



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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The Alkan Society Piano Scholarship 2006

This year's Alkan Society Piano Scholarship competition, organised as ever by **Ken Smith** at **Fitzwilliam College Cambridge** (our grateful thanks to both) will be held on Friday 10th November at 5.15 pm. The set piece this year for contestants is *La voix de l'instrument* from the 5th book of Alkan's *Chants*, op. 70.

The competition will be followed next day at by a **recital by Thomas Wakefield** at the College at 8.00 pm, which will also form part of the Cambridge Music Festival's series, *Music, Mathematics and Mozart*. The programme is to include Alkan's *Aime-moi* op. 15 no. 1 and his *Scherzo focoso* op. 34, as well as works by Mozart, Pinto and Webern.

Editor's notes

- We are glad to report that our Chairman, **Eliot Levin**, is recovering excellently from his recent indisposition, which unfortunately prevented him from attending the recent AGM, and will soon be fully 'back to normal'. We send him the best wishes of all members.
- The Society is grateful to all those who have renewed their subscriptions, and we particularly wish to thank those who have added voluntary donations in excess of the subscription. Please note that subscriptions paid by credit card will processed around June or July this year.
- Volume II of **Kevin Bowyer**'s Alkan organ conspectus on Toccata Records is expected to be issued in July this year and we hope to make it available at discount rate for society members, as for Volume I. We are also hoping to arrange with the co-operation of Toccata a recital by Kevin in London featuring Alkan to which members will be invited. Details to follow when known.
- We look forward in the near future to a new CD of Alkan rarities from **Thomas Wakefield**, supported by the Society. Members will be sent full details. In the meantime

we wholeheartedly recommend Tom's recent recording of the music of **George Pinto** (see review below).

- **Jianing Kong** will be including a selection of Alkan 'miniatures', together with music by Bach, Chopin and Liszt, in his recital for the **Whitstable Music Society** on Saturday 29th April.
- A new CD '*Transfigured Mozart*', by the US based pianist **Petronel Malan** (Hänssler Classics, CD98.231) includes the first-ever recording of Alkan's version of the slow movement of Mozart's A major string quartet, K. 464. This chaste and accurate transcription, admirably played by Ms. Malan, testifies to Alkan's pure admiration for Mozart. Other curiosities on the disc include a version by Alkan's contemporary Thalberg of the *Lacrimosa* from the *Requiem*, and Mozartiana by Hummel, Raff, Friedman and Reger.
- **Ken Iisaka**, who gave a performance of Alkan's **Grande Sonate** in San Francisco on January 22nd, also included in his recital the Liszt B minor Sonata. He believes this may be the first time both have featured complete in a single recital: do members have any views?
- August of this year will see publication of a new book, '*Charles-Valentin Alkan: His Life and Music*' by **William Eddie** (Ashgate).
- **Lloyd Buck**'s recital at the RCM (see review below) included 3 Alkan items, one being a rare outing for the op. 34 *Scherzo fucoso*. We hope it will be possible to arrange for Society members to hear more of this talented young pianist in the near future.
- Wearing my other hat as the Society's Webmaster, I apologise for irregular updating of the site over recent months, due partly to a losing argument with a van which drove into me from behind and put me out of action for a while. I hope to ensure regular updates over ensuing months.
- **As ever, I send an urgent plea for all and any contributions for the Bulletin!** We are grateful to Richard Murphy for his review of the recent Piers Lane recital; and welcome all the views and opinions of members on all aspects of Alkan.

“Quasi-Faust” at the Wigmore Hall – Piers Lane’s Recital

The pianist Piers Lane gave a recent series of recitals, ‘Metamorphoses’, including the second movement (‘Quasi-Faust’) of Alkan’s Grande Sonate. AS member Richard Murphy attended the concert at the Wigmore Hall on January 24th.

I wonder if players feel impelled to make changes in interpretation when a sonata movement is played in isolation from its intended setting? Mozart's *Rondo alla turca* (from K331) is played at all sorts of speeds; the last movement of Weber's C major sonata is used as a virtuoso vehicle as astonishing velocities; likewise the *Funeral March* from Chopin's second sonata get a variety of treatments, not least in its dynamics.

