



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered Charity number 276199)

<http://www.alkansociety.org>

President: Yonty Solomon

**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

Chairman: Eliot Levin

Treasurer: Averil Kovacs e-mail treasureralksoc@aol.com

Archivist: Brian Doyle **Bulletin Editor/Webmaster:** David Conway

Bulletin e-mail: info@alkansociety.org

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BULLETIN no. 70 July 2005

Editor's notes

The past few months may have been quiet as regards Alkan performances and recordings, but the pace is clearly hotting up.

The Society's President, **Yonty Solomon**, gives a recital on **Monday October 3rd at 7.30 pm at the Warehouse, Theed St., London**, sponsored by the Society – details to follow.

Kevin Bowyer returns to recording Alkan with a three discs covering the complete organ/pedalier oeuvre - the present Bulletin includes an interview with him. He will be including Alkan (op. 66 nos. 4 and 10) in his **Durham Cathedral recital on August 17th**.

Also we note that the pianist **Piers Lane**, who recently issued a fascinating recording of the op. 90 studies of Alkan's contemporary Moscheles, is including works by Alkan in some of his forthcoming recitals (see end of this Bulletin and our web-site).

The website forum continues to be active and we were especially pleased to hear from **Anders Rådén** about his mp3 transcription of Alkan's op. 34 'Scherzo focoso'. Anders has contributed a specially written article to this Bulletin about his achievement.

Development of the website continues. The eagle eye of Brian Doyle has enabled a revision and correction of many of the discography entries. In addition the task of getting all the Society's bulletins on-line has progressed and with all numbers from no. 21 onwards now being available to members. I hope to complete this task by the end of this year.

Members are reminded that the **5th Alkan Society Piano Scholarship Competition** will be held on 11th November at Fitzwilliam College. There will be a recital by Thomas Wakefield on 12th November. For details see below.

As always the editor invites all contributions and comments from members for the next issue!

Kevin Bowyer – a New Alkan Organ Intégrale

The announcement of a three-disc complete recording of Alkan's organ/pedalier works by Kevin Bowyer is an important Alkan landmark. Your editor met with him to discuss it.

The organist Kevin Bowyer was born in Southend in 1961. His introduction to the world of the organ was by the traditional British path, starting as a member of his church choir. This is



a tradition which Bowyer recognises as now being under threat – these days being a church musician carries with it a heavy overlay of administration. At the same time, other associated traditions, such as the typical British ‘town hall organ recital’ are also on the wane. Bowyer however is clearly very much a part of the British organ tradition, with the addition of a decided taste for non-traditional elements, as his recordings of Gubaidalina, Ferneyhough and others testify.

He won first prize at the St Albans International Organ Competition in 1983 and his career has never looked back. He is active as a teacher – he presently teaches at the Royal Manchester College of Music and is organist at Glasgow University; as he ruefully comments, his teaching commitments give him a detailed knowledge of Britain's motorway system. But he also maintains a busy world-wide concert and recording schedule. His extensive discography (over 70 recordings) will shortly be extended by the first complete recording of Alkan's organ works – of which more below.

Bowyer is a big man and clearly thrives on big projects – one of which is a complete recording of Bach's organ works (totalling 29 CDs from Nimbus in 17 volumes). He is also a champion of the challenging and neglected – which led him to Alkan, originally via the music of Kaikhosru Sorabji.

Around 1986 Bowyer was invited to take part in a performance of Sorabji's *First Organ Symphony* (which he subsequently recorded – Continuum Records, CCD 1001/2). This led to contact with Ronald Smith and subsequently to a series of meetings with Sorabji himself before the latter's death in 1988. It was through Smith that Bowyer was introduced to Alkan's organ music (of which Smith lent him copies), and he immediately ‘felt it to be really different’. Sorabji himself was of course a keen Alkaniste, so the connection was highly appropriate.

