



# THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered Charity number 276199)

<http://www.alkansociety.org>

**Vice-Presidents: Nicholas King, Hugh Macdonald,  
Wilfrid Mellers, Richard Shaw**

*Secretary:* Nicholas King, 42 St. Alban's Hill, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, HP3 9NG  
e-mail: [secretary@alkansociety.org](mailto:secretary@alkansociety.org)

*Chairman:* Eliot Levin

*Treasurer:* Averil Kovacs *Archivist:* Brian Doyle *Bulletin Editor/Webmaster:* David Conway

Bulletin e-mail: [info@alkansociety.org](mailto:info@alkansociety.org)

All contents of this Bulletin © The Alkan Society, 2004

**BULLETIN no. 66 July 2004**



**Ronald Smith 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1922 – 27<sup>th</sup> May 2004**

## The President's Last Address

*Ronald Smith died peacefully at home on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2004. Active as ever, he had given a concert in Hove a few days previously, and was looking forward to his debut in Singapore in July. A few weeks before his death he gave the following talk to the Society's AGM about his early life. We reproduce a verbatim transcription which we hope can evoke for our members the warm human qualities of this great musician, whose dedication over many years, including his support to our Society, helped re-establish Alkan to his rightful place in the musical pantheon.*

One of the things I am often asked is how music entered into my family. Well, it didn't, I think *I* entered into it. When I was born, I know, the doctor who was there – it was all quite professional – he said, 'What do you want him to do when he's a big chap later on?' and my father said, 'I want him to be a footballer'. My mother said, 'I want him to be a pianist.' I don't know why she said this because there was absolutely no money in it – there was no money in football in those days, but it's rather different today. But, going back – I have to go back two or three generations – I go back to where the whole thing started because my parents were not really musical, although my mother played the piano in a certain sort of way and she was quite ambitious, but not properly motivated and not properly taught. So we go back to my maternal great-grandfather who, of course, I never met. I doubt I could have met him, even had he not fallen off the top of London's famous Guildhall. He was a builder and he fell to his death leaving a widow with five young children to bring up. So she did the only decent thing she could and married again very, very quickly. But she didn't really select very well because the chap she married had a terminal illness, and he also, as my daughter would say, karked it, and it was at this stage where, I think, perhaps the musical strain in the family started.

My grandfather was the youngest son of this rather large family. He was pretty unruly; he was aged six and mother immediately had to go out to work and the coffin containing his stepfather was on the kitchen table. He obviously had a commercial instinct, which has not been transmitted to the present generation unfortunately, and he invited all the little street urchins of the district in at a ha'penny a time to view the corpse. But they got more and more excited and they started to rock the coffin. Suddenly the whole thing keeled over and the corpse fell out onto the kitchen floor. Well, his mother came in and she realised from this that really she could not cope with this boy and he was sent to what was, well, they described it as a reformatory school. I don't know what such a thing is – it's an industrial school for boys who need a certain amount of discipline. And there they taught him two things. They taught him to mend boots and shoes which, because he had a vast family later on, was extremely useful to him. The other thing they taught him was to play the cornet. Now, when my mother was born, she was the eldest of the next generation of the family. When she was old enough to learn, my grandfather decided that she should have some piano lessons so that she could accompany him on his cornet. He bought a funny old piano, I can still remember it with the candlesticks, this big piano, and she went to Mrs., no *Miss* Clemence, that was it, and it was a course of lessons that cost the equivalent of 50 pence the whole lot; ten lessons for 50 pence. That was the sum of her tuition. And she could play, she had one or two pupils later on in life, but, there was no proper touch and this sort of thing, but she eventually taught me.

My father was an insurance man, he wasn't musical at all, although I think he could have been, because he never said anything about my own playing. The *only* remark he ever passed was once when I was about to record Bob Simpson's first composition, his piano sonata, which is a very aggressive piece, and I was working at this and he came into the room and went out sort of muttering, 'Tch tch tch! They still send missionaries abroad'. That's the only remark I ever had from him about that. But he had an elder brother – I still remember him when I was a little boy, when I was three and four – he was a comedian, he could play any instrument by ear, and a very, very entertaining man, marvellous for children. I thought the world of him. Alas, he died when I was very young, Uncle Jack, but I think there might have been something in that. There was another member of that family, Uncle Charlie, who, they all told me, played the violin, 'makes that violin speak'. Well, I never heard him, but I had

my violin concerto broadcast by Colin Sauer in 1948, and shortly afterwards I met this uncle for the first time. 'Ron, boy,' he said, 'I was really proud of you last Saturday afternoon when I listened to your broadcast. Do you think the band was a little bit too loud? I could hardly hear the piano at all.' That was my violin concerto. So that gives the sort of background that I emerged from.