I must admit that my heart sank at Piers Lane's opening of *Quasi-Faust* which he played *assez lent* as opposed to the instruction *assez vite* – then with an exaggeratedly shortened third note, followed by an interventionist crescendo on the triplets. 'Queasy Faust', I thought – but that I am glad to say was the only shock in his interpretation.

Quasi-Faust is a large canvas portraying a drama of extreme states; of atmosphere (*satanique, diabolique*); emotion (*naïveté, passionnément, impitoyable, suppliant, avec désespoir, déchirant*); theology (*Le Diable, Le Seigneur*), and erudition (*fugato-passacaglia*). It ought to

be shattering and exhausting for these dramatic reasons, and I've heard performances that were. But there were a number of things I actively missed in Lane's performance. There are four appearances of *fff* in the score, and these were underpowered moments. The first is the entry of *Le Diable* with his preposterous march in four 6-bar phrases. The second is for the four 16-20 note chords, each upswept over more than five octaves, which immediately precedes the fugato-passacaglia. This latter builds into a very quiet 7-11 layer texture when the 3rd *fff* appears as *Le Seigneur*. The last eight bars are also *fff*. But none of these was differentiated from the other loud passages.

Despite these reservations, I remain grateful to Piers Lane for programming this piece. Although perhaps restrained and a little on the slow side generally, it was accurate and clear, with effective use of rubato, and intelligently and freshly thought-out. It was valuable to hear this interpretation in a public performance – and I should add that Lane's performance of the Liszt Sonata, which also featured in the concert, was in many respects outstanding.

Raise a Pinto

David Conway encounters a forgotten British musical master, brought to life by a champion of Alkan, Thomas Wakefield. This review is reprinted from the Social Affairs Unit website (www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk)

Piano music of **George Frederick Pinto**, played by **Thomas Wakefield**. Foxglove Audio FOX1205CD.

Available from Thomas Wakefield, Flat 8, Carlogie House, 365 Wilmslow Road, Fallowfield, Manchester M14 6AH. Price £10.00 inc. p&p in the UK.

You will already have seen cascades of verbiage on a certain musical anniversary this year, and you ain't seen nothing yet. But how about a very British musical bicentenary which has received no coverage anywhere and, unless perhaps someone at the BBC catches on, is likely to pass without a single public recognition?

It is the death, on 23rd March 1806 in Chelsea, of George Pinto, aged 20 years and six months. Never heard of him? Neither had I, I think, until the pianist Thomas Wakefield sent me a copy of a CD he has recorded of some of Pinto's works. I have now listened through this fascinating recording several times and I am convinced that there was more than conventional piety in the verdict of the London impresario Salomon, (who also introduced Haydn to England) – *'If he had lived and been able to resist the allurements of society, England would have had the honour of producing a second Mozart.'*

The biographical facts are simply stated. Pinto was born George Frederick Sanders or Saunders in Lambeth on 25th September 1785, his mother Julia being the daughter of the English violinist Thomas Pinto, himself of Neapolitan descent. Initially a prodigy on the violin, he came at the age of eight under the aegis of Salomon, adopted his mother's maiden name and appeared playing a concerto in 1796. For the rest of his brief career he played regularly at concerts in London and the provinces, and made two brief concert tours to Paris. He seems to have taken up the piano whilst already a professional violinist, but it soon became his favourite instrument. He wrote a number of pieces for both instruments, some of which were incomplete at his death. Others, including a violin concerto, are lost. He died, allegedly 'a martyr to dissipation', from unknown causes after giving a charity concert in Birmingham and sleeping in a damp room. As Wakefield puts it: 'Well-educated, strikingly good-looking and charismatic, in high society he charmed all he met, whilst in circles more Hogarthian he was noted for his generosity towards the inmates of gaols and the protection he

gave to distressed animals [...] From the blue-stockinged to the picaresque, his adventures left him little time for looking after his health.’ How much we are to read between the lines of Salomon’s reference to “allurements”, or a Scottish critic’s warnings in 1802 of “dissipation and consequent idleness”, can only be conjectured.