The first fruit of this introduction was a 1988 recording on Nimbus (NI 5089) including Alkan's *Treize pièces* op. 64, the eight *Petits préludes sur les gammes de plainchant* and the op. 69 *Impromptu sur un choral de Luther*, played on the organ of Salisbury Cathedral. The new recordings stemmed from Bowyer's desire to commit the whole of Alkan's organ/pédalier output on disc; he found a willing collaborator in Martin Anderson whose new label, Toccata Classics, will specialise in neglected corners of repertory. Recording of the three disc set should be completed later this year. It will include all the music for organ and

pedalier, including the first recording on organ of the op. 31 *Préludes* (which were originally published for ‘piano ou orgue’). We will also have the first British recording of the short piece *Pro organo*, a manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale. Hopefully volumes 1 and 2 will be available in late autumn 2005. Doubts have been expressed in the past as to the suitability of some of the pédalier music for organ, but Bowyer finds that the texture of these pieces – and even those of the most ‘pianistic’ of the op. 31 *Préludes* – can suit the organ very well.

It has often seemed to me that it is possible to deduce something of the physical characteristics of the great keyboard composers through the ways in which they write for their instrument, and I asked Bowyer if, playing all of Alkan’s organ music, it told him anything about Alkan the man. Certainly, he felt, the ‘very delicate and well-balanced pedal technique’ showed something of Alkan’s specific attributes – and in this context he singled out the seventh of the twelve studies for pedals alone.

One consequence of this project is that Bowyer will be playing more Alkan from time to time in his organ recitals, such as the forthcoming recital in Durham Cathedral on August 17th – we will try to give notice of these in the Bulletin and on the Society website.

For the future there are many other recording proposals and also a continuing involvement with Sorabji. Bowyer is preparing editions, with a view to recording, of Sorabji’s second and third Organ Symphonies, which are on a scale even more massive than the first. Both scores cover 300-350 pages of manuscript, in a handwriting not the easiest to decrypt. So far, only the first movement of the Second Symphony has been played in public. Bowyer hopes to have his edition of the whole Symphony ready in 2006, and reckons a full performance would take about 6 ½ hours. He is timetabling his edition of the Third Symphony for 2010, and believes it may take even longer in performance. These admirably heroic undertakings mark the determination of a man determined to conquer and reveal the unknown in organ music. We await his Alkan recordings with great interest.

The first two discs, which will be issued by Toccata Classics, include: Vol I: *Benedictus* op. 54, *Pedal studies nos. 1-6*, *11 Grands préludes and Handel Messiah transcription*. Op. 66; Vol. II: *Pro organo*, *Pedal Studies 7-12*, *11 Pièces religieux and Handel Messiah transcription*, op 72

Rekindling the Scherzo Focoso, op. 34

Anders Rådén announced his remarkable computer transcription of Alkan’s ‘Scherzo focoso, op. 34, on the forum of the Society’s web-site earlier this year. Here he tells us of the painstaking work he undertook in bringing this extraordinary work to life – and reveals that the story is not yet over.....

My interest in Alkan started in 1994 when I studied Music Psychology at University of Melbourne, and I found Ronald Smith’s two books on the composer in the University library. Glancing through them I was intrigued by all the musical examples and especially the torrential volume of notes. Long since a Liszt fan, I wondered: how would this kind of music sound when played on the piano?

Soon after I borrowed Smith’s CD recording of the *Grande sonate* from the library, but I must admit that the music did not appeal to me very much. To this day the sonata is actually one of my least favourite Alkan pieces. This could have been the end of the story, but luckily I gave

Alkan another chance two years later. I picked up Jack Gibbons' recording of the *Douze études dans les tons mineurs* following of a favourable review, and I was immediately mesmerised. I remember taking an instant liking to the coda of the 11th étude (*Ouverture*) and especially *Le festin d'Esope*. A bit later I bought Marc-André Hamelin's incredible live recording of *Trois grandes études*, and his wondrous interpretation was revelatory to me. From that moment on I started collecting other pieces by Alkan. I wrote my Bachelor of Arts paper in Musicology on Alkan and Liszt, comparing and analysing some of their études in relation to the étude form in the first half of the 19th century.

I had read in Ronald Smith's *The Music of Alkan* about *Scherzo focoso Op. 34* and I was frustrated to find out that no pianist had recorded it; but Smith's description of it as "a remorseless path to pianistic immolation for all but the most invincible techniques", and "both looking and sounding as difficult as it is", seemed to justify the lack of recordings. I had heard of the Japanese virtual pianist Michael Nanasakov and his recording of Alkan piano pieces with a computer and a Yamaha Disklavier, and with the explosive development of home computers I started thinking that it might be possible to actually reproduce *Scherzo focoso* in sound without even using a real piano.

