



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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<http://www.alkansociety.org>

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Editor's notes

We are very pleased to be able to offer members of the Society the opportunity to purchase the excellent new recording by Kevin Bowyer of Alkan's music for organ (see review below and enclosed flyer). Whilst this music is not entirely previously unrecorded – Nicholas King's Symposium disc, for example, contains three of the op. 66 pieces - it is excellent news that we are now to have the chance to experience this corner of the Alkan repertoire complete. The other two volumes in the series should be available next year and the Society hopes to celebrate with Toccata Classics by arranging a recital by Kevin Bowyer – we will advise members of news of this as soon as possible.

This issue of the Bulletin includes notices of the recitals by our President, Yonty Solomon, in London in October and by Thomas Wakefield in Cambridge in November. Also during recent months Piers Lane has been including Alkan in his recitals in England and Italy and will be playing *Quasi Faust* from the *Grande Sonate* at his Wigmore Hall recital on 24th January 2006.

We are very pleased to be able to include in this issue an extract from Alkan Society member Seth Blacklock's master's degree thesis on the music of Alkan. We are delighted to report that Seth has been awarded an 'MA with distinction' and offer him our heartiest congratulations.

Hermann et Ketty

An exciting project is under way which will result in the publication, with the support of the Alkan Society, of Alkan's cantata *Hermann et Ketty*, written for the Prix de Rome competition in 1832. This was one of Alkan's two unsuccessful attempts at the prize (he also wrote *L'entrée en loge* in 1834) and both the cantatas have remained in manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The winner in 1832 was Ambroise Thomas, whilst Alkan got

a *mention*; his failure to obtain even this in 1834 presumably led to him abandoning future attempts.

The French publisher Symétrie, in association with the French Académie des Beaux-Arts, is engaged in a major undertaking to publish the 19th-century laureates' cantatas, including *Hermann et Ketty*. The Alkan Society is making a contribution to the costs of bringing *Hermann et Ketty* to print for the first time. As a consequence, society members will be able to obtain this volume at a discount of one-third. In addition there will be a companion volume of essays, *Le concours du Prix de Rome de Musique (1803-1968)*, covering many aspects of the competition, which will include a study on Alkan's cantatas by François Luguenot and David Conway.

Publication is expected to take place in 2008, and we will keep members informed of all developments.

Yonty Solomon's Recital at The Warehouse, London

A small number of members, but an impressive turnout of his students, came to the recital by our new President at The Warehouse on 3rd October. He opened with a very fine performance of the Bach-Busoni *Chaconne*, combining a classical discipline with a suitably romantic freedom which paid tribute to both composers. The line of Bach's original piece was always clear within Busoni's elaboration; the use of rubato was tasteful and subtle; and he reserved the full power of a modern piano for a few telling climaxes. This was always a favourite piece of Ronald Smith, and it was very moving to hear this reminder of his performances.

Yonty Solomon followed the *Chaconne* with Schumann's C major *Fantasy*. This is sometimes used as a vehicle for virtuosity at the expense of its expressive intentions. A good technique is certainly needed, but here it was used in the service of an intensely musical interpretation. He achieved a good sense of the narrative aspects in the opening passionate movement, contrasting the forward drive of the first section with a tender middle section marked "in the style of a legend". The following March, with the notorious "dreaded skips" in its coda, had both high spirits and an impressive command of its demanding writing. For once the ending, which so often elicits premature applause, seemed to lead logically into the unconventional slow finale. Here the sense of structure was always in control within its improvisatory feel, and the lines sang out to excellent effect.

Alkan was not forgotten, of course, and after the interval we heard the well-known *Barcarolle* from the third suite of Chants. It works best at a steady tempo, and with a sense of restraint, and these were both in evidence. After this, Mr Solomon modestly gave way to his student Maria Redman for an exciting performance of *Comme le vent* from the minor-key Etudes. She has already got the spirit of this piece in excellent style, with fast fingers and a sense of humour. If I have a criticism, it is that she needs to believe Alkan's marking of "sic" in the sets of two, three, four and five chords which make its second subject "spring to obedience as though at the sadistic crack of a whip", in Ronald Smith's words ("Alkan; The Music"): those bars of one semiquaver in length are precisely what the composer intended, and there should be no trace of a rest after them.