I very quickly realised that I was terribly keen to get on with the piano. My mother started me when I was seven. I can still see this first page with a semibreve and two things with tails on and four things with tails on, and blacked-out notes and all this sort of thing. Within a year I was trying a piece called 'Toccata' by Paradies and my mother couldn't play this, This intrigued me very much. She couldn't manage it and I used to practise it under the desk at school and I got my fingers going, and it was set for the under-18 class for the festival at Brighton. And it was a memory test, they put me in for this. Well, when it started, there were about twenty people in for this and these great big girls, they looked like lighthouses to me, got up (I was, well, I was eight) and went up. And I'd been doing this piece, da da di di di di di di di di like this – the first one went up – diddle, diddle, diddle, diddle, diddle, diddle, diddle – oh, goodness me! And the next one went up – diddle, diddle, diddle, diddle, diddle, diddle, diddle – a lot of pedal, but there – so I went diddle, diddle, diddle – I saw my mother's chin start to vibrate a bit and she said, 'Don't you try to do that, will you'. Well, I was number seven or eight, I went up there – diddle, diddle, diddle, diddle, diddle – I think mother nearly had a heart attack, but I got what I thought was called a 'sustificate' for this. The adjudicator, Alec Rowley, placed me third. He said, 'This little boy, although his hand wasn't large enough for the big snags (there were some octaves that shouldn't have been there anyhow), was the only one who realised this piece was written for a spinet (I'd never heard of a spinet; I think it was written for a harpsichord) and he really made it sound like a spinet'. So I went home and looked up to see what a spinet was. I'd heard of a spittoon, but I didn't know what a spinet was.

So that was how we started. And because of this, a very nice teacher at my infant school called my mother and said, 'You should put him in for a scholarship to the Brighton School of Music'. Well, I didn't know what a scholarship was. Anyway, I went in for this, this was under-sixteen and I was still eight, and I was the youngest one to go in there and I played for a lovely lady called Maud Hornsby. We selected her scholarship because it was the most remunerative one; she was obviously the best teacher because she charged more, you see. And we had a note from the Brighton School of Music, 'We very much request your presence at the prize distribution on Saturday'. So we went, and I heard an orchestra for the first time, this was the Brighton School of Music Orchestra. You'd probably think it was absolutely chronic now, but I thought it was fantastic, they played the *Merry Wives of Windsor* overture and I thought an orchestra in those days had a piano in it and a pipe organ. That was to fill in things that were missing, of course, obviously, and I also thought from then on that anybody who played the double bass must be over eighty, from the appearance of the orchestra. Well, they had the prize-giving thing and someone suddenly said, 'The Maud Hornsby Open Scholarship is awarded to Ronald Smith, would he come this way'. My mother said, 'Go on, you must go, go on, up there', so up I went. To my disappointment all they gave you was a little envelope, that's all I had. Well, that was my entry to the Brighton School of Music. She was an inspired teacher, who knew very, very little; knew nothing about technique. One of my great advantages, I think, over youngsters today is that I *knew* nothing. I was a bad boy at school. In the primary school, the inkwells, we used to have inkwells, and you'd have to dip your pen in in those days; I used to put in carbide, and light them up so they had little flames coming out of them. And I graduated from there to, what was it? Sugar, sulphur, iron filings, potassium chloride, that's right; I used to mix this up and we blew the school wall up. We did all sorts of very interesting things, and I think they all give one a much greater insight into life as it really is. I know my dear old headmaster, when I took my wife-to-be along to meet him, he said, 'You know, you've no idea what you're taking on; he was the worst boy we ever had in the school. The only reason he wasn't expelled was because of his piano playing'.

So I went to the Brighton School of Music and Maud Hornsby had a large number of very, very good pupils. They all went to her. She taught by singing at the top of her voice and breaking chair legs and this sort of thing, and she used to put a concert on at the Aeolian Hall once a year in London and at the

Dome in Brighton, also once a year. And there were opportunities to play; it was an absolutely new world to me, I'd known nothing about this. My parents bought a gramophone, but their music was, well, things like 'We Love the College Girls', and there was one record they bought that was Mark Hambourg playing the *Hungarian Rhapsody*. There was only one *Hungarian Rhapsody* in those days, it was number two. Liszt obviously hadn't written number one or the rest of them, and this was my treat; if I'd been a good boy on Sunday night, they'd put this on for me. I thought this was absolutely fabulous, and I began to realise that people clapped a lot after I played and this was rather nice. And I thought of composing, I thought it would be rather nice. Somebody gave me, I think a master at school, gave me a book and they rolled out lines on it, music lines like this, and I started with a waltz. I wrote something for one of my masters at school, a clarinet piece, I think. And then, of course we were coming up towards what was then called the 'School Cert.', now called 'GCSE', and I remember the very, very boring history lessons in which we had to take notes down from what this chap read out at breakneck speed; that was the history lesson. If you memorised his notes you'd pass. Well, I wrote notes furiously during these lessons, but mine were a piano concerto, and that piano concerto got me a composition scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music later on when I was sixteen.

Going back a little bit, I also took the violin up, there was a violin class at the school, but we didn't think the teacher was very good. I competed again at the Festival. I thought I played rather well, but I came bottom. But somebody heard me, and Madam Kate Menges gave me a scholarship for a year to study with her. Isolde Menges, does her name mean anything to you? Yes? It was her mother. Isolde Menges, what's happened to her, I never know of any records or anything, she was a very famous name. She had a string quartet of course. And Herbert Menges, the son of course, I got to know very well and did many concerts with him. I didn't really enjoy these fiddle lessons, but I did learn quite a bit about the fiddle and I could write for it, which was very useful; I think all pianists *should* play a stringed instrument, it would be very helpful for them to do so. I'm always telling my pupils, an up-bow for this – you know, *yup baar* – and that gives them the idea how these things go.

