



The Alkan Society

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Concert reports

Mark Viner's Festival Baltimore performance of the Alkan's *Grande Sonate*

Society member Laura Snyderman reports on the recital

The Alkan Society chairman, Mark Viner, delivered an inspiring performance as part of Festival Baltimore's two week concert series at the under-recognised Linehan Concert Hall located on the University of Maryland Baltimore County Campus on Sunday, June 23, 2019 at 7:30 pm. The previous weekend, Mark had played an equally impressive program, performing as Thalberg in a re-enactment of the famous 1837 piano duel between Franz Liszt and Sigismond Thalberg with pianist and Festival Baltimore founder, Asiya Korepanova. Both concerts demonstrated modest audience turnout rates; however, both performances were well received, particularly for Mark's exquisite tonal control and colorful dynamic contrasts.

Lauded by Frank Bruni in *The New York Times* as a "stunning hall with sumptuous acoustics", this lovely space features a nine-foot Steinway grand concert piano and boasts 375 seats. The concert offered a delightfully unique program:

Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944) - *Au pays dévasté*, op. 155

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) - *Fantasie*, op. 17

Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888) - *Grande Sonate*, op. 33

Mark's clever programming boldly compared the musically demanding Schumann *Fantasie* to Alkan's structurally similar sonata. Of course, the *Grande Sonata* poses many technical demands compared to Schumann's op. 17.

Prior to each piece, Mark delivered insightful contextual understanding – the history of Chaminade's strong following in the US was particularly enlightening to me as a US resident, especially provided the current neglect of her works. The Chaminade *Au pays dévasté* performance displayed shimmering cadenzas, and superior dynamic control.

In the Schumann *Fantasie*, Mark communicated a clear depth of harmonic and intellectual understanding, producing inner voices seldom heard. Mark's impeccable musical pacing, colored by an outstanding tonal palette rendered a breath-taking, original performance.



Photo by Asiya Korepanova

The Alkan *Grande Sonate*, which is seldom performed as a complete work, particularly impressed audience members. Mark's stirring performance of the second movement, *30 ans: Quasi-Faust*, was simply extraordinary. Difficult passages awed with daring speed and tonal control. The following slower movement, *40 ans: un heureux ménage*, yielded tantamount intellectual and musical merit. Following a well-deserved standing ovation, Chairman, Mark Viner played a lovely revival of the *Chaminade* as an encore.

Society 2019 AGM Recital

The Society's 2019 Annual General Meeting was held on the 28th of September in the small and charming 12th-century church of St Mary's Perivale in West London. (Since the time of our picture, the environs of Perivale have become somewhat more urbanised, but the church still retains a beautiful leafy churchyard.) St Mary's is an exceptional London venue for chamber and solo recitals¹, hosting over 60 free recitals a year (with a retiring collection), and the Society thanks the Friends of St Mary's for making the venue available to us.



Following a successful AGM (quorate for once, and joined by our Secretary José López through a Skype link to Florida), our chairman Mark Viner wowed a sizeable audience, both Society members and regular clientele of St Mary's, with a programme of Liszt, Schumann and Alkan. He opened with Liszt's atmospheric and climactic *Marche funèbre de Dom Sébastien de Donizetti* (S402), setting the tone for his now familiar mix of assured bravura, exquisite lyricism and sheer musical sensibility. The Liszt was followed by Schumann's *Fantasy in C* (op. 17) and Alkan's *Grande Sonate* (op.33). Mark's performance of these two pieces is reviewed above in the report of his Baltimore recital, and I would not wish to add to Laura Snyderman's insights, perhaps only to reiterate the total musical and technical control that Mark seems able to sustain in these demanding works.

A poster for the 'Joint Music Societies' Dinner Recital 2020'. The poster has a yellow background with blue text. At the top, it lists composers: 'ALKAN, LISZT, MAHLER, SCHUBERT, STRAUSS AND WAGNER SOCIETIES PRESENT:'. The main title is 'JOINT MUSIC SOCIETIES' DINNER RECITAL 2020'. Below that, it says 'Tickets £50 including welcoming glass of Prosecco, recital and three course dinner with wine. Dinner will be served at 7:30pm'. It also lists performers: 'Includes performances by: Christian Adolph, Simon Wallfisch, Leslie Howard, Mark Viner, the Andrews Massey Duo and Alicia Cadwgan'. The date and time are 'TUESDAY 28TH JANUARY 2020 AT 5:15PM FOR 6PM'. The venue is 'LANCASTER HALL HOTEL, 35, CRAVEN TERRACE, LONDON W2 3EL'. At the bottom, it says 'TICKETS AVAILABLE FROM: WWW.WAGNERSOCIETY.ORG'. The poster features silhouettes of a horse and a person's head on the sides and a decorative blue and white diamond pattern at the bottom.

Joint Societies Dinner-recital: 28th January 2020, London

The next annual Joint Music Societies Dinner-recital takes place in London on 28th January. The recital, which includes performances of works by each of the composers represented, starts at 6:00pm (preceded by a wine reception from 5:15pm) and is followed by a dinner. Our Chairman Mark Viner will perform for the Alkan Society.

Alkan Society members are strongly encouraged to attend: the event has been much enjoyed in previous years. Tickets are available to Society members and their guests from the Wagner Society website at:

wagnersociety.org/events/joint-societies-dinner-2020/

If you or your guests have dietary requirements, please email Izzy Pitman (izzypitman@btinternet.com) with details.

Further details of the programme will be posted on the Alkan Society website in due course.

¹ For more information on St Mary's and forthcoming events, see www.st-marys-perivale.org.uk

Alkan's *Esquisses* – past, present and future

Brian Inglis (Middlesex University, London, UK)¹

In March 1990 I delivered a talk on Alkan's Esquisses at Hinde Street Methodist Church, at an Alkan Society event also featuring performances of Books 2 and 4 by John Lewis and Peter Grove. The subsequent newsletter (no 41, June 1990) announces the publication of the substantive content in a subsequent issue. As far as I can tell this never happened! The content did however find its way into a chapter of my final-year undergraduate dissertation at the University of Durham. In the following I take the opportunity to tie up this particular loose end, drawing on the said chapter as a starting point, updating it with further thoughts (mine and others') and reflections on these quirky pieces, in an overview and reminder of what makes them special both in Alkan's output and more generally, timed to coincide with the deadline for the call for members' compositions paying homage to the set.

As Ronald Smith has shown, the multifarious miniatures which comprise Alkan's *Esquisses* op.63 appear to have been composed, rather than all in one go for publication, over a 14-year period of his career (Smith 1987, p.44). The title of the set might imply sketches from sketchbooks, as if they were preparatory working concepts for other, larger compositional projects. (And they are not without their connections to some of Alkan's larger-scale projects; for instance, the connection between 'Tutti de Concerto' no 15 and the Concerto op.39 – although on stylistic grounds this is more of an off-print than a preliminary sketch; the greater degree of polystylism between (neo-baroque) tutti and (Mendelssohnian) solo passages suggests the vignette is a quirkier spark from the furnace of inspiration which created op.39.) Other, more appropriate comparisons might be made with Beethoven's *Bagatelles*²; or more broadly with the 19th-century piano genre of the character piece (*morceau caractéristique*). Rather than preparatory sketches they are like an artist's drawings; highly individual and characteristic pieces in their own right, albeit on a smaller scale. The sketching is not compositional but para- or extra-musical: many of the pieces have extra-musical inspiration, often manifested in colourful or descriptive titles (see table 1 below).

