

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Reg. Charity No. 276199)

BULLETIN - OCTOBER, 1983

REPORT OF MEETING on January 25th, 1983 at the Guildhall School of Music.

A fuller account of this meeting, written by Peter McCallum and with a short introduction by Richard Shaw, had unavoidably to be held over from the last bulletin. We are pleased to include it here -

On January 25th at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Peter and Stephanie McCallum presented a joint programme. Peter described the salient features of Alkan's two Military Caprices Op. 50, Nocturne Op. 22, the first of the Trois grandes études Op. 76 (for the left hand alone) and Field's Nocturne in F (H 40) clearly and with great enthusiasm. Thanks to his carefully prepared handouts of music examples and analytical charts, and plentiful illustrations at the piano (played by Stephanie), Peter was able to capture and hold our attention while going into considerable technical detail. After dissecting the works and laying bare the various compositional devices found within, they were played in their entirety. With sharpened ears we were able to listen afresh to the pieces, assisted by the fine quality and characteristic energy of Stephanie's playing.

Because of the nature of the talk, its wealth of technical detail and the need for plenty of illustrations, we are not able to provide a full account here. Peter, however, has very kindly written for the Bulletin a trimmed version of his comments on the Capriccio alla soldatesca. Readers may find it useful to have a copy of the music at hand (15% discount from Universal Edition, remember!).

'I wonder if I am alone among Alkan Society members in having misgivings about the Capriccio alla soldatesca Op. 50 No. 1. Its companion piece, le Tambour bat aux champs Op. 50 No. 2, with its enigmatic mixture of tragedy and parody had perhaps led me to expect too much of the Capriccio and, having read Sorabji's enthusiastic description in his book, Around Music, before I had actually heard the piece, I was bound for disappointment.

It is, of course, full of the quiriness which one associates with Alkan - lots of sudden, bare shifts of harmony, some extraordinary keyboard textures and some contrapuntal details and bold key changes, all of which go to make up what we usually associate with Alkan's originality. There is, for example, the bold move from a C minor to an E major chord in bars 26-27 (p. 3 of the Costallat/Billaudot edition) which must have made Schumann wince and confirm his opinion which he expressed in 1838 that Alkan "may be an interesting player who well understands the rarer effects of his instrument, but as a composer only the severest studies will enable him to make much progress". However, to twentieth century ears, the legitimacy which Alkan's ear must have given to such a progression seems justified. Debussy and Bartok both explored just such a relationship, Debussy in his twelfth study for piano entitled pour les accords and Bartok in his 1st String Quartet.

This progression in fact exemplifies the main tonal contrast in the piece, which is between the tonic (A minor) and the relative major (C major) and, by extension, C minor. In the following bar (bar 27) this tonal conflict manifests itself in the false relation between g sharp of the left-hand chord and the g natural in the right-hand semiquavers. Before

these two keys have sorted themselves out we arrive on a B major chord which is sustained for twenty-four bars (from p.3, line 3). The role of this B major chord in the piece is problematical.

In the tonal argument it can only make sense as the dominant of E minor or major, in which case it would be described as the dominant of the dominant of the tonic key, A minor. But instead of behaving this way and moving to E major/minor, the first time around this B major chord is cleverly deflected to F sharp minor for the theme marked "Dolce, quasi-gemito" - a large-scale interrupted cadence. The B major returns with a swaggering theme on page five marked "Crânement" (jauntily) but again is treated to diversion tactics, ending up in the key of E flat, the furthest point of remove from the tonic. Having moved away as far as he can Alkan starts again in the tonic (A minor). This return has something of the quality of the C minor/E major progression mentioned above, E flat being the relative major of C minor. After an extended galloping section in C major ("Tumultuoso", p.8) he arrives once again at a B major chord (p.10). The note b is sustained as a pedal point for another twenty-four bars, and the key is again deflected by a large-scale interrupted cadence, this time moving to C major rather than E major.

If we look at the piece as a battle between C major and A minor, then C major seems to be winning hands down at this point. When A minor returns, the approach is very subtle, in fact almost too much so. Instead of approaching it by way of its dominant, Alkan cleverly slips down by semitones in the bass (moving from c to a) without reference to the dominant chord, E. This indirect approach might have paid off, were it not for two factors. First, the A minor tonic is strongly in need of the support of its dominant at this point. And secondly, Alkan has strongly prepared the way for this dominant chord E, by dwelling at such length on the dominant's dominant, B major, without, as yet, resolving it.