I tried for one or two piano scholarships to the Royal Academy of Music, but it was coming up towards the war and I really do think there was a bias against taking on male students, because they thought they would be called up anyhow. Everybody thought the war was inevitable. It may have been that I didn't play well enough, I don't know, but I didn't get a piano scholarship. I was very highly commended, and that sort of thing. But I got this scholarship for composition, and that was fantastic, and I went to a marvellous man called Theodore Holland. His wife Ismena is still alive; she's just had her hundredth birthday, and she's in a sort of nursing home about ten minutes walk from my house in Hythe. She's still alive, she was half his age in those days. Theodore Holland was Chairman of the Royal Philharmonic Society, when they were commissioning, or helping to commission, Sibelius to write his eighth symphony, which never came. But he was also brought on to the radio to introduce Richard Strauss after the war, when he came back. Behind the scenes he was quite an important person, but he was a marvellous composition teacher. I did strict counterpoint. When I went to the Academy I didn't even know what a triad was, I didn't know anything.

Of course, going back a few years to just before the war, we acquired a radio, a wireless it was called in those days, and I was able to twiddle the knobs when my parents weren't around and get things from abroad. I heard the Liszt E flat concerto for the first time and was bowled over by it. And on the radio in those days, British radio, there were two stations. There was a National and a Regional. And the National had a thing called – they were very unfortunate with their titles in those days, very stuffy – 'Foundations of Music'. I mean, it just is enough to put anybody off, isn't it. But the Foundations of Music, they used to get a gentleman called Egon Petri, and Egon Petri played lots of Liszt, I heard it all, campanellas and things like this for the first time in my life, I was thrilled. But I imagine, I can't remember this, in 1938 I was fourteen or fifteen, I imagine in the *Radio Times* I would have seen that Petri was going to play something by a chap called Alkan, and that wouldn't have attracted me you see. And this is one of the things with Alkan that we've always been up against. I remember some years ago, in the earlier days when I was pioneering Alkan, putting on the Concerto for Solo Piano in a cut version for a music club, I think it was in Sheffield, and I stayed with a very good pianist friend of

mine, and she always used to come to my concerts. She said, 'I'm not coming tonight', so I said, 'Why not?' 'Well,' she said, 'I don't care for the programme, this Alkan is the whole of the second half'. I said, 'Do you know any Alkan?' and she said 'No, but I'm not sort of attracted by the idea of it'. So you see how difficult it is with a lot of people, and she was a professional musician. So, I digress slightly, I wouldn't unfortunately have heard the Alkan programmes, I probably wouldn't have understood them at that stage.

Well, the war came. I was turned down flat for any sort of military service on my sight. And so I made it to the Academy. I was jolly lucky, I had an orchestral piece played in a public concert by Sir Henry Wood when I was eighteen. And still Alkan was never on the horizon, nobody had heard of him, although the Academy library had a large amount of Alkan music. And they gave me a scholarship afterwards. I was the first one to have this sort of travelling scholarship to go abroad to study. It was very generous of them. And I went out to study with Marguerite Long for a time. She was very nice to me. And of course she had been through all Debussy's music with Debussy, and she was very interesting. She was also very interesting about Ravel and she was the dedicatee of his G major Concerto. And she, I think, had been the girlfriend of Gabriel Fauré, so she was quite a lady, but I didn't get from her what I wanted so this lapsed.

I was starting to get broadcast for the first time. The Third Programme had just started in a rather experimental way, and one of the producers was Humphrey Searle, you know the name, of course, the composer. He clearly had remembered and been inspired by the Petri/Alkan programmes. Petri did two for the National Radio and two for the Regional Radio. I can't think which were which, but I know he played the Symphony at one of these, which he played quite a lot, it was a sort of star turn of his. He played what was described as 'Aesop's Banquet' and he played 'Le tambour bat au champs' which was quite correctly translated as 'The Drum beats a Salute', not as they do now as 'The Drum beats on the Field' which is crass, of course. And he played the Concerto, which got a mixed bag of critiques. One man said the end of the first movement was 'almost shriek worthy, it went on and on.' Somebody said it was a fraud; somebody else said it was a most interesting and extraordinary composition. But I think he must have made *some* cuts, although he was one of the fast boys; he might have done the whole thing in about forty-nine minutes, I don't know. I certainly couldn't. He certainly plays parts of the Symphony, particularly what I think are the slower parts, rather faster than I would. So, it's possible he played the whole thing. I do know from Anthony Lewis – you know Sir Anthony Lewis was the Principal of the Royal Academy of Music for a period – that he had been a young producer before the war at the BBC and he was in on the Petri broadcast. He told me that they gave Petri three weeks for these four recitals. They said, 'Can you do it?' and he said, 'Yes, I think so'. And he did everything from the music, and I think Lewis turned the pages for him, for the concerto. So, that's a little piece of history which you may not know.