As a set of pieces organised in a macro structure, the *Esquisses* sit in the context of Alkan's other cycles placed under a single opus number; into one folder, in the words of Hugh MacDonald (2001, p.378). Yet they are at the opposite pole from the likes of the op.39 Etudes. They represent the most concise and finely-chiselled facet of the composer's approach. In this they effectively rebuff the accusation sometimes made against Alkan's music of undue length and uneven quality-control – consider for example Georges Beck's comments, even in the context of advocacy: 'At the outset two faults must be pointed out: prolixity and inequality'; Beck complains of 'an incontinence of language', allegedly given 'free rein' in Alkan's largest works (Beck 1969). This is echoed then refuted by Steven Osborne: 'Instead of the virtuosic monstrosities I had expected, there were [amongst the *Esquisses*] simple dances, airs, touching fragments, brilliant (but concise) etudes, and an extraordinary variety of character pieces' (Osborne 2003, p.4). The *Esquisses* are certainly models of concision, some of them being only a few lines long, and few of them being more than a couple of pages in length. In this respect they resemble a mode of thought found in strands of 20th-century modernism, such as the piano pieces of Schoenberg, Webern and Berio. Their consistent level of musical invention has been remarked on by writers including Smith and Eddie, who writes: 'Of all Alkan's compositions for piano the esquisses show the composer at his most endlessly creative. The range of canonic awareness is phenomenal and the inventiveness more consistent than many of his other collections' (Eddie 2007, p.129). Despite its somewhat extended gestation, then, the collection forms a more consistent and unified whole (not least through the key scheme) than such other collections as the Preludes and *Chants*. An intriguing, though contested, theory of the symbolic or 'cult' value of the key sequences has been expounded by Yukirou Murai, with the conclusion that the *Esquisses* constitute at once 'a 19th-century *Affektenlehre* book' and Alkan's 'own confession of Jewish heritage or beliefs... a book on music theory embracing deep within its compositional layers Alkan's towering achievement in both music and thought', while not denying 'classical views of the *Esquisses* as a collection of sketches of everyday life or small musical ideas' (Murai 2015, p.15). Whatever one's view of Murai's theory, the macro-structure of the set is remarkably well thought-out, given not only the gestation period but the fact that composition of the *Esquisses* must have been squeezed between the realisation of larger pieces, including the monumental studies of op.39.

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² Smith notes a Beethoven connection in no 47 (p.47). The subtitle of the set, '48 motifs', also suggests a Beethovenian impulse.

They have not merely been lumped together for publication as a matter of commercial expedience. Which begs the question: did Alkan plan to execute a set of esquisses as early as the late 1840s, from when the earliest manuscript evidence of one of the constituent pieces dates?³ Did he take care to compose in keys which would allow for the final double sequence of 24, or transpose pieces to fit the scheme once it had been determined? The fact that the original version of 'Délire' is in D major and appears in the *Esquisses* set transposed to E suggests the latter.

Gathering pieces into larger groups, potentially creating something greater than the sum of its parts is linked, as noted by Brigitte François-Sappey (1991), specifically with French tradition but also the international standard repertoire. It was a commonplace of Baroque practice; the French baroque *clavecinistes*, yes, but not least JS Bach (the 48 preludes and fugues of the *Well-tempered Clavier* are an obvious reference point). A sense of fruitful structural tension results between smaller units and the grander whole (in the case of the *Esquisses*, the whole accommodates pieces which are so short they would scarcely be viable concert works on their own). We find this approach again in 20th-century neo-classicism, whether in Debussy's Preludes, Douze Etudes and projected series of six sonatas for 'divers instruments'; Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis* or Shostakovich's 24 Preludes & Fugues. It is also found in the organ and piano cycles of Messiaen, one of which actually references the title 'esquisses' (*Petites esquisses des oiseaux*, 1985).

François-Sappey invokes Roland Barthes' writings on Schumann's piano cycles in citing 'la mystérieuse cohérence organique du "cercle des fragments"', considering the parts relating to the whole like stars grouping themselves into a constellation (pp.70-71).

Stylistic comparisons and sources of inspiration

As noted, when viewed in the overarching context of 19th-century piano music the *Esquisses* fit best into the category of character pieces. As some of Alkan's most original conceptions, comparisons may seem unnecessary. That said, some of the more lyrical *Esquisses* are comparable with both Alkan's own *Chants* and their ultimate model, Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*. Both Smith and Eddie draw attention to the connection between 'Notturmino innamorato' no 43 and the 6th of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* op.30. Eddie also detects an intertextual relationship between 'Fais Dodo' no 33 and Schubert's *Moment Musicale* in A flat, as well as the Austrian composer's harmonic influence on 'Le premier billet doux' no 46 (p.125). Schilling (1991) finds a Schumannesque poetic sensibility in items like 'Confidence', 'Les Soupirs' and 'Attendez-moi sous l'orme' (p.157). Germanic Romanticism surely also pervades the consecutive pair nos 18, the songlike 'Liedchen', and 19, 'Grâces', with its interior pedal beating out the distinctive dactylic rhythm.

Some of the more playful and less technically demanding pieces (such as the 'Rigaudon' and 'Fais Dodo' from Book 3) bear comparison with the various suites of pieces for children which other 19th-century composers wrote and Alkan otherwise didn't – Schumann's *Album for the Young*, for instance⁴. But across the collection as a whole there is considerable variety in technical difficulty, compositional technique, style and topic. All bear Alkan's distinctive compositional stamp, and generally avoid banalities and clichés except for a special point of satire or wit (as in 'Musique Militaire' no 35). As with most of Alkan's music there are pieces which combine great originality with considerable eclecticism – 'Les Frisson' and 'Increpatio' from Book 1 are good examples. As MacDonald puts it, 'Alkan's originality is evident in nearly all his music, but he was in debt to both old and new music [and sometimes seemingly music yet to be written!] for elements of his style' (p.378). Importantly, and not unlike Stravinsky's neoclassical initiative, it was *through* looking back – for instance to Scarlatti, with his proto-clusters, in 'Les Diablotins' no 45 – that Alkan was also able to look forwards to a radically new harmonic world.

Sources of inspiration are very wide, then, both stylistically and with regard to extra-musical ideas. Extra-musical suggestions can be gleaned from many of the titles, described by MacDonald as 'obscure and elliptical, often with a satanic or mocking tone' (p.378). These range from the Classical in subject and phraseology (Alkan was after all a Classical as well as a Biblical scholar) – 'Odo profanum vulgus et arceo', 'Les Initiés' – to the descriptive and poetic or picturesque ('Pseudo-naivité', 'Le Frisson', 'Le

³ See Smith 1987 (p.44).

⁴ Relatedly, it's worth noting the presence of 'La Vision' on the grade 7 syllabus of the London College of Music (as reported in the *Alkan Society Bulletin* 94, p.16), attesting to its pedagogical value.

Table 1: Esquisses typology⁵

No	Title	Type
1	La Vision	A
2	Le Staccatissimo	B
3	Le Legatissimo	B
4	Les Cloches	B
5	Les Initiés: Quasi-Coro	B
6	Fuguettes	B
7	Le Frisson	C
8	Pseudo-Naïveté	C
9	Confidence	C
10	Increpatio	C
11	Les Soupirs	C
12	Barcarollette	A/B
13	Ressouvenir	C
14	Duetto	B
15	Tutti de concerto (Dans le genre ancien)	B
16	Fantaisie	B/C
17	Petite prélude à trois	B
18	Liedchen	B
19	Grâces	C
20	Petite marche villageoise	A
21	Morituri te salutant	A
22	Innocenzia	A
23	L'homme aux sabots	D
24	Contredanse	A
25	La Poursuite	A
26	Petit air (Genre ancien)	B
27	Rigaudon	A/B
28	Inflexibilité	B/C
29	Délire	C
30	Petit air dolent	B/C
31	Début de quatuor	B
32	Minuetto	A/B
33	((Fais dodo))	B
34	Odo profanum vulgus et arceo: Favete linguis	C
35	Musique militaire	A
36	Toccatina	B
37	Scherzettino	B
38	((Le Ciel vous soit toujours prospère!))	A
39	Héraclite et Démocrite	D
40	((Attendez-mois sous l'orme))	A
41	Les Enharmoniques	B
42	Petit air à 5 voix	B
43	Notturmo-innamorato	B/C
44	Transports	C
45	Les Diablotins	D
46	Le Premier billet doux	A
47	Scherzetto	B
48	En Songe	A
	Laus Deo	A

KEY: A = incident/activity; B = pure music/sound; C = emotion; D = personnages

⁵ This table is partly inspired by Eddie's classification diagram (p.130), although my 'types' differ from his, being explicitly concerned with domains of reference (Eddie mixes domains of reference with historical/stylistic characteristics).