So, instead, to the music: and here we encounter a personality indeed. Wakefield has recorded the two piano sonatas op. 3 of 1802-3, the piano sonata in C minor of 1803 (dedicated to John Field, whom Pinto had partnered in concert in 1800), one of Pinto’s three sonatinas based on folk songs, a stray Minuet, and the final unfinished Fantasia and Sonata in C minor, to which Wakefield has supplied his own completion to replace the anodyne ending offered by its original editor, Beethoven’s rival Wölfl, who took up residence in London in 1805.

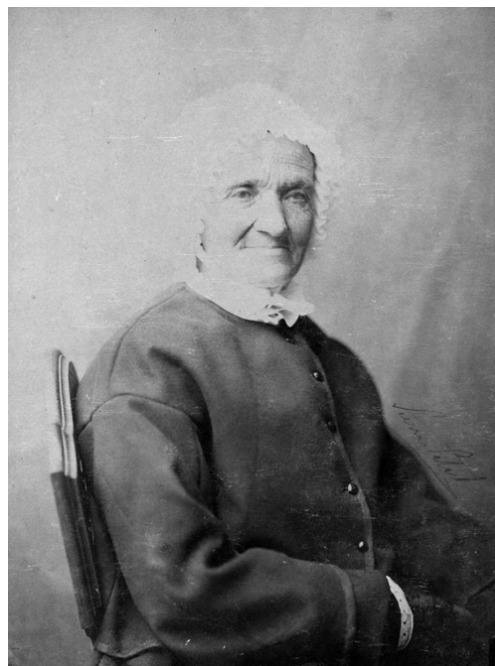
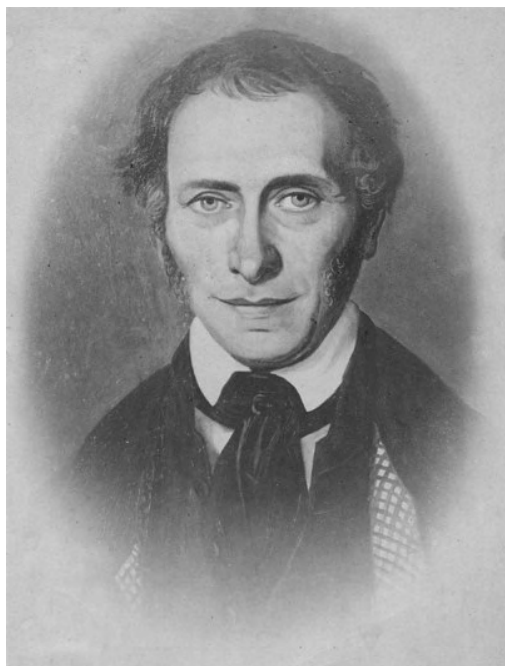
I challenge anyone listening to this music ‘blind’ to place it accurately, as to country or date of composition, let alone as to composer. Clearly it is young man’s music; often neurotic, passionate, showing a welter of influences not always quite welded into a homogeneity, but always fresh and intriguing. The sonata op. 3 no. 1, in the very ‘romantic’ key of E flat minor, starts in its first bar like Mozart, but before very few beats we are with harmonies that bespeak Schubert, and rhythmic obsessions that bespeak Beethoven. The second movement takes us to the world of the Czech miniaturists immediately preceding Schubert, Tomášek and Voříšek, with hints of Chopin and even Schumann. The last movement is clearly an early Beethoven sonata finale which got away. The radiant sonata op. 3 no 2 in A major, more pastoral in nature, carries echoes of all of these. The sonata dedicated to Field displays, as Wakefield puts it ‘fiery Beethovenian dialectic’; and all of these show a clear and original command of form and coherence – not, unsurprisingly, with the maturity we expect of a master, but with the daring and confidence we can attribute to a genius.