So, getting back to the period after the war, in '49 I was very busy, I had my first job. I was teaching at Harrow, teaching little boys to try to play the piano. I used to travel up from Canterbury four days a week. It was an absolute killer. I used to catch the 6.47 in the morning. I did all my work – I was working for a B.Mus. – standing up because there was no room to sit down in the corridor of the train. The great luxury was to get a corridor and not the concertina thing between the two coaches. And, back in the early hours of the morning very often, and then up again for the 6.47 the next day – not very good. I must have been quite mad because the BBC asked me, Humphrey Searle asked me, if I would do a live broadcast of some Brahms studies. They were Opus 25 No.2 Study of Chopin, but arranged in double sixths and thirds, you may have seen it, fearfully difficult; the 'Moto Perpetuum' of Weber; the last movement of the C major Sonata, but with the filigree work in the left hand, it was like stroking the cat the wrong way, and there were all sorts of other things, the Bach G minor violin partita with the hands reversed, that's terribly difficult to memorise. I must have been mad. It was on, I believe, a Saturday night. I went and taught at Harrow literally all day, had a meal, went straight along to the studio, broadcast at 10.15 that night and caught the eleven something train home. I must have been quite crazy in those days, but I managed to get through the thing somehow.

Two or three days later I went into the Royal Academy of Music and Sir Stanley Marchant, the Principal, who'd always been terribly nice to me, came up to me. 'Ah, dear boy,' he said, 'I heard your little broadcast the other night. Very good, it's quite tricky some of those pieces'. 'Yes,' I replied, 'a little bit tricky' and I continued, 'I have a problem now. Really, I don't know what to do about it. I've had a telegram from him,' (I didn't even have a telephone in those days) 'Would I play a concerto by somebody called Alkan? A concerto without orchestra, and really they've only given me three weeks to learn this, I haven't seen it yet and I wonder whether I really ought to do this. I'm in two minds'. He said 'My dear boy, there's a queue of people who'd give their eyes to get that broadcast; you must do it'. So, I think I rang Humphrey up from a call-box and said 'Yes, I'll do this. Could you *not* give me more than sort of just under three weeks?' 'Well,' he said, 'I'll have a word with Robert Collett, he's doing one of these things and see if he can perhaps swap dates with you' and he did, very nicely, Robert swapped dates and gave me an extra three or four days, I think. 'Mind you,' Humphrey said, 'You'll have to make some cuts, you know, because you've only got thirty-five minutes'. Of course, the piece takes about fifty-five minutes, but I didn't know this, I didn't know Alkan. This huge volume arrived and I was unfortunate because I just opened it at random and what very strange looking piano music, very busy. I propped it up and tried to read some of it – I was never the world's greatest reader – but I couldn't make any sense of this. I turned the pages back – 'Pour la main gauche seule' – good gracious, left hand alone!

That was my introduction to one of Alkan's toughest pieces, but I had found the Concerto. 'Ah, this is rather nice music' was my first impression. Well, I got into it and I became quite hooked on it. The last movement was very brilliant, I played the last movement complete. I made a cut in the second movement, and Alkan's prescribed huge cut in the first movement. I got it down to about thirty-three minutes. I think four people played in that, Colin Horsley played the Symphony. I heard it for the first time on the radio, I heard his broadcast. That would certainly be, after Petri, the first time the Symphony had been played in this country. But Horsley didn't take it up afterwards, I don't know how he played it. It sounded quite a leisurely piece to me so I imagine he didn't play it with quite the fire and sort of single-minded élan that it requires. I don't know. Good pianist. And Kyla Greenbaum, I'm pretty sure they landed her with some of the shorter pieces, and Robert had some of the shorter pieces, and by then he was also teaching at Harrow. He had left the BBC – he was a producer, got fed up with it – and he taught at Harrow, why he wanted to do this I don't know. He was, I shouldn't really say these things you know, he's not here to defend himself, he was an absolute master at knowing when there were going to be field days, Harrow and Eton cricket matches, and all this sort of thing, and he arranged his timetable so that the pupils couldn't turn up because they had something else on and he was always in this room next to me practising Brahms D minor Concerto. And, between us, I had Prince Wali, who was the Crown Prince of Afghanistan I was told, whatever that can mean now I don't know, great little chap, he wasn't very good at the piano, he was very good at the drums. He only turned up about once every three lessons, Prince Wali; and King Faisal, who was younger, he was supposed to have come to me, but it was the wrong day, I couldn't take him, so he went to Robert. I don't know what happened to him, he was probably bumped off or something, poor little chap. But during our coffee breaks, Robert regaled us with all sorts of stories about Alkan. He knew quite a lot about him because he studied with Isidore Philipp, and Isidore Philipp, of course, had known Alkan, so there was a direct link there. And some of the legends, the bookcase falling, they came from that direction, from Isidore Philipp via Robert. And he also told us about the '*petits concerts*', but we didn't know quite what they were, at which Alkan used to play what *he* wanted to play, spontaneously, and people used to say 'Play Scarlatti', 'Play Couperin', 'Play Chopin', 'Play Schumann' and that sort of thing and Alkan used to sit down and play. Well, I don't know whether this is so, but that is what he was telling us at that time.