There was a golden opportunity to restore the balance in the section marked "Il mezzo movimento" (p.15), but this was missed. Here Alkan plays on the ambiguity of the notes g sharp (related to the tonic, A minor) and a flat (related to the C major region through its tonic minor, C minor). However, Alkan resolves it in favour of C major, preferring to return to A minor by the method mentioned above.

What this amounts to is, in the terms used by Heinrich Schenker, the lack of a 'structural dominant'. Of course one need not judge Alkan's music according to his use of these structural dominants, but in this case he has given us strong reason for expecting one. The piece, of course, still retains many exciting and striking moments but, in my view, the lack of the structural dominant deprives it of an important pillar, and of the kind of tonal strength of, say, the Concerto.

For many, this autopsy approach to music may seem either unnecessary or even distasteful. However, in trying to bring Alkan's music to the attention of the musical world and the general listening public, it is important to subject it to the same kind of analytical scrutiny which has been applied to other composers. Such activity is not only important in the revival of Alkan's music but is, as with the contemplation of all great music, intensely rewarding.'

REPORT OF MEETING on May 13th, 1983, kindly provided by Charles Hailstone, who also wrote an account of the meeting for the Brentford and Chiswick Times (3/6/83) -

Visit to the Musical Museum, Brentford, Middlesex, on Friday evening 13th May: Mr. Frank Holland was the host to 15 members and friends of the Alkan Society in his unique and quite extraordinary museum which is housed in a Victorian gothic church. He welcomed the Society with tremendous enthusiasm and explained the history of various types of player pianos and organs as he demonstrated many of them to his delighted audience. Piano rolls of Alkan's music are scarce, although it is hoped to include particulars of a number which have been reported to the Society in the next edition of the Discography. Mr. Holland has one by Ernest Hutcheson (1871-1951) from the Trois Grandes Etudes pour les deux mains séparées ou réunies, opus 76 (described by Ronald Smith in his book on Alkan as "one of the most appallingly difficult pieces ever written") and this he realised on a Steinway Duo-Art grand, once the property of Princess Beatrice, the last of Queen Victoria's nine children, which after an interesting interregnum was bought by Mr. Holland in 1960 for his projected museum. Apart from the pianos upon which various composers were interpreted, other marvels were shown, such as the Violano in which the piano is accompanied by violin. There followed other novelties including a full scale organ upon which was played Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. Nostalgia followed with a demonstration of a Wurlitzer which occupies most of the south aisle. Refreshments were supplied by Mr. Holland who was intent upon giving the Society a memorable happening. Mrs. Jean Bartholomew (Hon. Secretary) gave the vote of thanks. The evening came to a close at 9.30 p.m.

REPORT OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING on Wednesday, July 13th at 7.00 p.m. at the Abbey Community Centre, 29 Marsham Street, London S.W.1. -

Richard Shaw was in the Chair. Apologies for absence were received from Alan Cowie, Charles Hailstone and John and Monica White. 9 members were present, including 5 members of the Executive Committee, and an amendment of the Constitution was passed, reducing the necessary quorum from 10 to 5.

Treasurer's Report - Generous donations from members had improved our financial position, which stood as follows:-

Current Account £75 (£29 in 1982), Deposit Account £112 (£103 in 1982). Membership was now 112 (102 in 1982). It was agreed that we should express our thanks in the customary way to our Auditor, Keith Craft, and to increase his honorarium from £20 to £25.

Subscription Rates - It was decided to adopt the proposed new subscription rates, as follows:-

£5 per annum for London and Overseas Members.

£3 for out-of-town Members and students.

The present joint husband-and-wife subscription is to cease, and the new subscription will cover both husband and wife. Our policy of making no extra charge for guests is to remain unchanged.

Committee Membership - It was unanimously decided to invite John White, on his resignation from the Committee, to become Honorary Vice-President of the Society, as a mark of our appreciation and gratitude. Those present were pleased to hear that John was making a slow but steady recovery from his recent hip-replacement operation.

There were no nominations for Committee members. It was therefore decided to invite John Newing, co-opted earlier this year, to remain on the Committee, and to invite Peter and Stephanie McCallum and Arthur Saville to join.

Secretary's Report - The Secretary was delighted to report that the French Government had agreed to our request that the lettering on Alkan's tomb in Paris, should be restored, and that a plaque should be put up on his house in the Square d'Orleans, when this had been positively identified. They also informed us that plans were in hand to organise a celebration of the centenary of Alkan's death in 1988.

One of our members in the United States, Wallace Lafferty of Richmond, Va., had sought the Society's approval for his plan to set up a U.S. branch of the Society. We awaited further developments with interest.