The official programme ended with Mussorgsky's *Pictures from an Exhibition*, a suite which has become something of a war-horse in its orchestral guise, but which can still surprise in its original version. Yonty Solomon paced this beautifully: the different versions of the Promenade always had the right sense of moving toward the next picture. He mastered the tricky ending of *Gnomus* perfectly, and the *Market Place at Limoges* bustled along at a

cracking pace. The lumbering ox-cart in *Bydlo* can sometimes become tedious if it begins at too literal a fortissimo, but here he managed the “pesante”, heavy, style while keeping a sense of restraint before its “tutta forza” final section. The quieter sections, like *The Old Castle*, and the delicate *Ballet of the Chicks in their Shells*, were equally effective. Again, the *Great Gate of Kiev* never became a relentless onslaught, but always kept a good sense of line and kept the power in reserve for the important climaxes.

The audience was never going to be satisfied without a little more music, and the theme from Bach’s “Goldberg” Variations made for a modest, expressive, and wholly appropriate postlude to this great musician’s recital. As Eliot Levin suggested in his vote of thanks, we have chosen our new President well, especially when he has so many students who can continue the interest in Alkan well into the future.

Peter Grove

Fifth Annual Alkan Piano Scholarship

We are grateful, as ever, to Dr. Ken Smith for his hard work in organising, and to Fitzwilliam College Cambridge for supporting, the Alkan Scholarship and the annual concert accompanying the competition. Dr. Smith has provided the following report on the competition. It is most gratifying to see an upward trend in the number of candidates, so the Scholarship is undoubtedly proving its worth in extending interest in Alkan and his music.

The fifth annual Alkan Piano Scholarship Competition was held on Friday 11 November in the new Auditorium of Fitzwilliam College. For the set work by Alkan the examiners had selected *Les Cloches* from Esquisses, Op.63, No.4, and *Doucement* from Preludes, Op.31, No.21. The judges were Mr Thomas Wakefield (Alkan Society Nominee), Dr Kenneth Smith (Fellow) and Dr Peter Tregear (Director of Music).

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

Charles Curry: *Scherzo No.3 in C# minor*, Op.39 by Chopin

Marianne Neary: *Prelude, Book 1, No.12, “Minstrels”* by Debussy

Malcolm Moffatt: *Intermezzo in E* by Brahms

Eleanor Goodfield: “*Ah, vous dirai-je Maman*” - *Twelve Variations in C major* by Mozart

Alex West: *Impromptu No.4 in A flat* by Schubert

Jonathan Hill: *Deux Arabesques* by Debussy

The Scholarship, which this year carried a cash value of £100, was awarded to **Malcolm Moffatt**. **Charles Curry**’s performance was considered by the judges to be of special merit. Each received a double CD set featuring Ronald Smith playing Alkan.

Thomas Wakefield Recital at Fitzwilliam College Cambridge

The good publicity effect of the Alkan Piano Scholarship clearly followed through on Saturday 12th November when Thomas Wakefield gave his recital at the Fitzwilliam College Auditorium, organised by the College Music Society in association with the Alkan Society. An audience of over eighty came to hear – and at its completion to cheer - a programme which commenced with works of three of Alkan’s heroes – Bach, Chopin and Beethoven –

continued with two works of a later virtuoso, Rachmaninoff, and concluded with a second half devoted to Alkan himself.

Mr. Wakefield's extraordinary virtuosity is known to many members both from experience and from previous reviews of his performances in this Bulletin and elsewhere. His performance of Bach's second *English Suite* (in A minor, BWV 807) set the tone for the nimbleness and clarity we were to experience throughout the recital, with the melting dissonances of the *Sarabande*, the pertness of the *Bourée* and the insistence of the *Gigue* triumphing over the rather aggressive acoustic of the hall. Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata was delivered with great aplomb, Mr. Wakefield clearly relishing the final passages which can make even the most experienced quail.

