, is refined and sharpened. Considered as a piece of music, this Study likewise is amongst the most successful; it contains much that is of great beauty. Its performance demands no physical exertion, but the intellect and the nervous system must be very active.

The twelfth, and last, Study is an extremely brilliant and worthwhile piece of bravura; it could take its place in the above-mentioned Octave Studies by Kullak. The five-part rhythm is very fresh and interesting; the sharing of the octave movement by both hands is very practical and guards against immoderate strain. The Trio in A minor forms a happy contrast with the brightness of the E major tonality and creates an original effect.

We would have made shorter work of the Alkan Studies if we had not prepared ourselves to meet prejudice that might be harmful to the composer, that is, to the dissemination of his work, the value of which cannot be denied by the crassest Francophile. We would counsel the individual musician to rely on his own sound judgment based on his own knowledge of the matter and, finally, draw his attention to some other works of Alkan, his Saltarelle, his Preludes, Marches, Serenades and Nocturnes which surely cannot be considered as mere chaff amongst modern original piano compositions and less so than many another. Nomina sunt odiosa.

Hans v. Bulow (translated by Jean Bartholomew)

* Study No. 7 'Fire in a Neighbouring Village' is one of Alkan's most controversial works, admired by some, reviled by others. Bernard Van Dieren described it as 'an exquisite tone-painting' and Humphrey Searle 'a masterpiece ... comparable to Harold in Italy'.

LA SOCIETE ALKAN. The French Society, who now have over 30 members, produced their first Bulletin last November. In it they say that some French pianists such as Danielle Laval, Bernard Ringeissen, Pierre Reach and Noel Lee are showing an interest in his music but there is a prejudice amongst most pianists against music which has not established itself in the mainstream of the repertoire. They hope to encourage more recordings of his works. As yet the literature on Alkan, in French, is almost non-existent, but they are hoping to interest an enterprising publisher to issue a collected work for the centenary year in 1988. They report that Alkan's tomb is in a very sorry state, and was in danger of being destroyed but for the intervention of Mme. Cuzelin. Talks about its restoration have not yet yielded any results. Under the heading 'Pioneers across the Channel' they give a history of our Society.

Their inaugural recital took place on June 18th 1985. It was publicised in French periodicals and on France Musique. About 50 people attended including M. Marc Bleuse the Director of the Paris Conservatoire and many other members of the teaching establishment. The programme included some Preludes from Op. 31 and the Trois Grandes Etudes Op. 76 played by Laurent Martin.

HAROLD TRUSCOTT. The distinguished composer, pianist, writer and lecturer, has kindly agreed to give a talk at our next meeting on March 10th at the Guildhall School of Music. His subject will be Alkan's Chamber Works. Mr. Truscott's vast knowledge of the highways and byways of Western music is well known. For the Penguin publication 'The Symphony' (two vols. 1967) he contributed the chapters on Haydn, Schubert, Mahler, Sibelius, Franz Schmidt, Havergal Brian, Rubbra and Tippett, and other publications include a book on Beethoven's Later Quartets. He is currently working on a three volume study of the music of Franz Schmidt of which Vol. I 'The Orchestral Music' has recently been published by Toccata Press. His compositions include a Symphony, Suite for Orchestra, 18 piano sonatas, 5 violin sonatas and many other keyboard and chamber works. There are currently available three recordings of his piano music played by Peter Jacobs on the Altarus label. His talk is sure to be most enlightening and is eagerly looked forward to.

STEPHANIE McCALLUM. During her recent concert tour of the U.K., Stephanie introduced audiences to Alkan's 'Trois Grandes Etudes Op. 76'. Many Society members were present at her enterprising Wigmore Hall recital. Sadly most of the newspaper critics were not, the exception being David Murray of the Financial Times, who commented - 'Like her one time teacher, Ronald Smith, Miss McCallum cultivates the hyper-virtuoso piano music of Charles Valentin Alkan. Her special strengths are her clean, muscular technique and her confident grasp of extended musical wholes ... Her Alkan set amounted to a tour de force, as it must ... of the second *étude*, a 20 minute Introduction, Variations and Finale for the right hand alone, a sense of rounded purpose informed all of it. In her immensely capable hands, both the outer etudes made great impressions. The first a florid 'Fantasie' for left hand alone, the third-by an ingenious stroke- uniting both hands strictly, two octaves apart in racing semiquavers. Alkan's pianism was madly professional and intricate. No lover of the Romantic piano should be unfamiliar with it, for it carries a certain ideal of the instrument to a magnificent extreme.'