I got hold of the score in pdf-format from Sylvain Chosson's Alkan website and started the tedious job of inputting all the 21 pages note by note, chord by chord into *Sibelius*, which is a notation program. The score is extremely difficult to interpret in places because the copy used for the pdf is in really bad shape, but I filled in some of the dubious places conjecturally, based on similar bars in other places, or on what seemed harmonically correct judging by the surrounding chords, runs and figurations. I exported the finished file as a Midi-file, which is a rough "blueprint" format that can be played on any computer. I imported it into *Cubase SX2* which is a music sequencer program, and then I started adjusting dynamics, tempo and accents according to the markings in the score. For playback I used the *Sampletekk Black Grand* which is one of the most realistic and detailed Steinway grand piano samplings available in the music business. Each of the 88 piano keys has a total of 36 different samples (touch strengths with pedal up and down).

I added reverb from an impulse recorded in the *Concertgebouw Amsterdam* to give the sound added depth and live feeling as if it was played in a concert hall.

Of course, in places the piece still sounds very much like a computer recording, not only because it would be nearly impossible for a performing pianist to play all the notes at the prescribed tempo, but also because it is played *too perfectly*, especially the right hand in the *pp* section of the coda. Furthermore, chords in both hands have a tendency to sound synthetic because the computer plays all the notes in the chords exactly simultaneously. In live performances there is always a subtle time difference between the notes in runs and especially in the chords, which automatically makes them sound "fatter" and less "perfect". Also, due to the weaker strength of the fourth and fifth finger some notes in a chord or run will be involuntarily played weaker than the other notes, thus producing a subtly uneven quality to the overall sound volume (of course, the better the pianist the more even the strength of the fingers).

The version of *Scherzo focoso* that I have published on the internet (hem.bredband.net/alkan/alkan.htm) is only a preliminary rough version and I plan to put more work into making it sound less mechanic and more "full-blooded" taking the above considerations into account.

Ronald Smith wonders in his book if the substance of *Scherzo focoso* justifies its elaboration, and I certainly think it does. In my opinion the transition to the final part of the coda is one of the most impressive end sequences in all piano music.

Alkan Society Piano Scholarship Competition 2005

The Fifth Alkan Society Piano Scholarship Competition will be held on 17.15 on Friday 11th November 2005 in the Auditorium, Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, at 17.15,

On Saturday 12th November 2005 at 20.00 in the Auditorium, Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, at 20.00, there will be a piano recital by Thomas Wakefield organised by The Fitzwilliam College Music Society in association with the Alkan Society. The programme will include Alkan Op.15, Trois Morceaux dans le genre pathétique (nos. 1 and 2), and Beethoven's Sonata No.21, Waldstein (op. 53). The recital marks the Fifth Alkan Society Piano Scholarship Competition.

Further details from Dr. Peter Tregear, Director of Music, Fitzwilliam College (e-mail: pjt21@cam.ac.uk).