I have two things I will say now about my own impressions of Alkan as a composer; having devoted many, many years to him, having written about him, having listened to a great amount of his music, and played a great amount. I think, although things are righting themselves now, he was first of all totally neglected for the wrong, but understandable reasons. France completely scorned him for many,

many years. I had a broadcast in the early 'fifties for Paris Radio. When Capdevielle, who was the head of chamber music there, asked me to submit a programme and I suggested some Alkan, I already knew Alkan then, a little bit of Alkan – this was after Humphrey Searle's little escapade on the BBC – and I suggested some Alkan. I had a letter back, I've still got it, from Capdevielle. He said, 'I'm absolutely astonished,' (in French, you see, I'll say it in English) 'I'm absolutely astonished that you suggested Alkan. Even our French pianists don't play this long forgotten composer, who perhaps was interesting for certain technical innovations but not for any musical value. We'd much rather you played some of your English music, marvellous composers like John Ireland for instance'. So I remember the announcer, and I was suddenly transfixed while I was in the middle of this recital, the announcer said, "*Et maintenant, M. Smit va jouer 'The Dark Valley' de John Ireland*". Oh my god, what's this? Oh, the 'The Darkened Valley' by John Ireland, of course.

When eventually a new generation came into Radiodiffusion Française, young people, and, I think, largely because Lewenthal had come over from America, quite flamboyantly, and a huge thing had appeared in *The Times*, a big article about Alkan, with pictures of him, this brought the thing forward again. I had played a certain amount of Alkan on the radio, but up to then it had gone off at half-cock.

You see, occasionally they would have a little broadcast about Alkan – I won't give you any names of the people who did this sort of thing, they were, after all, friends of mine – in which they fell over backwards not to overstate the case. You can imagine the result. I mean, of course, they had read Sorabji's *Around Music*, 1930; and they had read the van Dieren book of 1935, *Down Among the Dead Men*. Van Dieren emphasised two pieces, one of which I don't think is the best Alkan by any means, although it is rather a nice piece, which is the '*L'Incendie au village voisin*' ('The Fire in the Neighbouring Village'). And he spoke about '*Le Tambour bat au champs*' as he doubted if any such piece of so simple means had ever been written that so expressed such unmitigated tragedy. Well, I don't hear the piece quite like that, but because these two pieces were mentioned, so little bits of these were played, you heard just the opening in these talks of *The Fire in the Neighbouring Village*, which by itself, out of its context, doesn't sound particularly original, it might have been written by almost anybody you see, and then perhaps somebody else mentioned the Symphony and played just the exposition, but rather gently. Well, the exposition of the Symphony, for somebody who doesn't know Alkan at all, it could really sound a little bit like Mendelssohn, before things really happen. And so he got off to a rather weak start and there was always this sort of almost apology for him. He used to say as a start off 'Why is this music not well-known?' and then try to find why it shouldn't be any better known, which is not quite the way to do it.

Then Lewenthal came along, with quite a lot of colour and positive thoughts. I came along at exactly the same time and some people might have thought I overdid it a bit, I don't know. Lewenthal was asked to give a talk for Radio 3, by Robert Leighton, for his department, and they asked me if I could do illustrations for this. I thought it's not necessary, I mean he can do illustrations perfectly well. However, they wanted to get me in on the act for some reason. They gave him microphone tests, but for some reason they didn't take to his delivery, so they then came back to me and said, 'Would you do the whole thing?' So I did, and I did, what, three big recitals following that. That would have been in 1968. And that helped to get things going. In 1968 I also recorded some short pieces on old pianos from the Colt Clavier Collection, and three records went out, one of them was Alkan and Roger Fisk in *The Gramophone* went overboard about the quality of the music. That helped enormously, and I was asked to record for the BBC, the concerto, still with some cuts – not the big cut – some cuts to make it take about three quarters of an hour, for Robert Simpson. And he said, 'I think the BBC would be interested in making a disc of this commercially.' However, a friend of mine who had been the engineer on this particular occasion rang me up and said, 'There's a company called Radnor that's very interested in this. I can tell you you'd get a fantastic recording from them in stereo.' This particular broadcast had been in mono, you see. The result was I recorded the concerto in – I think it must have been '68, yes – in the Wigmore Hall, and this was the first version that went out.

After this, as a sort of last fling before getting married, I went out on an adjudication tour across Canada, five months. When I came back my wife-to-be met me at the airport. She said, 'I've got one piece of rather bad news for you. You know that recording you made of the *Concerto for Solo Piano*, the Alkan, well, Radnor have gone into liquidation. Oh dear'. Well, I rang up the producer, and he said, 'Well, I think the engineer made a copy of this, but I believe he's made off with the master'. So I rang him up and he said, 'Yes, I've got it, what do you want me to do with it?' So I thought of my friend Patrick Piggott, who invented John Field you know. He said, 'I have a great friend in the Saga Gramophone Company; I think they might take it on board'. Well, I rang this man, and they said, 'Oh, he's gone over to EMI – HMV'. At this point I thought is it worth pursuing this? Well, I managed to track this chap down in his office, rang him one morning and told him about this. He said. 'Look, I'm the wrong person, I'm in light music. The person you want is John Whittle'. Well, I'd heard this name, and he said 'Why don't you ring his secretary, I'll give you the number'. So I rang his secretary and I asked, 'Would it be possible for me to see Mr. Whittle just for a short time this afternoon, as I'm in London, and talk about a rather interesting record of Alkan, it might interest him. Would you call his attention to page so-and-so of the current *Gramophone*?' (Where this fantastic notice that Roger Fisk had written appeared). Yes, I was told, he would see me. So I went along there, I met him and we clicked. 'Well,' he said, 'It would be very nice to hear it'. He remembered, of course, that I had recorded for EMI with Edwin Fisher and Denis Matthews in the Bach Triple Concerto in 1950, a long time earlier. I said 'I can a copy of this to you to hear and see what you think of it'. Well, he rang me up and said 'We have heard it, it's been all round the departments, and we are going to put it out'.