With Chopin's *Mazurka op. 33 no. 4* we came to the world of Alkan with a tender performance of this strangely bleak take on Polish folk-music. It was music such as this that the two composer must have discussed in their conversations on folk-style, as related by Alkan in his correspondence with Fétis. The 'slipping' between keys prominent in this *Mazurka* was certainly a trick which Alkan was to use effectively, although he was often to prefer a sudden final jolt to the dying fall, one of Chopin's most affecting traits, that ends this piece. On the Rachmaninoff pieces, (*Preludes nos. 4 and 5* from op. 23), your reviewer is not the best qualified to comment, since if had his way he would expunge this compositaster (to coin a word) from the repertoire. If as music they seemed to me the weakest part of the evening, Mr. Wakefield was more than equal to their technical challenges.

In the second half we heard firstly the two set Alkan pieces from the previous day's competition. The *Prelude op. 31 no. 21 (Doucement)* and the *Esquisse op. 63 no 4 (Les Cloches)* both appear models of simplicity, but to approach them prosaically is to miss the special magic which Alkan was able to give even to his shortest works when he was so minded. They can both be seen as studies in that infinite extension and gradation of *piano* which, according to Bertha, Alkan felt was an essential component of Chopin's technique. In these performances the *Prelude*, if gentle, was wistful and the *Esquisse* a gem of sonority in a tiny compass.

With the first two of the *Trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique op. 15* we were on territory more familiarly associated with Alkan. Mr. Wakefield provided in his programme notes an excellent description of the way in which the first of these, *Aime-moi*, relentlessly turns the screw, increasing the number of notes per beat as 'clusters of flats dangle like-over-ripe fruit from trees as the arpeggios swirl between the keys of F flat major and B double-flat minor. On paper this may appear over-engineered, like genetically-modified harmony, except it works; these keys really do sound dark!' Mr. Wakefield excelled himself in making this darkness visible. As for the second of the op. 15 pieces, *Le vent*, we were swept up from the commencement and borne relentlessly until its close, even through the passage described by Ronald Smith as 'surely intended for an extinct race of seven-fingered pianists'. The sheer excitement of this performance overcame any shortcomings of its musicality, which have been uttered by critics from Schumann to Smith. Much the same can be said of the recently recovered and published *Etude Alla-Barbaro* – was this, by the way, the first UK concert performance of this piece?

Before the *Etude Alla-Barbaro* we had heard another of Alkan's expressions of internal passion, the unpublished *Palpitemento* – also perhaps a first concert hearing; the manuscript is held at the Geneva Conservatoire. The official programme ended with another work sans opus – the A minor study published in a *Méthode* of the Conservatoire keyboard professor and early supporter of Alkan, Zimmerman. This is music reduced to the quintessence of technique in a punishing interplay of the hands at high speed, syncopated rhythms and aggressive

percussion – not only as Wakefield describes it a ‘showstopper’, but a terrifying roller-coaster. Man and piano here have to be interlocked as a single machine; it may not be great as music but it was a sensational experience for the audience.

But one of the finest performances of the evening came in the encore, the second of the *Trois andantes romantiques op. 13*. Having only ‘heard’ this previously in the computerised realisation of Mr. Nanasawa I had never been able to experience the extraordinary way in which Alkan is able to embed his melodies and harmonies within the textures that span the whole range of the keyboard. Only a live performance can evoke all the resonance and power of this prophetic music as it deserves – and it is impossible to imagine the commensurately vital command of the keyboard more accurate and intense than that of Mr. Wakefield to bring it off.

Not only this, but we had a *bonne bouche* in the form of a witty Tchaikovsky transcription by Earl Wild. A memorable evening, which makes one look forward eagerly to the recording of Alkan rarities which we understand Mr. Wakefield is contemplating.

DC

Bells in Alkan’s Music

The following is an extract (adapted by the writer) taken from a Master’s degree thesis by AS member Seth Blacklock, a music student who is soon to graduate from Queen’s University Belfast in Northern Ireland. The thesis deals specifically with the issue of religion in Alkan’s life and music; Alkan’s deep personal faith as a Jew is seen sometimes to expand from a Jewish standpoint to encompass Christian elements, altogether forming a profoundly spiritual nature.