Mendelssohn and the Alkan Trio

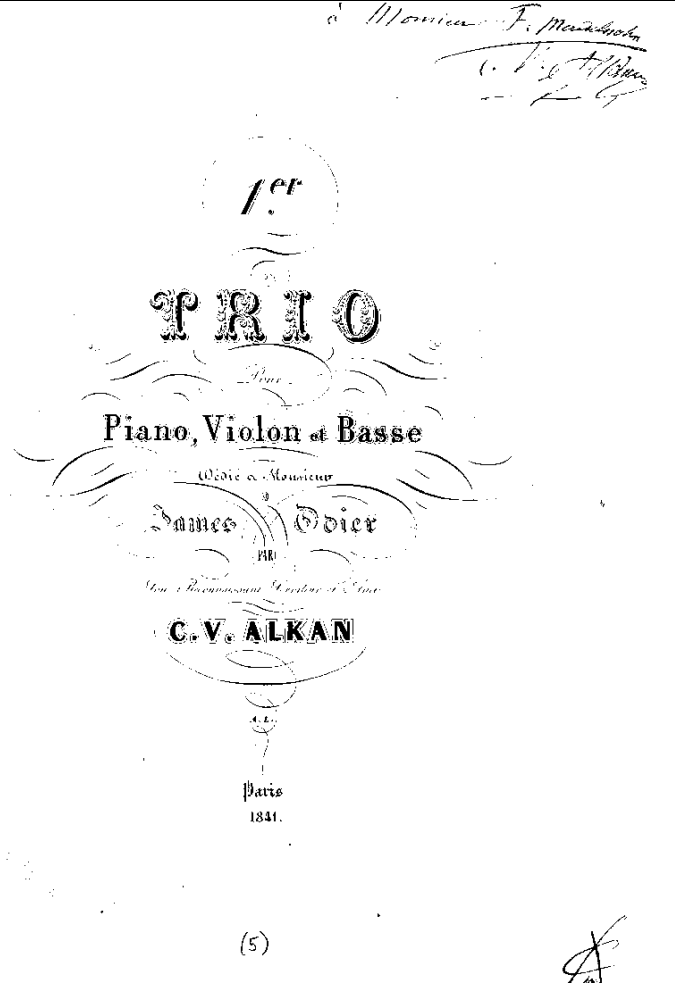
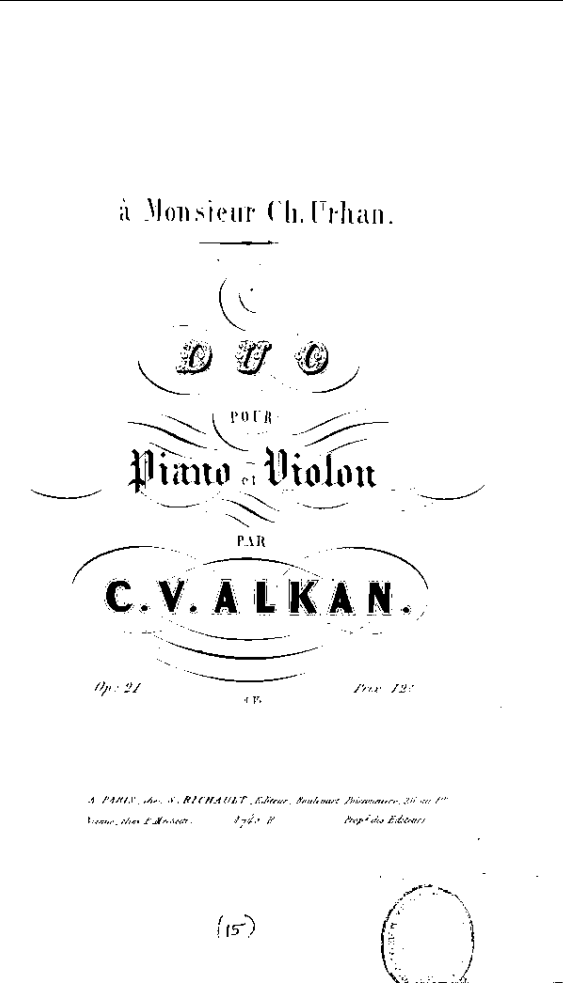
We know that Alkan was a keen Mendelssohnian. His sets of 'Chants' for the piano are inspired by – indeed often closely modelled on – Mendelssohn's 'Songs Without Words', 'gently refracted' as Ronald Smith puts it, 'through the distorting mirror of Alkan's mind'. And he also played many Mendelssohn pieces in his 'Petits Concerts' at Erard in the 1870s. Mendelssohn's high regard for Bach and the 'classic' tradition would also have qualified him, in Alkan's opinion, for a place on the side of the angels against musical revolutionaries such as Wagner.

But might Mendelssohn perhaps also have been influenced by Alkan? Although Mendelssohn throughout his life remained unimpressed by Paris and its music there is a tantalising reference in a letter from Felix to the violinist Ferdinand David, written in Berlin and dated 8th February 1844. David (1810-1873), who was the dedicatee and the first performer of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, was a lifelong associate of the composer – indeed, he had been born in the same house as Felix in Hamburg – and was at the time a professor in the Conservatory which Mendelssohn had established in Leipzig, as well as leader of the Gewandhaus orchestra, a post which he held from 1836 until his death. The letter looks forward to David's forthcoming visit to Berlin, and asks him to persuade the cellist Julius Rietz (1812-1877), another old associate of both musicians, to come with him.