Dr. Alkan had written from Israel to say that a whole programme devoted to the recorded music of Alkan, including a talk on Alkan, was being prepared by Israeli Radio for transmission on their classical music wavelength.

Arrangements for the new session were discussed, and the meeting closed at 8.20 p.m., after which Richard Murphy, one of the members present, kindly let us hear a cassette of Alkan's Marche Triomphale, arranged for steel band, played by the Groovers Steel Orchestra, of which he is a member.

DOCTOR JOHN WHITE

As reported in the note on the Annual General Meeting, the Society thought it only appropriate that on his resignation from the Committee, we should invite our founder, John White, to become an Honorary Vice-President. We are all grateful to him for the inspiration and enthusiasm which led to the successful launching of the Society, and for his devotion and untiring efforts on its behalf.

John, in his reponse to our invitation, writes:-

".....I was touched, delighted and highly honoured by the invitation extended to me by the Alkan Society's Committee, to become an Honorary Vice-President of the Society. I am only too pleased to accept."

After the last meeting of the Executive Committee on October 2nd, a small party was held in honour of John and Monica, and an engraved crystal goblet, commemorating John's association with the Society, was presented to him with the gratitude and affection of the Committee.

DISCOGRAPHY

Our thanks must be recorded, once again, to Charles Hailstone, who has prepared the up-to-date discography enclosed with this bulletin.

(Members may, incidentally, be interested to know that Charles has recently published a book entitled Alleyways of Mortlake and East Sheen (72pp, 17 illustrations, 3 maps) It costs £4.25 plus 35p postage, and may be obtained from:-

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

Frank Lioni, our member in Holland, has kindly sent the following note on Alkan works on piano-rolls:-

Addition to list of Alkan works on piano rolls

Etude op. 35 no 3. G Major - Michael Von Zadora	Hupfeld	13078
	"	51935
Etude op. 35 no 5. Allegro barbaro - Michael Von Zadora	Hupfeld	13079
	"	55692
Etude op. 35 no 5. Allegro barbaro - Louis Closson	Hupfeld	14178
	"	55806

Capriccio alla Soldatesca Op. 50 no 1 - R. Singer	Virtuola 4419
Le tambour bat aux champs Op. 50 no 2 - R. Singer	Virtuola 4420
Le vent Op. 15 no 2 - Harold Bauer	Aeolian A921
Minuetto alla tedesca A minor (pianist unknown)	Aeolian 1143

He also sends news of a new organ recording which includes two works by Alkan - The Prieres Op. 64 no 2 and no 3 from the Onze Grandes Preludes Op. 66. Part of a recital by Ton Van Eck on an Adam-Schreurs organ in St. Jacobus Church, The Hague - Polygram 6814 769

NEWS ITEMS

Ronald Smith - Members will be delighted to hear that Vol. II of Alkan is now well on the way to being finished, and that the EMI recording of Alkan in Miniature is scheduled for next summer. Ronald has very kindly agreed to give us a lecture-recital on this subject at our May meeting (see under forthcoming meetings).

On October 15th the European Piano Teacher's Association held a Gala Evening at Steinway Hall, at which a galaxy of well-known pianists had been invited to perform. Ronald Smith, as his contribution, played 'Chanson de la Folle au Bord de le Mer', 'Allegro Barbaro' and as an encore, 'Cantique des Cantiques'. Richard Shaw and Jean Bartholomew had the privilege of attending this prestigious 'soiree musicale'.

Alkan Centenary - As reported at the A.G.M., the French Government has agreed to our request that the lettering on Alkan's tomb should be restored, and that a plaque should be put up on his house in the Square d'Orleans, when this has been identified and when permission has been received from the family.

It is good to hear, too, that official plans are afoot in France to celebrate the Centenary in 1988. We, too, must begin to plan ahead for this occasion, and our President suggests that part of our May meeting should be devoted to an open forum, where members with ideas will have every chance to air them. Further details will be announced at a later date.

Correspondence in The Jewish Chronicle - John White writes as follows:-

Last January a letter from Dr. John White was published in the "Jewish Chronicle". It asked if anyone could explain the extraordinary neglect of Alkan by the Jewish community. Two replies appeared subsequently in the "Chronicle" and Dr. White received other letters and two interesting phone calls at his home address. In general, the neglect was admitted and deplored. Only one correspondent offered an explanation - 'But the real point is that Alkan's contribution to the rich and intricate tapestry of Jewish music is literally negligible'. This, however, was a lone voice disagreeing entirely with the other correspondents. One indeed wrote - 'I would contend (and some of the compositions mentioned by Dr. White corroborate this) that Alkan's music is no less Jewish than Bloch's.'