Round about that time John Ogdon, who had heard me play a cut version of the concerto at the Wigmore Hall, this was how he knew it, decided that he wanted to learn it. And he had learned it without any cuts, and he had recorded for RCA, and a thing appeared in *The Gramophone* to say it was great news that John Ogdon's recording of the *Concerto for Solo Piano* by Alkan – this gigantic piece – is going to be available in a few months' time. Well, I immediately rang up John Whittle, and I said 'Look, have you seen this?' He said, 'We've seen it and it's alright, we've brought yours forward'. And mine came out that Christmas. I won't tell you what it said about the pianist, but the work got the thumbs up and it got into the sort of top four of the bestsellers for a month. That really, I think, with Lewenthal's record got us off the ground with Alkan.

I gave a long talk to the Alkan Society on the terrific saga of the chamber works, so we won't go into those any more now.

Before you ask questions, there is one thing that has just come into my mind; different things float into my mind you see. There are two very prominent members on the Committee of the Society to whom I am very much in debt. One, of course, is Richard Shaw who did his thesis on Alkan at Edinburgh University just about the time I was writing my first book. He put all his researches at my disposal; it was an absolute godsend. He also read all my stuff as well; we used to get together. we had some fun over that.

The other is Nicholas King. When we decided to do something about the *pédalier* works, the pedal piano works, the odd thing for organ, the odd thing for harmonium, he came down to Folkestone. We went into Holy Trinity Church, a vast Victorian church with a large organ, which had a fault, I know, one note that wouldn't work or something. Nicholas King literally sight-read onto a tape for me the entire works for that medium. It took about two hours. He went straight through from beginning to end. Really, quite a lot of this should come out on disc you know. That was a red-letter evening in my life, when I heard all these things for the first time. He didn't do the pedal studies, he chickened out of those, but he did a two-handed version of them on the piano for me.

*[N.K. You'll be glad to know this, Ronald, I've been working on them for the last eight weeks, because I've had to. (N.K. suffered an arm injury in the recent snows.)]*

So – questions.

*Q. You've given us a very interesting talk from a British perspective. I'd be interested to know if the enthusiasm is the same in other countries, like the United States or Germany or France.*

A. Well, I can tell you two or three things. Certainly, with the new generation of the French, there is quite a considerable coterie there, absolutely fanatically interested. And the radio, I gave the first performance in France of the *Grande Sonate* for them, for radio. I've even been involved over there in a sort of impromptu discussion *en français* for France Culture; I'm sure it's a jolly sight less 'culture' now than it was when I started.

Also I went to Russia about ten years ago, with two programmes. One was entirely Alkan. I was going to play for the Composers' Guild there and I met this man who ostracized Shostakovich, but unfortunately there was a spy exchange beforehand and this went asunder. When I arrived they said, 'We don't want Alkan. You're not French, it must be a Frenchman to play Alkan. They want all the other pieces'. I said, 'Well, I'm sorry, I'm going to play Alkan'. And I had a terrific argument. In the end I changed every programme, putting in a substantial amount of Alkan. And when I played Alkan at Kharkov the students all came on to the platform afterwards and they all shouted 'Alkan! Alkan!'; and a boy went over to the piano and by ear played quite a chunk of 'Festin d'Aesop' that he'd heard me play once. There was such enormous enthusiasm and shortly afterwards they published for the first time the 'Festin d'Aesop'. But I will never go to Russia again, they said, because I misbehaved myself abominably there by doing this.

*Q. You might get let back there now.*

A. Oh, it's possible, but I shan't go, I think. I'm going to Singapore, that's enough. Then, the States, of course, I gave an all Alkan recital in New York. Got a very, very good review in the *New York Times* – they described him as an obsessive, which he is of course – obsessional perhaps the better word would be. I played shorter pieces in the first half, ending with the 'Festin d'Aesop' and the Concerto in the second half, so it was quite a programme. The audience was very enthusiastic about this. But by then Lewenthal's endeavours were on the wane – this happens in the States, they do tend to grow hot and cold very quickly. They made a great fuss of Lewenthal, then they sort of rather dropped him, which was a shame. But, I really couldn't continue to keep going out there and doing it. You know, one gets older and one doesn't want to do these things any longer. I'm in my 83<sup>rd</sup> year now - one can't go on for ever.

And Australia, of course. I played and broadcast Alkan extensively there and yes, they're mightily interested there. My old pupil Stephanie McCallum is over there and she's made the only recording, I think, of all the major key studies, plays them marvellously. She plays this stuff, she's done the Symphony, she's done all sorts of things. Yes, so she is carrying on the tradition over there.

Of course, we have our younger coterie of artists; quite a number feel that it's quite a good thing now to play Alkan, to put one Alkan item in their repertory, perhaps the Symphony or the 'Festin' or something like this.