In Alkan’s music, the composer’s “religiousness” is apparent in his use of chorale tunes and the learned style, and in his creation of God-filled atmospheres. His portrayal of bell sounds contributes much to a sense of the religious in his music.

Bells have been used in instrumental music since the time of Bach and two of the more outstanding examples of the use of bells in the music of Alkan’s contemporaries occur in the finale of Berlioz’s “Symphonie Fantastique” and in Meyerbeer’s “Les Huguenots”. Alkan replicated the instrumental sounds of the orchestra in his piano works in a masterful fashion (we think of the Symphony, Concerto and Overture, all for solo piano from his Op. 39 minor Études) and the same can be said for his treatment of bell sounds. In the composer’s works, bell and drum sounds almost always evoke a melancholy, even deathly poignancy and a plaintiveness that succeeds in creating music of a truly saddening and pathetic nature. There are two exceptions to this. The second appears in the twelfth of his “Treize Prières”, Op. 64 (discussed below), but the first example is to be found in “Un heureux ménage” from the Op. 33 *Grande Sonate*. Describing “A happy [or “fortunate”?] family”¹, Alkan brings their day and the movement to a close with a written description: “(10 heures)” and a bright clock-chime, striking at 10pm, in the surrounding key of B major, signalling the children’s bedtime.

The earliest work of Alkan’s to employ a bell toll is “Morte”, No. 3 from Op. 15, a work of formidable difficulties entitled: *Trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique*. In this instance, the bell toll (an isolated and strangely detached B-flat in the surrounding E-flat minor tonality)

¹ This could be a case of double-entendre where Alkan may have been reminiscing about the happy family he grew up in or perhaps he was depicting through everyday events the luck of someone who has a family of their own. Alkan, especially later in life, became lonely. He never married.

has a destabilising effect that is fascinating. The regular beat is $\frac{4}{4}$ but Alkan's bell cuts across each bar. An added difficulty of this passage is the constant polyrhythm presented by the stalking, smouldering triplets in the left hand against the two voices in the right hand that are made up of a regular-beat theme in the lower voice and the tolled syncopations of the bell in the upper voice. It is an ingenious piece of writing and the set of three pieces as a whole is today seen as one of the landmark stages in Alkan's development as a composer. Disappointingly, the whole opus was lambasted by Schumann in a vitriolic review he wrote in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.²

In Alkan's *Marche Funèbre*, Op. 26, we are presented with a harrowingly touching central section. The fact that it is so modest adds to the shattering sense of melancholy therein. The section forms one of Alkan's most heart-rending passages of music and, like several instances in the composer's output, comprises some of the most beautifully simple but profound offerings in music. The core of this E-flat major section is an alto melody below which appears a repeated phrase of a descending sequence of four bell tolls (in two voices, separated by the interval of a sixth). As in "Laus Deo" (see below), there appears another bell in the bass register which here regulates the pattern. The warmth and fullness of emotion implicit in this part of the *Marche* contrasts greatly with the cool, but nevertheless funereal atmosphere of the main theme of the work (which makes heavy and effective use of drum beats), and is distinguished from the piece's second theme, which is a dark and impassioned fanfare.

A profound and glorious pealing of bells occurs with the entry of "The Saviour"³ towards the end of Alkan's *Quasi-Faust*. In Smith's words, "the passage [...] with bright, clean sonority, [...] should set the heavens resounding to the triumphant peal of celestial bells".⁴ It forms one of the most superb examples of Alkan's exploration of the sonic, dynamic and sonorous possibilities of the piano.

A triplet bell-like figure is apparent in "La Foi", from the composer's first book of *Impromptus*, Op. 42. Visible in the central section, marked "divoto", its three tones form a descending minor third fragment and, like the twelfth organ *Prière* (see below), its triplet rhythm opposes the regular four-in-a-bar beat. Its juxtaposition with a bass line that suggests the *Dies Irae* theme makes this section ominous and rather more interesting than the other musical materials in the piece.