The unfinished Fantasia and Sonata brings additional surprises, with an ‘adagio fugato’ clearly echoing the C sharp minor fugue and B flat minor prelude from the first book of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

I agree with Wakefield’s assertion that Pinto was no ‘second Mozart’, but was rather a true innovator, a great master in the making for whom there was to be, alas, no stage much beyond the chrysalis. But every genius stands on the shoulders of those who went before him. From where exactly, during his brief life, could Pinto have drunk in the elements which he began to transform? Beethoven was only in his early 30s when Pinto was writing and his music was scarcely known in London. Indeed one authority has sought to maintain that Pinto influenced Beethoven, though it is even more difficult to see how that might have transpired. London in the 1790s was the home to a ‘school’ of pianists and virtuosi which included Clementi, Cramer and Dussek, all of whom Pinto must have known – he played in concerts organised by Dussek’s brother-in-law and sometime business partner Domenico Corri – and their spirit must have infused his work, as it did that of Beethoven himself. Perhaps Dussek provides the Bohemian connection as well. It is a fascinating puzzle.

All praise therefore to Thomas Wakefield, for bringing Pinto back to life for us. Tom is a remarkable pianist who can generate oceans or islands of sound as appropriate, with clarity, dexterity, humour and intelligence. No one who has heard him play Alkan’s monumental arrangement for solo piano of the first movement of Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto (complete with cadenza invoking the Fifth Symphony) will ever forget the experience. He is no less musicianly working on the more intimate canvases of Pinto’s works. With all due credit to Pinto’s distant Italian origins, this is a great British tribute to a great British composer.

Alkan Père et Mère



Members may be familiar with the above images, versions of which are retained at the Archives Nationales in Paris, where they are recorded as being of Alkan Morhange and his wife Julie (née Abraham), the parents of the composer. Perhaps I am not the only one who has had harboured some lingering doubts about these attributions, which were not supported by any provenance.

Now however we can have some certainty as to their validity. AS member Elisabeth Pearce, herself a great great granddaughter of Alkan and Julie Morhange via their son Napoléon, recently found old prints of the same photos (reproduced above) at the home of her cousin Mme. Jacqueline Cuzelin (a descendant of Charles-Valentin's sister Céleste). That they are not copies of the Archives Nationales prints is clear from the absence of the AN stamps, and from manuscript annotations on their reverse (and indeed on the front of the photo of Mme. Alkan). Indeed I rather think that they are the originals of the photos in the AN.

Whilst the portrait of Julie (who died in 1868) is certainly an original photograph, that of Alkan Morhange (who was born in 1780 and died in 1855) appears to be a copy of a painting – perhaps (from its oval format) from a locket or miniature. The subject appears to be aged around 30-40, so perhaps the portrait dates from the time when Charles-Valentin was just beginning his studies at the Conservatoire and Alkan Morhange himself was establishing his school, as described in the memoirs of Alkan's *bête noire*, Marmontel.

DC

Even more about Alkan's Death

I was surprised and delighted to receive the following communication from Rabbi Meir Salasnik, of Bushey Synagogue in Hertfordshire:

Aryeh Leib ben Asher Gunzberg (1695-1785) known as the Shaagat Aryeh (The Lion's Roar) after his book, was rabbi in various communities, lastly in Metz, and lived a very long life for those times.

There is a cute story that a few months before his death, he reached for a book and the bookcase fell on him. After about half an hour he was rescued by his students. He informed them that he would die within the year. They asked him how he knew. He replied that while he was under the books, all the authors of previous rabbinical works he had disagreed with made their peace with him. One rabbi, who had lived a couple of centuries previously, would not make his peace with him. So, he knew he did not have much longer in this world.

As Alkan's family came from Metz (we know that one of his rare excursions from Paris was to visit Metz on family business), it seems fairly certain that this 'urban legend' must be the origin of the story which was to be fabricated about Alkan himself.

A little more about Rabbi Gunzberg. He began as a rabbi in Pinsk, and then later founded a *yeshivah* (rabbinical college) in Minsk (now in Belarus). Here however he engaged in hostile dispute with another rabbi, Gaon Yechiel Halpern, whose supporters eventually drove Gunzberg from the city. Gunzberg's turbulent nature was clearly evident even at this stage of his career.