Premier billet doux') to the specifically technical ('Le Staccatissimo', 'Le Legatissimo'). Table 1 outlines a schema of types, ranging from those with a purely musical or sonic impetus (the latter may involve 'realism') to the evocation of emotion, an incident/activity, or specific personages. Allowing for some overlaps/grey areas in the typology⁶, we can see that B is the most common type, confirming Alkan's essential (neo-)Classicism; followed by the Romantic expression implicit in C, followed by the narrative suggestion of A, and lastly the overt pictorialism of D. Despite their rarity in the set, the latter types constitute some of Alkan's most memorable aural images.

In terms of musical style, a wide range of Alkan's creative personality is expressed, from neo-classicism to (literally) *avant-garde* experiments, affirming Alkan's eclectic combination of past traditions with radical originality. We encounter such expected traits (identified by MacDonald) as, for example, the use of military motifs and gestures for rhetorical effect (e.g. 'Musique Militaire' no 35), and the perennial return to a spiritual tone and mood. Particularly noteworthy is the devotional atmosphere at the very end of the set, in the extraordinary Messiaen-like unnumbered 'Laus Deo'⁷. This coincides with a return to C major tonality, which seems to acquire a symbolic value – both the beginning and this ending of the cycle link this key with a calm, radical simplicity not unlike that found in the tintinnabuli compositions of Arvo Pärt⁸. As Smith puts it Alkan comprehends 'both past and future in the continuity of French keyboard music', citing Gorer's observation that Alkan stands 'as a link between the *clavecinistes* and the impressionists of the early years of the twentieth century' (p.44).

Connections with the many short harpsichord pieces by Rameau, and the *ordres* of Couperin, are particularly evident (the latter are even grouped in a similar way to Alkan's op.63). 'Les Soupirs' (no 11) and 'Les Enharmoniques' (no 41) are titles borrowed directly from Rameau. Alkan knew and loved this music, as we know from his inclusion of Rameau pieces in the later Petites Concerts. The pared-down keyboard writing may be inspired by this source: the keyboard style in the *Esquisses* tends to eschew the huge chords, involved figurations and dense 'orchestral' textures of Alkan's earlier keyboard manner. Variety of texture, from unadorned melodic lines (nos 13, 26 and 34), to cluster-like chords (in 'Les Diablotins'), is one area of the collection where originality is especially apparent⁹. Not surprisingly the keyboard writing is close to that of the Sonatine op.61 in its emphasis on clarity, counterpoint, and economy of means. While looking back to Rameau, Couperin and Scarlatti, it also seems to anticipate the pared-down styles of Satie and Bartók. The neo-Classicism present in many of the pieces could be seen as a forerunner of later neoclassicisms, not least those of Stravinsky and Prokofiev.

Concluding thoughts

As a final reflection, let's consider another characteristic identified by MacDonald: the stark juxtaposition of disparate and contrasting elements with no attempt at integration between them, found throughout Alkan's oeuvre but in necessarily concentrated form in the *Esquisses* (which are in many ways a miniature reflection or encapsulation of much of Alkan's output). On one level we have the binary oppositions which Alkan was so fond of – *Marche funèbre* and *Marche triomphale* for instance, or in the context of the *Esquisses* the paired 'Le Legatissimo' and 'Le Staccatissimo' nos 2 and 3. More specific contrast between cynical, sarcastic or diabolical ideas and a sweet, childlike simplicity is found most obviously in 'Les Diablotins' with its radically contrasting Quasi Santo and Quasi Santa modal interludes. This bears comparison with Liszt, Mahler¹⁰ and, to offer a more recent correlative, Alfred Schnittke and other 'polystylistic' composers, in whose music we find (pasted) old and newer styles sharply juxtaposed and set into relief against each other, and occasionally overlaid. (Here the most striking example from the *Esquisses* is 'Héraclite et Démocrite', with its alternation and eventual overlaying of contrasting stylistic elements – French recitative and Italian aria – in different but related tempi¹¹.) Such an approach is necessarily eclectic. Yet there have always been eclectic composers. Eclecticism is a key feature of postmodernism (in which context it has gained the status of a methodology, with Charles

⁶ For instance, dance-forms may be said to relate to an (other than musical) activity, though certain forms have been so firmly established as musical genres they are arguably purely musical.

⁷ Murai links this to the phrase's use as an epithet to 15th-17th century music-theoretical treatises (p.14).

⁸ I also hear this quality in the bell-like middle section of Alkan's *Marche funèbre* op.26 (1846).

⁹ As pointed out by Schilling (1991) the dissonant sound-world of 'Les Diablotins' is unique for its period (p.166).

¹⁰ See for instance Agawu 2009: 'In the music of Mahler, the essential utterance is heterogeneous at the core' (p.47).

¹¹ It could be argued that these alternating styles are simply a 19th-century extension of the well-established 18th-century use of musical *topics* (such as stylised dance forms – see Agawu 1991 and 2009). However it's the wider frame of reference, I think, which lifts Alkan's usages beyond the frame of topic theory to the realm of (proto-) polystylism.

Jencks using the term as a verb 'to eclectic' (Jencks 1987, p.7). This – at least, at best – doesn't mean merely patching together a series of pastiches and imitations. Disparate elements, rather, are used to create something quite new, not inherent in the original models, through juxtaposition and/or synthesis. Alkan's use of such diverse elements as Jewish music, church modes, the *genre ancien*, neo-classicism, military motifs and pianistic devices – clichés even – can be seen in this light. Writers imbued with the ideology of Romantic/Modernist music historiography, for whom formal and technical innovation and stylistic originality and consistency are praised, and stylistic discrepancy and fetishisation of the past criticised, have found the eclectic and backward-looking elements of Alkan's music problematic. As Eddie observes though, a postmodern approach allows such apparent contradictions, as well as other controversial aspects of Alkan's music, to be accepted and appreciated. Responding to François-Sappey's reference to Alkan's excesses of shape and symbolism, he comments: 'Modern analysis and postmodern aesthetics permits us today to accommodate such excess in a romantic composer' (p.198).

Alkan the postmodernist? Before postmodernism, or even modernism (typically dated, in musical terms, to Debussy's *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune* of 1892-4)? Umberto Eco refers to 'an attempt to make [the term postmodern] increasingly retroactive... gradually it reached the beginning of the [20th] century, then still further back.... I believe [he concludes] that postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category – or better still, a *Kunstwollen*, a way of operating. We could say that every period has its own postmodernism, just as every period would have its own mannerism' (Eco 1985, pp.65-66). It's therefore not surprising that interest in Alkan's music grew at a time (the 1970s – the decade the Alkan society was founded!) when many contemporary composers started re-evaluating their relationship with their musical pasts, moving in many cases towards a new (postmodern) accommodation.