"Les Cloches" (The Bells), No. 4 of the *48 Motifs*, Op. 63, is a piece of only $17\frac{2}{3}$ bars length and thus succeeds in being a sketch that has a concentrated funereal atmosphere. The piece is in $\frac{6}{8}$ time and in G minor. The bells, lasting a bar's length and played by the left hand, toll 17 times in an off-beat fashion (beginning a third of the way into the first bar) and appear in G minor, D minor, A, D major and G minor tonalities. Like all of Alkan's miniatures, this piece has its own character and is unlike any other piece in the composer's output in its mood, its seeming simplicity and its brevity.

An unearthly tolling of bells that seems to transcend the cosmos frames Alkan's final, unnumbered piece in the Op. 63 *Motifs* (Esquisses), which is called "Laus Deo" (Praise to God). There are three voices on the score that correspond to a group of eight bells. Time

² See a translation of this review in: Schumann, Robert; "Music and Musicians. Essays and Criticisms by Robert Schumann", trans., ed. & ann. by Fanny Raymond Ritter (London, n.d.) 317.

³ A passage described by François-Sappey as "[une] sorte de *Deus ex Machina*" – François-Sappey, Brigitte. "Grande Sonate op. 33 «Les quatre âges» - Un destin musical", in *Charles Valentin Alkan*, ed. Brigitte François-Sappey (Paris, 1991) 111.

⁴ Smith, "Alkan: The Music", 75.

stands still, to attention, as the upper voices toll in intervals of fourths and augmented fourths over a period of five phrases. These are harmonised by three galactic detonations from another bell, in the lowest octave of the keyboard, that seems to prophesy the end of the world, the Day of Judgement and the coming of the Lord.

“*Laus Deo*” closes with a modified version of the clanging bells of its opening. The augmented-fourth intervals, coupled with the profoundest C-note on the keyboard and the depressing of the *sostenuto* pedal throughout the opening section, creates an apocalyptic vision that forms one of music’s most unique and original offerings.

From studying the piece, I have come to believe that it is possible the number 5 had a kind of religious significance for Alkan. Looking at “*Laus Deo*”, the epilogue-like closing miniature from the Op. 63 *Motifs* (and acknowledging examples elsewhere in the composer’s output), we discover that the opening peal of bells is written in five phrases, that quintuplet crotchets compose the rhythm of the succeeding melody, that both halves of the chorale occupy five bars, that the chorale is almost entirely in five parts, that the final tolling of bells in the bass register amounts to five strokes, and finally that the piece in its entirety is made up of five sections in a quasi-palindromic A, B, C, B¹, A¹ format. In this writer’s estimation, there is no apparent reason, other than that of a spiritual nature, for the omnipresence of the number 5 in “*Laus Deo*”.

Among Alkan’s organ works, we find one paradigm of tolling bells that is intriguing. It is to be found in *Prière* No. 12 from the composer’s *13 Prières*, Op. 64. Its conclusion has been described as follows by Ronald Smith: “a three-note carillon chimes in “Ivesian” contradiction to the prevailing rhythm”.⁵ This summation stems from the coda’s, for the time, unusual rhythmic feel. Firstly, the piece is in $\frac{2}{4}$ time but the bells, ascending now unlike other examples by Alkan and played initially on the pedals, cut across the four-quaver rhythm on the manuals with a curious triplet-crotchet rhythm that is accentuated when the bell tolls become bare-fifth harmonies. This strange coda concludes the piece in a haphazard and slightly eccentric manner that is somewhat typical of its composer.

Together, the above examples evoke but one minute facet of the inventive imagination of this intriguing composer. Alkan’s uncanny ability to lullaby, to dramatise, to perturb and to delight in such a realistic and original fashion with the most commonplace of materials continues to surprise at every turn and does much to solidify the widening conjecture (first pioneered by Ferruccio Busoni) that here was a mind of genius at work, a pianist-composer who stood alongside Beethoven in musical innovation and stature.