My own thoughts on the great works of Alkan? I'm quite convinced now: the Symphony, the Concerto, Overture. I would say these are greater works than the 'Festin d'Aesop'. It's a marvellous piece, but they are greater works. The *Grande Sonate*, that is a very special work, you've got to view it in its historic perspective – it's amazingly original. Whether it quite works – I suppose it does in its own curious way. I think some of the greatest Alkan is also to be found in the chamber music, the three works, that I've recorded, so I know them very, very well indeed. The *Duo Concertante*, which looks so unpromising on paper, but it comes off. It's furiously difficult to play for both instruments, terribly difficult, but it is a most remarkable early piece of Alkan. And the Trio, so different, so concise, so relevant, marvellous piece – Harold Truscott thought it was the best of them. Most people think the best of these works is the later 'cello sonata, which of course is a wonderful piece. I think some people find the opening movement, the actual quality of the ideas a little bit Mendelssohnian, but it is not so if you know it very, very well. And the construction of this first movement is fantastic, on a very big scale. The second movement is so original in the way *Petit conte* is original, with these

strange shifting harmonies. No other composer used harmony in quite this way. The third movement, of course, is a masterpiece and the finale, of course, is wonderful – alla saltarello – a fantastic showpiece.

*A vote of thanks moved by the Chairman was carried with acclaim.*

R.S. Well it's lovely to see you all again..

*Transcribed by Eliot Levin*

## Remembering Ronald Smith

*The Society has received many tributes to Ronald Smith, from members and from admirers all over the world.*

*The pianist Marc-André Hamelin had just been informed of his election as an honorary member of the Alkan Society (agreed at the AGM which Ronald addressed) when he heard the news of Ronald's death. He e-mailed us from Canada:*

I am deeply honored by my nomination as an honorary member of the Alkan Society and I gratefully accept. Please convey my sadness to the members of the Society over the passing of Ronald Smith. Such a precious musician and human being!

*We also received the following e-mail:*

Dear Members of Alkan Society

On behalf of the staff and management of the Singapore International Piano Festival, I would like to extend our deepest condolences to the family of Ronald Smith. Our thoughts and prayers go with them at this difficult time. Ronald Smith was to have performed a recital on 2 July 2004 at Singapore's Victoria Concert Hall. His passing has denied us the pleasure of his company, musicianship and scholarship. The recital will be dedicated "In Memory of Ronald Smith".

We will never forget you.

Dr Chang Tou Liang  
Artistic Director, Singapore International Piano Festival

*The Memorial Recital was given by Leslie Howard, who included in his recital Alkan's 'Symphonie'.*

*We publish as an annexe to this Bulletin obituaries and tributes to our late President. We are endeavouring also to place links to as many published tributes as possible on the Society's website.*

## Forthcoming Events

We draw Members' attention to the following forthcoming Alkan events. Update information on these events is available on the Society's web pages.

**Saturday 24th July 2004** *University Music School, Cambridge at 18.00.* Recital by **Thomas Wakefield** to include music by **Alkan**, Pinto, Field and Gottschalk. Members are requested to e-mail Dr. Roderick Munday at [rjm1000@cam.ac.uk](mailto:rjm1000@cam.ac.uk) for tickets, which are by invitation only. The Society is very grateful to Dr. Munday for extending invitations to Members.

**25th July-8th August 2004 Ameropa 2004 11th Annual International Chamber Music Festival, Czech Republic**, will include European premiere of Mark Starr's transcription of **Alkan 'Comme le vent' op. 39 no.1** for four flutes and piano. Check Festival website <http://www.ameropa.org/> for date and venue.

**Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> August 2004**, *Holywell Music Room, Oxford*. Closing concert ‘**Farewell Piano Party**’ of **Jack Gibbons**’s 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Oxford Series. Good chance of Alkan in this farewell medley; NB the second half of the concert programme will be voted by the audience!

**Thursday 2nd September 2004** *Haldane Room, University College London at 18.00*. Alkan Society sponsored recital by **Thomas Wakefield**, to include Alkan, Mendelssohn, Gershwin and Liszt/Meyerbeer, as part of the London2004 International Postgraduate Conference of the Dept. of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University College. Please contact the Society for tickets and details.

**Friday 1st October 2004** *Novon Manegezaal, Odeon Theatre, Zwolle, Netherlands at 20.00* Performance of **Alkan's 'Marche funèbre sur la mort d'un papagallo' and 'Concerto da Camera no. 1'** (soloist: Rian de Waal). Programme also includes Poulenc Sextuor and Ravel Violin Sonata. Tickets Euro 14.00. Concluding concert of the festival 'Kammermuziek aan de IJssel'.

**Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> October. Masterclass by Richard Shaw** at *Fitzwilliam College Cambridge*, in advance of the **Alkan Scholarship Competition, Friday 12<sup>th</sup> November**. This year’s set piece is Alkan’s op. 31 no. 13 (Song of Songs).

## Editor’s Notes

➤ Those who are seeking some holiday reading with an Alkanesque tinge might do worse than pick up ‘The Last Samurai’ by Helen DeWitt (Vintage, £7.99, or £6.39 from Amazon via our website). Nothing to do with the recent Hollywood blockbuster, or even very much to do with Japan – but it will appeal to anyone with an interest in the films of Kurosawa, classical Hebrew grammar, child prodigies, advanced physics and ‘Le festin d’Esopé’. Need I say more?