Last October Stephanie gave the Australian premiere of Op. 76 in a recital at the Newcastle Conservatorium. The music critic of the Newcastle Herald wrote, under the headline '**Astonishing lunchtime piano recital**' - 'These lunchtime recitals continue their double function of delighting and informing. Yesterday a third aspect was hugely evident and this was of astonishing. Stephanie McCallum is simply an astonishing musician both in technique and feeling. 'Mozart's Sonata in D K576 ...' a satisfying listening experience. Then came the astonishment, an astounding performance of a ferociously difficult work, and I choose my words carefully. Three Grand Studies Op. 76 of Alkan which was being given its first Australian performance. The first movement for the Left Hand alone had Ms. McCallum and the composer confounding our ears. Surely there were two hands here, or even the notorious third hand of Thalberg. But no. Through brilliant arpeggios, chording and pedalling, one hand conveyed an entire universe of sound. The second, for the Right Hand alone continued, with remarkable gradations of touch, the rich pageant of technique and sensibility. The third for Both Hands reunited ended the work in consistently exhilarating, even hair-raising fashion. Stephanie McCallum gave melody and accompaniment, foreground and background, due explication always. The wonder is not that this work was given such an impressive performance but that it was performed at all.

Stephanie has now returned to Australia to a busy schedule of performing and teaching. She has begun studying the Concerto for solo piano which she plans to perform on her return to England in late 1987 in time for the 1988 celebrations. An event to look forward to.

A.T. SMAIL, the agent for the Libraries of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the National Library of Scotland, and the National Library of Wales, has asked us to supply them copies of the Bulletin for distribution to each library. We already send copies to the Guildhall and Barbican Libraries.

ALKAN ON RADIO 3. Alkan has been featured on Radio 3 more often in the past few weeks than he usually does in a year. On December 1st last year, the programme 'New Premises' paid a birthday tribute (a day late) to Alkan. The speaker gave a few biographical details, described Alkan's *études* as 'more dazzling than Chopin's or Liszt's' and went on to say that 'he has been ignored to the point of hostility but that it was now time that he was re-admitted to the musical establishment. Then followed a performance, by Ronald Smith, of a work specially composed by Ben Mason in tribute to Alkan. A pungent piece which cleverly echoed many of Alkan's compositions particularly with its use of march rhythms so favoured by Alkan.

Alkan also cropped up in a series of short stories by Graeme Fife based on incidents in the lives of famous composers. The other composers featured were Rossini, Stravinsky & Gluck. The Alkan story, 'A Question of Gravity', was a heavily embroidered account, with many philosophical asides, of the last day in Alkan's life, centered on the legend of the falling bookcase.

Last, but certainly not least, two Alkan recitals by Ronald Smith have just been broadcast. He included all the works featured on his last recording plus a few old favourites including the Allegro Barbaro.

NEW MEMBERS

Peter Asher, Scunthorpe
Christopher Bates, California
Erwin Fötschl, Stockholm
Mr. & Mrs. A.R. Gillot, Purley
B.A. Proctor, Stanmore, Middx.
Paul Turunen, Helsinki, Finland
Richard Zeff, Lewes, Sussex

C. Ashton, Leicester
Wayne Forrest, Wisconsin, USA
P. Gibson, Redditch
R. Gregory, Bishops Stortford
M.J. Trayhorne, Devon
Jonathan Wortley, Norwich

SUBSCRIPTIONS:- £5 for London and overseas members (payable in Sterling)
£3 for members out-of-London and students
(both these rates cover husband and wife membership).

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

Monday March 10th at 7.00 p.m. in the Lecture Hall at the Guildhall School of Music, Silk Street Barbican (nearest underground Moorgate). A lecture by **Harold Truscott** on **Alkan's chamber works.**

The following meeting will not be suitable for members with a nervous disposition. **Hugh McDonald**, one of our Vice Presidents, will give a talk on - **Composers' Deaths.** Taking Alkan's mysterious death as a starting point, Professor McDonald will tell tales of murder, suicide, execution and other misfortunes that have befallen composers over the centuries. With suitable musical illustrations.

He has given this talk in the USA and on French radio but this will be the first time in Britain. The date and venue have yet to be arranged. Details in the April Bulletin.