Volume I of Kevin Bowyer’s Alkan Conspectus

Toccata Classics have released the first CD in a 3 volume project which will include all of Alkan’s so-far unrecorded organ and pedalier music, played on the organ by **Kevin Bowyer**. Volume I (TOC0030) retails at £15.99 but thanks to *Toccata* we are able to offer it to Society members at £12.50 including postage in the UK (see separate order form with this issue). The following is part of David Conway’s review on the website of the Social Affairs Unit (www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk).

⁵ Smith. “Alkan: The Music”, 228.

[...] Most of Alkan's music was written for the keyboard – although we know that he also composed an orchestral symphony and a number of chamber works whose manuscripts seem to be lost forever (as is his Bible translation). But the keyboard did not only mean the piano. Alkan was also a virtuoso on the organ and on the pédalier piano – a grand piano with a pedal-board. This instrument had a vogue in the second quarter of the nineteenth century – Schumann was another devotee who wrote music for it – but its greatest exponents were undoubtedly Alkan and his illegitimate son, Elie Delaborde, his pupil (and later editor), who gave concerts in London on the pédalier in the 1880s. Today pédalier music has to be played either on the organ or, by 'borrowing' a third hand, on the piano.

Now the new recording company Toccata Classics has determined to give this less known side of Alkan a hearing by preparing recordings of the organ and pédalier works, which will eventually comprise three CDs. They are performed, on the organ, by Kevin Bowyer, well known and justly fêted for his expeditions into the musical unknown. Toccata's Volume I includes the *Benedictus*, op. 54, originally written for pédalier, the first six of the *12 studies for the pedals alone*, and the *Eleven Grand Preludes and Transcription from Handel's Messiah*, op. 66. Except for four of the op. 66 pieces, these are all first recordings. Toccata's set will complement Bowyer's earlier Alkan organ CD on the Nimbus label, giving complete cover of Alkan's pédalier and organ oeuvre.

I should I suppose declare my hand as an enthusiastic member of the Alkan Society, but even allowing for that, I found this disc a complete revelation; performances of great finesse and bravura, outstandingly recorded and played. Admittedly the six studies for pedals alone are more of a musical curiosity than great works of art – how Bowyer manages to play trills, sequences of four-part chords and a three-part fugue with two feet baffles the imagination.

The other pieces offer more food for musical thought. The *Benedictus* is a remarkable fusion of a jazz-like, measuredly sinister, ostinato *idée fixe* with hymn-like passages recalling one of Alkan's heroes, Mendelssohn, but avoiding any lapse into mere religiosity at its grand climax. The op. 66 pieces, written for organ or pédalier, which take up most of the disc (50 minutes of its 76), give us a tour through many typical Alkanesque moods. They are dedicated to César Franck, another admirer of Alkan who made editions of some of these pieces for organ performance. No. 4 is built around a fandango-style march; no. 5, *quasi adagio*, seems a contemplation of the grandeur of an empty cathedral; no. 6 with its wildly varying episodes was described by Ronald Smith as 'one of Alkan's most bizarre inventions'. No. 7, marked *alla giudesca*, is a parody of the excesses of the synagogue cantors (*hazzanim*) of the day, with which Alkan, who remained a religious Jew throughout his life, would have been only too familiar. Smith labelled the exuberant no.10, which demands the utmost in virtuosity, 'a Cossack dance', though this perhaps understates its wildness. After the varied feast of the first 11 pieces of op. 66, the last is an absolutely chaste and straightforward transcription of the recitative 'Thy rebuke hath broken his heart' and the aria 'Behold and see' from Handel's *Messiah*. But even here, ending (as did Handel) on an imperfect cadence, Alkan teases us into anticipating what might come next.

Whilst Ronald Smith double-CD albums must still remain the starting-point for those who wish to acquaint themselves with Alkan's unparalleled musical universe, this recording and its successors will undoubtedly extend Alkan's reputation as an important figure in musical history. For if he had few fellow spirits as a pianist (apart from Delaborde), there can be no doubt, after hearing this disc, that he found true disciples in the French school of organists, running from Franck, Saint-Saëns and Widor through to Alain, Messiaen and their present successors. This is a fascinating project and Bowyer and Toccata must be congratulated on their commitment and achievement.