Which brings us neatly back to the call for new esquisses (see the final call which follows this article)

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Yui Morishita's CD of the complete *Esquisses* is reviewed on page 11 of this issue

Alkan's 'Avertissement' to the 25 Préludes, op.31

Mark Viner, London

A couple of years back I was fortunate enough to receive a scarce first edition of Alkan's *25 Préludes dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs*, op.31 published by Brandus in 1847. It was passed on to me by a fellow member of the society and has been greatly treasured ever since. What makes it so special, aside from being a first edition, is that it comprises an 'avertissement'¹ from the composer which, for some inexplicable reason, is entirely absent in subsequent reprints. In it, Alkan explains his intentions behind writing a work which can be played on both the piano and organ and, furthermore, gives instruction on how to do so.² This completely dispels the long held assumption that his initial conception had been a work for the pedal piano which he reluctantly agreed to ascribe to the piano or organ at the behest of the publisher who, naturally, had sales in mind. In preparing the set for my recording I was adamant that this important piece of text be translated and included in the sleeve notes and, as far as we can tell, it doesn't seem to have been translated before. It reads as follows:

NOTICE

As it is likely that these Preludes will be more often played on the piano than on the organ, I have had to write them following some of the means of and with preference to the scoring of the piano, with consideration, however, to the distance which separates these two instruments, and the link which can sometimes connect them, notwithstanding the well-marked difference of their characters. This link evidently emerges from the musical weft, and all piano works are in as much open to total or partial reproduction on the organ should their true value rely less on effects exclusive to the instrument.

Leaving aside considerations which concern the particular attributes of the organ or piano, to the so common error which comes from assimilating these two instruments (doubtless because of the resemblance of the keyboards), the confusion which must always have been born of this error, and the confusion greater still which stems from the numerous mechanical improvements of modern organs, – all questions which, added to many equally important ones, would necessitate rather extensive discussion, and must be the subject of special study, – I will limit myself, in the interest of the present article, to indicating some of the techniques which will help make certain passages, which are almost impossible on the organ, be rendered easy and well-suited to the nature of this prince of instruments.

It will be necessary first of all to slow down speeds which are too fast. For example, no. 10, marked very fast, must be taken in a way that all the notes are properly heard, depending on whether the organ takes more or less time to respond, which varies according to the instrument and, on whichever instrument, according to the stops (1). No. 24, faster still, would present, in this respect, fewer difficulties, as high notes always stand out more easily than low notes or than those of the middle register. Nowadays there are such organ manuals on which one could play this number just as quickly as on a piano, but it would, nonetheless, be out of keeping rendered at such a speed. In places marked loud, and where one uses numerous and loud stops, there would be no point in doing the octaves indicated for the piano (for example in no. 20); it will be necessary furthermore to avoid thick chords, especially in the left hand and in the lower end of the manual, unless for a special effect I suppose, as in no. 25. Besides, this number, as well as nos. 3, 4, 9, 16, 21, and even 22, can be transferred from the piano to the organ, without undergoing a single modification. I would add some other numbers to the preceding ones if I didn't want to point out that they would benefit still from the removal of some repeated notes: these are nos. 1, 13, 15, 19. This is especially when a same note forms part of the harmony which has just been played and that which is about to be played, which is called a common note, that it is better to not repeat it. The organ comprises but the sustained genre, the legato style, close and homogenous form, and is generally incapable of staccato. This is why detached accompaniments, which can be justified on the piano, are thoroughly unpleasant on the organ, and, though much in use today, their effect remains no less false and awkward. The same goes for repeated chords in the left hand, especially in a faster tempo. One would therefore do well to change these figurations everywhere they occur, by substituting the bass notes, which are more or less sustained, on the pedalboard, and the rest of the notes

¹ The word 'avertissement' literally means 'warning' or 'caution' though, in this instance, 'notice' is really the only sensible word to use.

² A much shorter version of this text outlining the same philosophy adorns the title page of the Schlesinger edition in French and German.

which form the harmony in the left hand, in the form of middle parts: all this, of course, on indicated chords. Nos. 12, 14 and 23 will require a similar reworking.

I would be loth to carry on with this list of techniques and means all better known than each other, and I would seem to seriously doubt the intelligence and knowledge of the vast majority of performers and audiences, if I didn't add that I have written these few lines not so much in view of teaching something new, than to avoid a certain criticism which a cursory reading of my work could have drawn: by which I mean that of having confused the two instruments in my mind, of having wanted to play the piano on the organ, or greater still of having deemed what can be permitted on some modern organs as if forcing together the two styles. It isn't that I don't strongly value all the improvements and progress of current organ building; I merely chance at outlining my reservations with regards to an ill-considered use, as it would not be reasonable nor fair to condemn on the pretext of misuse, that from which it is possible to draw a good effect, in treating it with moderation and discernment.

It only remains for me to say except that almost all these little pieces could serve different Offices, be it in the form of verses and antiphons, or that of preludes, as the title suggests, either with cuts or kept whole.

C.-V. Alkan

17th April 1847

- (1) I said previously that I had written these pieces with the nature of the piano in mind but everyone knows that a same range, and one greater still, can be obtained on the organ by different combinations of manuals and registers. Crescendi and diminuendi can also be obtained through many of these combinations and blends, even though organs don't have an expressive manual: all things, besides, secondary to the size and capacity of each instrument, and to which it is impossible as well as pointless to give rules here.³

Mark Viner's recent CD of Alkan's *25 Préludes dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs*, op.31, is reviewed on page 14 of this issue

Call for a new editor of the Alkan Society Bulletin

This issue of the Bulletin is the ninth under my editorship. It is a great pleasure and privilege to engage with members and other Alkanists to commission, encourage or cajole them to submit news, write letters or articles and conduct reviews. Over the years, there have been some innovations – for example helped by the introduction of regular email *News Digests* which allows the *Bulletin* to focus on more substantive pieces. However I feel the time is approaching when the Bulletin would benefit from the influx of new ideas and fresh perspectives. I therefore intend to resign the editorship in due course, but not until a new editor, or editorial team, is in place. I am happy to continue in the role until such arrangements are made.

Any member who wishes to be considered for the post of editor should contact the Honorary Secretary (José López, secretary@alkansociety.org), stating what they would bring to the role. Members who have suggestions on how the role of editor or the Bulletin more broadly might be developed are also invited to contact the Secretary with their ideas. Please send you application or ideas by 31st January 2020. The appointment of the new editor will be a matter for the Committee.

If you wish to discuss the role and its requirements in more detail, please contact me, Nick Hammond, at treasurer@alkansociety.org.

Nick Hammond, High Stittenham, North Yorkshire

³ Translation by the author.

Final call: Write your own *Esquisse*

A repeat of the call for members to compose a short piece inspired by Alkan's *Esquisses*. A number of submissions have already been received and many more are welcome by the deadline of 30th November 2019.

All members are invited to compose a short piano piece inspired by Alkan's *Esquisses*, op. 63. The pieces will be compiled into a volume to be published as a supplement to the next Bulletin.

Apart from a handful of globally little-known instances, Alkan's music has been widely ignored as a stimulus and model for composers. What is it about the music itself that appears to quench the spark of imaginative compositional response? And who can answer that question? This is our chance to be one of the first group of musicians¹ since Alkan's death to answer by **overtly permitting his influence on our composing for piano** by each of us writing a short *Esquisse* **lasting no more than 150 seconds**.

The project can be imagined either as a tribute to Alkan and his op. 63, or more broadly as an opportunity for a composer – whether professional or amateur – to be stimulated and influenced by Alkan. The following are merely suggestions to stimulate ideas:

- A parody, pastiche or tribute (according to your personal definition), in any pre-1861 style as variously found throughout op. 63 – or in a post-1861 style
- Piece that sounds like “the music that Alkan forgot to write”
- A new piece using a title from op. 63
- A new piece of ‘updating’, such as Mussorgsky's *Schmuyle and Goldberg* (1874) as an updating of Alkan's *Héraclite et Démocrite* (1861)
- A prequel or sequel to any of op. 63
- A variation based on any of op. 63
- A short piece, independent of the above, perhaps with a purely conceptual influence of Alkan.