The Director of the Central Enquiry Desk of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, kindly wrote to ask for details of our Society.

Israeli Radio Programme on Alkan - We have, as yet, received no further news about this programme (see note of AGM, Secretary's Report). Dr. Alkan, however, was planning to record the programme (which was, of course, to be in Hebrew).

Musical Museum, Brentford - Frank Holland, Director of the Musical Museum writes for the information of our members that he is at present arranging for recordings to be made of a number of piano-rolls, including the two Alkan rolls in the Museum's collection and the two rolls on loan from the U.S. In this connection we should be grateful if members with special expertise in recording and in the conversion of microfilm into photocopyable material would contact the Secretary.

Ed. Note - As this goes to 'press' I have just received a letter from a member, Eliot Levin, who tells me that he has recently, with the help and hospitality of the Director, produced a recording of these 4 rolls. He writes:- "I would be very happy to produce copies for anyone who is interested." He feels that reliable and cheap cassettes could be produced in the quantities we would be likely to require, though "discs would be much more expensive unless several hundred were wanted." Interested members please contact:-

Eliot Levin, 110 Derwent Avenue, East Barnet, Herts BN4 8L2

Advertisement (our first, incidentally!) - Brian Alderson would like to advertise his collection of brand-new Alkan piano music, bought, he writes, 'in a burst of enthusiasm after hearing a recital of Alkan's music', but which other commitments have prevented him from pursuing. He is asking £100 for the collection, listed below, which he values at 'more than £150.' Please write, if you are interested to:-

Brian Alderson, 21 Belsize Park Gardens, London NW3 4JH
(Tel: 01-722-8976).

Collection

Op. 13 Trois andantes romantiques, Op. 17 Le preux, Op. 25 Alleluis, Op. 30 Perpet. mobile, Op. 31 25 Preludes dans tous les tons, Op. 33 Grande Sonate, Op. 35 Etude majeurs (2 vols.), Op. 38 Chants (Books 1 & 2), Op. 39 Etudes mineurs (2 vols.), Op. 41 3 Petites fantaisies, Op. 50 i) Capriccio alla soldatesca, ii) Le tambour bat aux champs, Op. 51 Trois menuets, Op. 60 i) Ma chère liberté ii) Ma chère servitude, Op. 63 Esquisses (Books 1,2,3, &4), Op. 65 Chants, Op. 67 Chants, Op. 74 Les mois (Books 1,2 & 4), Op. 76 (i) Etude main gauche seule Variations à la vielle.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

As mentioned in the A.G.M. report, the subscription rates have been increased. The new rates are:-

£5 for London and overseas members (covers husband and wife membership).
£3 for members out of London and for students (also covers husband and wife membership).

All members subscriptions expire on the 31st July of each year.

Deed of Covenant - Members are invited to pay their subscription by Deed of Covenant. This will enable us to recover from the Inland Revenue the tax you have already paid on your donation, thus increasing the value to the Society of your subscription, by 30%. The minimum period for covenanting is four years. For those who subscriptions are due, we enclose a form.

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

November Meeting - Sunday, November 20th, 1983 at 3.30 p.m.

Our joint programme with the Chopin Society will take place at the Polish Institute, 20 Princes Gate, London SW7. Grazina Maciejko will be playing a programme of Chopin piano music, to include Andate Spianato & Polonaise, Scherzo Op. 31 no 2, and the posthumous Nocturne, and the Alkan Piano Trio will be performed by Andrew Ball and friends.

Normally guests are welcome to come to our meetings free of charge, but as this is a joint meeting with the Chopin Society, guests on this occasion will have to be charged £1.50.

January Meeting

This will be held on Tuesday, January 17th at 7.00 p.m. at the Thomas Coram Foundation, 40 Brunswick Square, when Thomas Wakefield will be giving a piano recital of Alkan and some of his contemporaries.

March Meeting

On Thursday, March 15th at 6.45 p.m. at the Trinity College of Music, 11/13 Mandeville Place, W.1., David Gammie will be giving us an illustrated talk on Alkan's organ and pedalier pieces.

May Meeting

This will be held at 7.00 p.m. on Tuesday, May 29th at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Barbican. Our President, Ronald Smith, will be giving a lecture-recital on Alkan in Miniature, and there will also be an open discussion of plans for the Centenary celebrations in 1988.

HON. SECRETARY'S ADDRESS:-

Jean Bartholomew (Mrs.)
116, Princes Gardens,
West Acton,
LONDON W3 0LJ