His book '*Shaagat Aryeh*' was first published in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1755, and became celebrated for its forceful disagreements with previous writers. It is still frequently quoted in rabbinical debate, as are many of Gunzberg's responsa. As was traditional, Gunzberg himself became known by the title of his most famous work.

He was appointed Rabbi in Metz in 1765, but an early argument with his congregation led to him refusing to enter the synagogue except to give four sermons a year. Despite this he retained his post until his demise.

I suggest that the story of Shaagat Aryeh was well known by the Metz Jewish community and hence to Alkan's family (and probably, therefore, to Delaborde who appears to be one source of the Alkan bookcase legend). As Alkan himself was a loner and a controversialist in his way, it probably did not take much to slip the Shaagat Aryeh legend onto him, especially as a piece of fallen furniture, (*'une porte-parapluie'*), did indeed figure, albeit circumstantially, in the composer's death, as shown by Hugh Macdonald.

It is fascinating that we can now add to Alkan's Jewish background the very legend which circulated about him after his death.

DC

WIMA – the Werner Ecking Music Archive

Members may be interested in this website at <http://icking-music-archive.org>. It is hosted by the Royal Academy of Music at Aarhus, Denmark, and contains a large number of downloadable scores (and some MP3s) of music by a wide range of composers, including Alkan (some of the op. 31 Préludes and the eight Plainchant preludes). Others in the archive include Pinto, Raff, and Reicha – as well as a selection of modern Danish composers!

Lloyd Buck's Recital at the Royal College of Music, 29th March

A goodly contingent of AS members attended Lloyd Buck's recital, which in fact formed part of his final examination at the Royal College of Music. The programme chosen was challenging both in terms of interpretation and technique. Beginning with two Bach transcriptions – the *Siciliano* from the BWV1031 Flute Sonata in Alkan's version, and the Prelude and Fugue BWV 543 in Liszt's – it continued with Mozart's E flat sonata K282 and Prokofiev's First Sonata, before ending with two very different examples of Alkan's music; the well-known *Barcarolle* from the op. 65 Chants, and the hardly-ever performed *Scherzo focoso*, op. 34.

The two transcriptions, Alkan's pastoral in nature, Liszt's virtuosic – an alternation of character which ran through the recital - gave Buck the opportunity to demonstrate from the start his thoughtful concern with textures and transparency, coupled with admirable fingerwork. Heroic as was his performance of the Prokofiev, the Mozart lingers longer in the memory, cool but sensitive.

The *Scherzo focoso*, Alkan's opus 34, was characterised by Ronald Smith as 'a remorseless path to pianistic immolation for all but the most invincible techniques'; he surmises that it may have been originally intended for the minor key studies, op. 39. This piece, extraordinarily obsessive even by its composer's standards, is yet far more than a note-spinning virtuoso display. Alkan was clearly sensitive to the many different types of fire – as we can hear in the slightly comic *L'incendie au village voisin* of the op. 35 studies - and this piece also displays many varieties, from flickering flames to white hot intensity, apart from the implicit diabolic fires of the soul. Carrying this piece off is not just a challenge for the fingers. The relentless pedal point of the closing pages, for example, tests the listener's tenacity to the limit, as well as the player's. Buck's performance was triumphant and won a correspondingly enthusiastic response from his audience. It will be fascinating to compare Thomas Wakefield's performance in Cambridge later this year - (one waits a lifetime for a performance and then two come along at once!) – but Buck's exuberance, clear enthusiasm and immolation-proof technique fully justified his decision to make this the climax of his recital. We hope to have the opportunity in the not too distant future of enabling members to hear this promising young pianist for themselves.

DC

In the Offing

From the Chairman's report at the AGM:

'We are very fortunate in our new President. Not only did Yonty Solomon grace us recently with a superb concert at The Warehouse, but he is encouraging his pupils to play Alkan. Indeed I have just spoken to him and can report that he is planning a big event to take place later this year. Details will follow in due course, but for now such words as Sonata, Symphony and Parrot are being whispered.'

We wait with baited breath.....