This project conveniently coincides with the 100th issue of the *Bulletin*, due to be published in 2020. Anonymous publication as a supplement to the *Bulletin* will allow the contributions to be appreciated free from bias. *Bulletin* 101 will provide contributors' names – with their permission.

The submissions should preferably be typeset on computer and submitted as a pdf on A4-sized pages (portrait), but neat hand-written scores (also A4 portrait) will also be accepted. It's up to the composer to design the layout with regard to title font, page turns, additional text or illustrations (minimal please).

You may also submit an audio performance of your score, as an MP3 (or equivalent) recording, and the recordings will, with your permission, be made available to members for download.

Please address queries to the Bulletin editor (Nick Hammond, email: treasurer@alkansociety.org, or by post to: Woodend House, High Stittenham, York YO60 7TW, UK), to whom final submissions should be sent by **30th November 2019** (Alkan's 206th birthday).

¹ But not *the* first: see letter page of *Alkan Society Bulletin* 98, p. 16.

CD reviews

Alkan: Piano collection 5: *La Vision* Esquisses, op.63

Yui Morishita, piano

ALM records ALCD-7239, released September 2019 in Japan, length 78 minutes



1	La Vision	3'19			
2	Le Staccatissimo	1'09			
3	Le Legatissimo	1'20			
4	Les Cloches	0'53			
5	Les Initiés: Quasi-Coro	3'59			
6	Fuguettes	1'15			
7	Le Frisson	1'49	29	Délire	0'55
8	Pseudo-Naïveté	2'15	30	Petit air dolent	1'37
9	Confidence	2'03	31	Début de quatuor	0'59
10	Increpatio	1'20	32	Minuetto	3'18
11	Les Soupis	1'40	33	((Fais dodo))	1'04
12	Barcarollette	1'30	34	Odo profanum vulgus et arceo: Favete linguis	2'23
13	Ressouvenir	2'42	35	Musique militaire	1'19
14	Duettino	1'46	36	Toccatina	1'07
15	Tutti de concerto (Dans le genre ancien)	1'03	37	Scherzetto	0'54
16	Fantaisie	1'16	38	((Le Ciel vous soit toujours prospère!))	1'37
17	Petite prélude à trois	0'47	39	Héraclite et Démocrite	1'59
18	Liedchen	1'01	40	((Attendez-mois sous l'orme))	0'45
19	Grâces	1'38	41	Les Enharmoniques	1'52
20	Petite marche villageoise	1'34	42	Petit air à 5 voix	1'06
21	Morituri te salutant	1'36	43	Nottornino-innamorato	1'54
22	Innocenzia	1'25	44	Transports	0'41
23	L'homme aux sabots	0'33	45	Les Diablotins	2'43
24	Contredanse	1'04	46	Le Premier billet doux	1'14
25	La Poursuite	0'41	47	Scherzetto	2'07
26	Petit air (Genre ancien)	0'52	48	En Songe	1'38
27	Rigaudon	0'52		Laus Deo	4'43
28	Inflexibilité	1'08			

Reviewed by Richard Murphy, London

Sketches, Motifs; how do these adjectival nouns educate players and listeners about this collection? Do they help with an approach to performance? What musical elements are being referred to? I feel hamstrung by not having a translation of the latest Jacqueline Waeber essay¹. She has insight I don't.

In a Fanfare review of Steven Osborne's recording, Adrian Corleonis suggested that Alkan's music should not sound genteel. It's all about subversion, joking, satire, parody, experiment, and not about being conventionally exquisite. Even the simplest sounding of these has at least one technically testing moment, and the very few which don't contain a harmonic oddity actually stand out because of that omission.

The numbers below refer to each *esquisse* in the order listed above.

1. Slow and stately with sonorous bass notes. Alkan's melody syncopations are very studied, not born of caprice or improvisation. The piano sound is recorded well.
2. Perfectly clean – no *scherzando* jokes – dynamics range from *mf*, not *p* or *pp*. One of the century's best staccato studies, or *pizzicato* pieces as in Tchaikovsky's 4th Symphony.

¹ Waeber, J. (2017). "Alkans Stücke mit Titel. Eine Poetik des Vagen und des Gemeinplatzes". In Ulrich Tadday (ed.), *Charles Valentin Alkan (Musik-Konzepte) Taschenbuch*. Boichard Boorberg Verlag GmbH KG (Edition text+kritik), Munich. Reviewed in *Alkan Society Bulletin*, 96, 17-20.

3. YM doesn't see the top line as a highlighted melody, and compensates for Alkan's very weak last-beat cadences by allowing them more time. Played in a default *mf*. The music seems to be searching for somewhere to settle, which it does on the eighth attempt, when two bass notes finally sound.
4. The title and the dynamic markings indicate that the bell tones should dominate the landscape over other notes. The distant whispering of the marked *pp* notes in every bar is ignored. A mistaken reading.
5. Lapidary, unsmiling, strong – some good dynamics – no hint of the Aristophanes dance tableau. The piano writing does not explain Alkan's direction of 'Quasi coro'. A Greek chorus?
6. Spot on! Very square and excitingly business-like.
7. What an extraordinary piece! – great dynamics – the menace of the low C sharps is well articulated.
8. A little pause after each two-bar phrase
9. Nicely flowing – could be quieter – beautiful ending, with LH melody clear.
10. Very fine – each whiplash starts with a note which is dissonant to the rest, and this is clearly heard – this strict court-martial of a rebuke is indeed harsh.
11. Beautiful sound, and at Alkan's 92 beats per minute (bpm). The strange telescoping of the previous material into half-bars is played a little louder, as asked for. Marvellous odd music.
12. Good, but a little too fast. I think the printed note value in the metronome mark should be halved.
13. Beautiful tone and phrasing – very touching end.
14. Brilliant sound – pedal free – could be more characterful because of the harpsichord allusions.
15. Strong and strict – the six solo bars still sound weirdly anomalous.
16. A Moszkowski-like study, but with many more surprises - extraordinarily light and fast - Bravo.
17. Lovely
18. A clearly delineated pre and postlude – subtly expressive.
19. Quite swift – C sharp seems more obsessive than usual – YM's tempo makes sense of the two-bar phrase with their *rf* endings – actually, lovely.
20. Light, bouncy, with a brilliant end. As Ronald Smith says, harmonically a very slippery customer.
21. Great performance – YM uses every imitation cue to express chords as counterpoint – nicely pedalled left hand. Unusually full of woe.
22. All four expression markings delivering the title!
23. Surprising balance noticeably favours the RH melody and its very crushed notes.
24. Great stuff – very effective slurring, LH grace notes – unapologetically heavy mid-section as requested – Alkan knows what he wants.
25. Just too fast to appreciate what's happening – *cantabile* at end goes for nothing – too little room left for enunciation of dynamics. Very effective vanishing last two bars.
26. A thoughtful performance, using the quaver rest as a slight pause. Unusual, and gives pause for thought.
27. Another example of possibly mistaken metronome mark note value, so it's very fast (as marked) and makes the last bar sound quite ridiculous. I propose a halving of the m.m. note value.
28. Very strong and square, quite rightly so.
29. Very obsessive sounding with a beautiful *Lento* at the end – Alkan's contrasts made very clear.
30. Beautiful
31. Lovely playing – a little more air and little less literal would evoke the company of four players more realistically.
32. A paraphrase of half a Mozart aria, but in the minor key and in a darker registration. I've never understood its place in this collection. Alkan's original (?) music in the *Trio* – with its second half in

G sharp major – could be a piece on its own.