Then we could have some really unbelievable music-making – we could e.g go early to the Cathedral at 9.00, we could hear the choruses for Aristophanes's 'Frogs' at 12.00, at 4.00 is the big concert in the Flower Garden, at 6.00 the opera, and in the evening we could once again play together the Trio of Alkan.¹

Exactly how serious Mendelssohn was about this proposal may be questioned – his next phrase is "so würdest Du sagen" – i.e. "that's what you would say". But it turns out that the proposal would have been feasible, as Mendelssohn certainly possessed the score of the Trio; and the wording suggests that they had indeed played it through previously at least once. It is

¹ Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *Briefe aus Leipziger Archiven*, ed. Rothe and Szeskus, Leipzig 1972, p. 196. My translation.

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|  <p>à Monsieur F. Mendelssohn C. V. Alkan 1841</p> <p>1^{er}</p> <p>TRIO</p> <p>Piano, Violon et Basse</p> <p>Édité & Annoté par James Odier</p> <p>Composé par C.V. ALKAN</p> <p>Paris 1841.</p> <p>(5)</p> |  <p>à Monsieur Ch. Urhan.</p> <p>DUO</p> <p>POUR Piano et Violon</p> <p>PAR C.V. ALKAN.</p> <p>Op. 21</p> <p>Paris 1841.</p> <p>A PARIS, chez S. RICHAULT, Libraire, Boulevard des Capucines, 26 au 1^{er} Vienne, chez E. Kailash, 1725, R. Propriété Ed. Gode</p> <p>(15)</p> |
| <p>Ill. 1. Alkan, Trio op. 30. Frontispiece Presentation copy to Felix Mendelssohn in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (reproduced with their permission)</p> | <p>Ill. 2. Alkan, Grand duo concertant, op. 21 (first edition). Frontispiece Bodleian Library, Oxford (reproduced with their permission)</p> |

preserved amongst the Mendelssohn collections in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, which arrived there after a complex history of descent, loan and gift. Not only that, but the copy is a presentation from the composer: signed ornately at the top on the frontispiece ‘à Monsieur F. Mendelssohn C. V. Alkan’ and with the composer’s CVA monogram at the bottom – the latter having been partly trimmed in the binding. (ill.1).

The Trio was published in 1841. Mendelssohn does not seem to have been in Paris between then and 1844 so the presentation was evidently not made personally. We have no evidence that Alkan had met Mendelssohn previously in Paris – the presentation must clearly therefore have been made as an act of homage.

Although we don’t know exactly what Mendelssohn made of the Trio we have evidence that it was not the only piece of Alkan known to him. The Bodleian also has Mendelssohn’s copy (this time without inscription) of the ‘Grand duo concertant’ for violin and piano of 1840. What is more, I am advised by François Luguenot that this appears to be the only copy of the first edition of the duo to have been located to date. We have therefore pleasure in including a reproduction of the title page in our Bulletin (ill. 2).

DC

Piers Lane – forthcoming Alkan Performances

The following engagements are listed from Mr. Lane’s website, from which it would seem that Alkan will be receiving a good airing in throughout England, as well as in Wales and Europe.

- Wednesday September 14th 2005 Burrswold Christian Hospital, Groombridge, Tunbridge Wells. To include Scarlatti, Brahms, Alkan, Scriabin, Ravel and Liszt. Phone 01892 863637 for ticket enquiries.
- Saturday September 17th 2005 St. Jans Church, Maastricht, Netherlands. To include Scarlatti, Brahms, Alkan, Scriabin, Ravel and Liszt.
- Wednesday September 28th 2005 Colchester Institute, Colchester. To include Bach-Busoni, Franck, Alkan and Liszt.
- Friday September 30th 2005 Talbot Lane Methodist Church, Rotherham. To include Bach-Busoni, Franck, Alkan, Strauss-Grainger and Gershwin-Grainger.
- Saturday October 1st 2005 Theatr Mwldan, Cardigan. To include Bach-Busoni, Franck, Alkan and Liszt.
- Friday October 20th 2005. Shirley Hall, The King's School, Canterbury. To include Franck, Ravel, Alkan, Brahms and Schumann
- Sunday October 29th 2005. Villa Olmo, Como, Italy. To include Franck, Alkan, and Liszt.