➤ The Society’s website continues to expand and draw attention. We recommend members to tune in regularly to the Forum to see recent contributions (and to add their own). Recent additions to the pages include, on the open site, a page of links to obituaries of our late President. On the ‘members only’ pages you will now find a page relating to Alkan Society sponsored and associated events which members may attend, and also a page of musical downloads. This was sparked by Mark Starr’s kind offer to provide the mp3 version of his arrangement of Alkan’s op. 39 no. 1 ‘Comme le vent’ for four flutes and piano. It is a large file and you will need broadband to listen to it unless you are very patient and don’t mind the contingent phone bill. You can also find there my own (greatly inferior) midi version of Alkan’s synagogue chorale ‘Etz hajjim hi’ which offers the sole merit of being much smaller and easy to download.

## Record Review

**Alkan: Sonate de concert, op. 47; R. Strauss: sonata op 6; Vivaldi Largo and Allegro, arr. from Concerto in E minor.**

*Jascha Silberstein (cello)/John Ogdon (piano). Kurakchi Studio HKA 25712, available from Amazon.com (US) at \$15.99. Recorded live at the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, 21.11.1975.*

I feel hesitant to give my critical opinion of the Alkan performance as I am neither a musician or a music critic, and just a music lover. But I do think this is a marvel. The musical relationship between the two artists was obviously very amicable and the result is a very enjoyable and very exciting performance indeed. Both Ogdon and Silberstein are on great form, but I do have certain reservations: the middle two movements are considerably slower than we are used to hearing, especially in the allegretto, which becomes a little more wilting than lilting, but they do give you the opportunity to revel in the exotic harmonies.

Silberstein does have the ability to create long musical lines at such a slow tempo (his golden, rich, resonatingly big sonority is beautiful) but does so frequently at the expense of some noticeably dodgy intonation. The adagio is predictably hypnotic, especially with Ogdon's superb pianissimo playing in the piano's high register, whilst the salterella is consumed at white heat with absolutely coruscating

bravura from both players. Silberstein attacks the opening triplets with real "bite", bringing to mind the wild stamping feet of a tarantella.

The recorded sound is quite resonant and full, but the balance is given in favour of the cello which can become quite obtrusive and percussive at times, with some piano distortion as well in some of the louder passages. But these are small quibbles and should not in any way distract or discourage anyone from digging this golden musical nugget out of the Amazon! It has all the excitement and frisson a live concert should have and is an important historical musical document to boot.

*Robert Warwick*

¶ *For Silberstein's memories of this recording, see interview in ASB 65 – Ed.*

## **Alkan, Meyerbeer, Nathan**

On the evening of December 14th 2003 David Conway gave a talk at the New North London Synagogue, Finchley on the rise of Jewish composers made possible by emancipation in the early 19th century. The subject may sound dry and academic, but those who have heard this speaker before came expecting a talk based on sound scholarship, excellently prepared and superbly delivered. They were not disappointed. As examples he chose Alkan, Meyerbeer and Nathan.

In Isaac Nathan were combined businessman, concert promoter, music publisher, singer, teacher and composer. He was born at Canterbury in 1791. He studied Hebrew at Cambridge with a view to taking the cloth, but interest in music moved him to study singing and composition with Domenico Corri. At a time when national melodies were proving very popular, Beethoven was setting Scottish, English and Irish melodies, and Thomas Moore Irish melodies, Nathan perceived a place for Hebrew melodies. With the acumen, flare and nerve of a true businessman, he wrote to Lord Byron offering to set some of his poems to Hebrew melodies. To our astonishment, if not Nathan's, not only did Byron accept the idea, but a genuine warmth and affection developed between them. Eventually, after Byron left England and various ventures failed, Nathan set sail for Australia, where he became highly regarded as a singing teacher and composed the first Australian opera. The story of Alkan and the bookcase has been discredited, but we have no reason to doubt the manner of Nathan's end; he was run over by a tram<sup>1</sup>.

Meyerbeer was a son of a very successful Berlin banker. He moved to Paris, perceived a market for 'grand opera' and proceeded to supply it with huge success. In Meyerbeer, as in Nathan, were combined musical and commercial abilities. Alkan, as readers of this Newsletter will know, was the exception of the three, lacking even the smallest element of self-promotion, but for many the greatest composer. Thus, in posthumous fame, aided by the work of Lewenthal and Smith, he may well be the more lasting.

This most fascinating evening was lavishly illustrated with musical examples in which David Conway was very ably assisted by his daughter Claudia Conway, who sang a wide variety of pieces, including Alkan's '3 anciennes mélodies de la synagogue' and culminating in "Nobles seigneurs" from Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, and Naomi Conway, who played an ersatz pedalier at the bass end of the keyboard. Indeed, one could say it was a family event, for David's mother and his wife assisted with refreshments in the interval and at the close his father, unable to repress very justified pride, expressed the pleasure the evening had given to us all.

*Eliot Levin*

---

<sup>1</sup> The Society's Resident Historian of Public Service Vehicles, who also doubles as Secretary, advises that the Pitt Street Horse Car Line opened at the end of 1861. The single track line was 1 mile and 63 chains long and the cars were horse-drawn. To accommodate railway traffic as well as tram cars the rails projected above the road surface. This gave rise to many complaints which intensified after the death of Isaac Nathan, killed by a tram after alighting from it. An investigation led to the line being closed in 1866.