- 33 This is beautifully phrased – inner harmony and tenor line are subtly pointed – all very tender, especially the ending.
- 34 YM does all that's asked – last note held for 12 seconds into the silence hinted at in the title.
- 35 Alkan's direction of 'tempo ordinario' is perfectly judged – rests are unfortunately inserted at double bars, which loosens the grip of the mania behind the music, as does the slowing at the end.
- 36 Spot-on speed for this two-part clarity.
- 37 YM's tempo converts what are usually heard as wide-spaced tremolos into very intense trills of notes a 10th apart – not adjacent. An amazing effect. Final chords accelerate.
- 38 Beautifully affectionate, but afraid to use the strong accents offered by Alkan. Slightly too well-mannered.
- 39 Héraclite is subtly rubatoed - Démocrite's laughter has exactly the right feel of uncontrollability without being hysterical – by the use of a very strict pulse, with accents.
- 40 A delicate bon-bon – a pretty narrative replete with mirror images between hands.
- 41 Introductory four bars are light and dance-like, and then move swiftly through the dissonant thickets. Next four bars give us the melody which will dominate. After the explosions of frustration at the massed chromatics, Alkan boldly gives us six variations of the melody in exactly matching rhythms. In fact, forget rhythm, this is a harmony exercise in six different keys. I'd have liked differently pedalled bass rumbles near the end which would clarify the presence of octatonic scales. Still an unsettling composition.
- 42 Indeed 'doux, et soutenu'.
- 43 Very movingly played! Breath-holding ending!
- 44 Numbers 43 and 44 make a showcase-pairing of Alkan contrasts – from intimate nocturne to the sun-bright, breezy, heel-clicking outdoors elation of *Transports*. Just a couple of niggles – one pedal mark is given at the very end, but YM uses pedal to emphasise phrases, which reduces the quality of bounce. I miss the hemiola feel in bar 28.
- 45 This performance shows the power of dynamics to change the perception of a piece. The *pianissimos* and slightly elongated rests bring extra drama to the whole picture. Very imaginative. The tonal quality of the scooped notes is both musical and atmospheric.
- 46 I feel there should be more shades of yearning than we are given. I'm not really convinced by the need to de-synchronise the hands. This is a melody that has its own shadows and imitations in the left hand throughout – it's a two-voice piece. We get lovely playing of a one-dimensional state-of-mind.
- 47 Exciting zipping around the keyboard, but I wished for more of the printed dynamics.
- 48 A truly beautiful soft touch. As asked for – both pedals used – but he lifts to clear the harmony at each bar. YM then lifts them for the last three bars when the music is to vaporise. Why lift? Alkan in his 'single-focus' element.

Laus Deo – no number. Neither *Esquisse* nor *Motif*??

YM makes this the longest of the collection at 4:44. Unusually, it opens with the swiftest of carillons, followed by a strict metric modulation into the cross-hands ineffability of the next seven bars. The central section's six prayer-like phrases are played very slowly and reverentially with plenty of time given between each. The cross returns, and the carillon chimes in to disappear very atmospherically. I applaud the imaginative approach to this piece, though initially unsettling.

There are some really outstanding performances on this disc, and many which show an original approach to this original music. I'd have liked more care taken sometimes with variation in dynamic levels, but there are only two or three which I feel don't fully work.

This is Yui Morishita's best Alkan disc to date, most consistently showing his artistry, and giving us some really stimulating accounts of these pieces. Thank you!

Alkan: 25 Préludes dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs, op.31

Mark Viner, piano

Piano Classics PCL10189, released September 2019, length 59 minutes

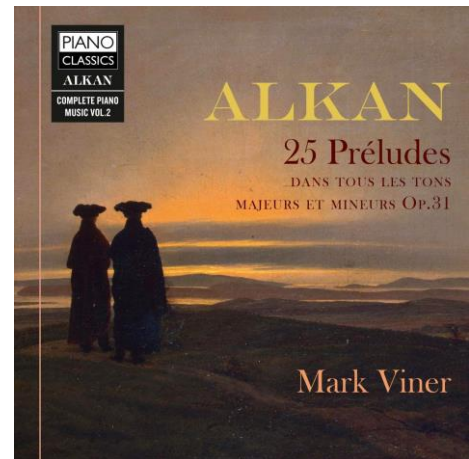
1	Lentement	2'51
2	Assez lentement	2'45
3	Dans le genre ancien: Très lentement	3'37
4	Prière du soir: Assez lentement	1'19
5	Psaume 150me: Avec enthousiasme	1'59
6	Ancienne mélodie de la synagogue: Andante flebile	4'24
7	Librement mais sans secousses	1'36
8	La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer: Lentement	4'15
9	Placiditas tranquillement	2'21
10	Dans le style fugué: Très vite	1'12
11	Un petit rien: assez vite	0'50
12	Le temps qui n'est plus: andante	1'28
13	J'étais endormie mais mon cœur veillait... (cantiques des cantiques 5=2.): Lentement	3'35
14	Rapidement	2'37
15	Dans le genre gothique: Assez vite et avec beaucoup de grâce	1'35
16	Assez lentement	2'02
17	Rêve d'amour: Assez vite	2'20
18	Romance: Sans trop de mouvement	4'46
19	Prière du matin: vite	0'49
20	Modérément vite et bien caractérisé	1'25
21	Doucement	1'47
22	Anniversaire: Assez lentement	2'12
23	Assez vite	1'33
24	Prestissimo	1'50
25	Prière: Lentement	3'35

Reviewed by David Conway, London

Greatly enjoyable (and highly praised) as Mark Viner's recent recordings of Chaminade, Liszt and Thalberg have been, it is especially pleasant to now have Volume 2 of what will be eventually a seventeen-volume set of Alkan's piano works, following his rightly-praised disc of the op.35 major key études. The remarkable, often visionary, world of the op.31 *Préludes* has had few manifestations in the recording studio; I believe there are only two previous recordings of the complete set, Laurent Martin's in 1990 and Olli Mustonen's of 1991. Five of the *Préludes* were recorded by Ronald Smith in 1977, and there are also selections by Stanley Hoogland and Laurent Martin recorded in 2002.

When the *Préludes* were published in 1847, Alkan was 33 years old and perhaps at the peak of his reputation. He might well have regarded the collection as itself the 'prelude' to the consolidation of his status as the leading French pianist of his era; but that status was soon to be undermined, first by the political manipulations which deprived him of his expected elevation to Professor of Piano at the Conservatoire following his teacher Zimmerman (1848), by the revolution of 1848 and by the hammerblow of the death of Chopin in 1849, which profoundly disturbed him and was a major element in his withdrawal from public performance. But the op.31 pieces are by no means celebrations of virtuosity. Although a few pieces demand exceptional technique, as a whole the collection speaks of introspection and reflection. Of the 25 works (one in each major and minor key, the former cycling in fourths, the latter by semitones, with a repeat of the opening C major), nine include the instruction *lentement*, and only one is marked *prestissimo*. At least seven are prayers or refer to religion or bible verses.

Viner's excellent notes to the recording give further background to the intimacy of these works, and their distance from mere display. His coverage of the history includes contemporary comments from



critics such as Fétis and Blanchard: the former observes, in a detailed review which itself indicates the esteem he felt for the composer, that “Alkan is a man of thought and feeling: his preludes are reveries which ... conceal a very studied and complete art form” and the latter describes a set of five of the preludes played by the composer at the Salle Erard as “ravishing in form, style and colour.” Viner usefully includes a full translation of Alkan’s note as to how the *Préludes* might be played either on the piano or the organ(!) and the composer’s apparent licence to use the pieces in full or in extract (“*fractionnés ou conservés en entier*”) as literal preludes to parts of Church services. (That seems particularly remarkable in view of the clear Jewish affiliations of many of them – notably no. 6, the *Ancienne mélodie de la synagogue*, and no. 22, *Anniversaire*, which as Viner points out is a reflection on the Jewish New Year.)

Viner’s interpretations show that he has taken these considerations to heart. A simple indicator – Mustonen’s recording gallops through the *Préludes* in around 45 minutes (though maybe he was pressured by having to fit Shostakovich’s 24 Preludes on the same disc!): Viner takes just under an hour, giving him proper room for phrasing and ‘breathing’. His performances, immaculate as they are, are tributes to the composer, not tributes to pianism. Of course, some of the pieces – the klezmer-like no 20 and no. 24, ‘Prestissimo’ – are simply romps, and Viner rightly lets rip with ‘Psalm 150’ (no. 5), which Alkan marks ‘avec enthousiasme’. But many are much more: the ‘Synagogue Melody’ (no. 6), the ‘Song of the Madwoman at the Seashore’ (no. 8) and the invocation of the Song of Songs, ‘I sleep, but my heart waketh’ (no. 13) are wonderful miniatures which Viner crafts carefully. In others he brings out an anticipation of Satie in ‘Assez lentement’ (no. 16), the grace of a mediaeval dance in ‘Dans le genre gothique’ (no. 15), the self-searching of ‘Anniversaire’ (no. 22).

I would not want to be without Ronald Smith’s extracts, and Hoogland’s selection played on an 1850s Erard piano, although flatly recorded, is of interest. But although Viner has not quite been able to rid me of an association of the central episode of no. 14 (‘Rapidement’) with the tune of ‘Men of Harlech’, his are the interpretations to which I shall return.



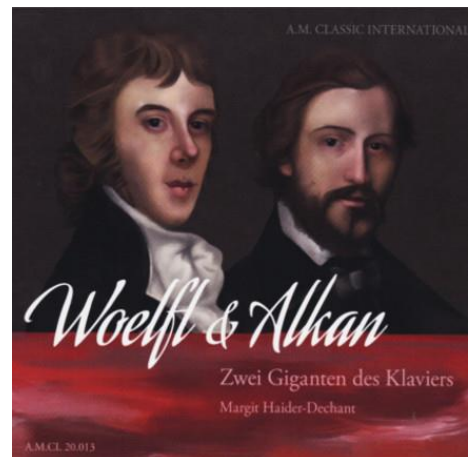
Woelfl: Sonata “Non plus ultra” (op. 41)

Alkan: Concerto for solo piano (op. 39, 8-10)

Margit Haider-Dechant, piano

Apollon Musikoffizin A.M.Cl 20.013, released 2017, length 77 minutes

<i>Woelfl: Sonata “Non plus ultra”</i>	20'36
1 I Adagio – Allegro moderato	8'37
2 II Andante	1'59
3 III Allegretto	10'00
<i>Alkan: Concerto for solo piano</i>	56'38
4 I Allegro assai	32'58
5 II Adagio	10'20
6 III Allegretto alla barbaresca	13'20



Reviewed by Seth Blacklock, Lisburn, Northern Ireland

I only recently discovered this recording, and was initially encouraged by the appearance of a new interpretation of one of Alkan’s seminal piano works. But, although the first portion of this somewhat unbalanced disk – devoted to the Sonata “Non plus Ultra” (op. 41) by Joseph Woelfl – is ably handled by the pianist, listening to the Alkan Concerto left me feeling less gratified.

Starting with some positives, however, and first a note on the booklet: the disk casing is attractively presented as a cardboard case with booklet affixed and includes a cover illustration of Woelfl and Alkan

seemingly created specifically for the recording. The booklet text is presented in German, English and French, opening it up to a wide readership. And the booklet notes obviously present both composers and their works in a favourable light – well-researched within the confines of the pagination – including two portraits of both individuals. With the exception of the questionable statement that the pianist presented Alkan's Concerto for the first time in public in 1990, the booklet looks and reads well.

It is worth noting, too, that Haider-Dechant is an authority on Woelfl, being the author of *Joseph Woelfl: Verzeichnis seiner Werke* (Apollon-Musikoffizin, Vienna, 2011), President of the International Joseph Woelfl Society and Chair of the Joseph Woelfl Society of Bonn.

And now to the recording proper: it is nice to hear Alkan's music played on a Bösendorfer, with its wonderful sonorities (especially in the bass register). The recorded sound is fine, too, if a little stifled or even dry. As to the musicianship on display, Haider-Dechant is diligent in respecting Alkan's dynamic and articulation requirements. Her projection of melodies, voices and inner voices is successful, where on a few occasions I heard musical details which were not especially noticed in previous recordings. The pianist is also careful not to rely on the sustain pedal, helping realise the clarity of the music under her fingers. These observations were particularly appreciated when, in a repeated hearing of the disc, rather than just listening to the music, I closely followed the score.

I've noted already that Haider-Dechant performs the Woelfl Sonata very capably. Unfortunately, though, she doesn't quite deliver in the Alkan when you most expect and desire it. This is no more evident than in the Concerto's long-breathed first movement *Allegro assai*, where the pianist crosses the finish line nearly three minutes later than the next-closest recorded performance I've found. Indeed, my first reaction to this recording was to liken it to Postnikova's reading of the Busoni Piano Concerto. While this may be an extreme (even harsh) comparison, I was left with the same overall sense: that, though there are many things to admire in Haider-Dechant's recording, and though the pianist does not necessarily lose her way, the *étude* loses vital coherence and suffers as a result. There are moments in the recording, and especially the first movement, where the music feels laboured. And there are several noticeable hesitations between phrases, especially in the most taxing parts, when the essential momentum is sorely lacking. Perhaps one of the most deflating examples is around the 11:50 mark, in the climax before the *Tutti* entry of the main theme. The performance here loses steam, resulting in a real lessening of the dramatic release of tension in the *Solo* third subject.

Conversely, where one might expect a slower tempo in the second movement, Haider-Dechant it seems takes the *Adagio* faster than in any other recording on disc. To do this is to lose some of the wonderful pathos and drama of the music. The pianist seems to be most comfortable in this *étude*. The final movement *Allegretto alla-barbaresca*, similar to the Concerto's opening *Allegro assai*, suffers from being too slow. Like the *Allegro*, the lack of impetus here holds back the full charm, joy, driving energy and virtuosity of the music.

My greatest take-away from the recording, therefore, is that works such as this by Alkan truly do need a formidable virtuoso technique and masterful understanding of structure to bring them off convincingly, coupled with the need for accurate tempi to keep momentum going. Alkan's requirements are brought home here; his tempi are exacting for a reason and performances of his music need to sound as effortless as possible, so as to mitigate against flagging of attention.

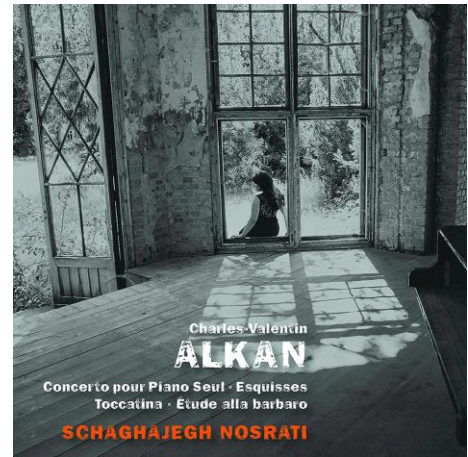
In closing, there's no doubting that Haider-Dechant is a very good pianist indeed and certainly deserves our thanks for dedicating obvious time and energy to Alkan's magnificent music. But, all things considered, and for me at least, this recent recording (April 2017) would only be one to return to for the Woelfl and not the Alkan, especially when we have in the recorded catalogue several interpretations of the Concerto that are truly exhilarating.

Alkan: Concerto for solo piano and other works**Schaghajegh Nosrati, piano**

C-Avi LC 15080, released November 2019, length 73 minutes

1	La Vision (op.63/1)	2'49
2	Le Staccatissimo (op.63/2)	1'12
3	En Songe (op.63/48)	1'31
4	Toccatina (op.75)	2'02
5	Début de Quatuor (op.63/31)	1'07
6	Notturino-inamorato (op.63/43)	1'24
7.	Etude: Alla barbaro	3'03
8.	Petit air (Genre ancien) (op.63/26)	0'50
9.	Les Soupirs (op.63/11)	2'15
10.	Barcarollette (op.63/12)	1'25
<i>Concerto for solo piano</i> (op.39/8-10)		55'08
11.	I Allegro assai	32'06
12.	II Adagio	12'14
13.	III Allegretto alla barbaresca	10'48

Reviewed by Richard Murphy, London



The quality that leaps out from this disc is the beauty of sound. Lightness of touch, clarity, pearliness of timbre, and warmth are constant companions, and give much of this music a sheen and a soft centre I had not previously experienced. The immediate association I have with these qualities is 'romantic'. Add a little rubato, a touch of desynchronisation between the hands, and we are taken by the hand and led into each piece – not faced with a 'take-it-or-leave-it' musical exhibit. This is particularly effective in the first ten pieces, each of which lasts under three minutes.

La vision – epitomises all the above qualities – beautiful *bel canto* and romantically expressive.

Staccatissimo – tellingly phrased with agogics; dynamics swapped between hands; magical bell sounds on high; perhaps too fussy for some tastes; not a motoric toccata; needed immediate re-listening.

En songe – Both pedals held down throughout.

Toccatina – Liquidly bubbling; perhaps a slightly safe *quasi-prestissimo*.

Début de quatuor – Playful perfection, and given exactly the expressive finesse that string players would use. What a delight.

Notturmino-Innamorato – as in *La vision*, but with tiny accelerandos within bars; keeps momentum.

Étude alla-barbaro – a study in unconventional pianism; a single-line melody played mainly with alternating right and left thumbs is dressed in a forest of chordal grace-notes. It's a piece of extrovert humour, ungainly melodic leaps, trickling menace, military signals, orchestral chordings. NS gives the necessary very clean and crisp playing. Excellent.

Petit air – enigmatic; phrased with finesse.

Les soupirs – relaxed breathing; liquid curls with slightly delayed final notes, giving a little more time for each phrase to vibrate (metronome says 92 bpm, SN plays 64 bpm). 'Warm bath' romantic; lovely feeling.

Barcarollette – SN achieves a highly effective balance between the resonantly mellow baritone of the gondolier in the LH and the extremely delicate glinting (of sun on water ripples?) in the RH – and she keeps it flowing. This is daring playing².

² I have my doubts about the printing of the dotted minim note with the metronome mark of 50 bpm because all Alkan's other barcarolles are played at around half this tempo – dotted CROCHET = 50/60 bpm. It's probably an easily overlooked printer's error handed down.

Concerto: Allegro assai

The first two notes have the power, the next six are quieter, and so with the following phrase. This is a decisive contrast of colour and a relief from many a pulseless hammering of this opening. It attracts attention, as do many of SN's decisions in this movement. All Alkan's lyricism is dressed in her golden-toned *bel canto* expressivity, and the first solo's combination of liquid passagework and flowing melody is delightful. The next section, from the *scherzando* 'skittering' at 8:44 to the next *tutti* at 11:22 is incredibly clean, clear, definitely playful, and never noisy. My reservation is that the tempo is inconsistent, with distractions of *rubato* at some phrase endings and perhaps the hint of lowering the speed to get all the notes. The following part has many highlights – the two *lanciato* spikes (13:42 & 19:42) with the really clear and rarely heard descending triplets which separate them, leading to the build up to the next *tutti*, the extraordinarily textured three-against-four section (14:48). The lyrical section from 21:02 – 27:15, which is halted abruptly by the *quasi tamburo* repeated note passage, is beautifully rendered, and I think it takes too long to get through. It's as though SN has forgotten that there is an orchestra also participating, and is waiting very patiently. It feels out of proportion, so that the momentum of the movement is lost. The repeated notes section to the end is very successful.

Concerto: Adagio

This movement, with its mood changes, demands strongly characterised and differentiated material. Warm and beautiful isn't quite enough to set up the drama. More could be made of the plaintive nature of the piano's first melody in its yearning phrase endings, which become more obsessive with repetition. One of the most technically demanding figures are the four-note *pp* drum pulses. SN controls the rhythm, but is inconsistent in the dynamic level. This draws attention to itself in the middle of the drama, as it does for many a player. The performance of this movement is bit too bland, despite the lovely playing.

Concerto: Allegretto alla barbaresca

This is the most completely successful movement, with its glitter, elegance, grace, gruff *tuttis*, and virtuosity. The odd tougher accent or *sforzando* wouldn't have come amiss, but SN has the measure of the piece without quite overwhelming. I recommend watching her performance of this movement on YouTube. It shows graphically what is being asked of the player, and is engrossing.

The long-term emotional journey of the huge first movement seems to be distracted by oases of lyricism, and a more pronounced dramatic insight would have benefitted the *adagio*. However, neither of these matters obviate the sheer pleasure of listening to Shaghajegh Nosrati – a noted Bach player by the way (also on YouTube) – who has known Alkan's music since she was very young. Her playing is a breath of fresh air, and I hope she will perform many more of the *Esquisses* Op.63 and other works of Alkan.

Alkan: Symphony for solo piano (op. 39, 4-7); Concerto for solo piano (op. 39, 8-10)

Paul Wee, piano

BIS records BIS 2465, released (in the UK) in November 2019, length 78 minutes

Symphony for solo piano

1	I	Allegro	10'33
2	II	Marche funèbre: Andantino	6'19
3	III	Menuet	4'59
4	IV	Finale: Presto	4'08

Concerto for solo piano

5	I	Allegro assai	29'59
6	II	Adagio	12'26
7	III	Allegretto alla barbaresca	8'56



Reviewed by Richard Murphy, London

This is the first single-disc commercial recording to pair Alkan's *Symphony* and *Concerto*, both for solo piano. The material of the *Symphony* fits the straitjacket of the four titled movements, whereas that of the *Concerto* is dressed in very roomy untitled garments. The former's four movements are more readily digested than the latter's vast opening movement – at 30 minutes, longer than the whole *Symphony*'s 26 minutes: classical dimensions in the one, Romantic Proportions in the other, so to speak. The *Symphony* has no rhapsodies of scales or other digital figurations, its piano style being based mostly around octaves and chords. There is only a little decoration in the *Menuet*'s trio, whereas there is much in the *Concerto*. Despite any motivic links between movements, what we have here are seven very varied pieces – all entitled *Étude*, and all demanding the highest level of pianistic accomplishment.

This is Paul Wee's first commercial recording. It was said that Alkan's piano music was unknown because it would take too much time for a performer to conquer its difficulties. No-one told Paul Wee [PW].

Op 39/4 – Allegro

All the notes of the opening 11-bar left-hand melody are heard clearly – a rare occurrence – though it didn't seem as troubled or neurotic as suggested by Alkan's unusually high number of dynamic and phrase markings (12) written specifically for the left hand. After some very effective colour contrasts PW speeds up a little for the perky E flat melody on the second page. I was delighted with the accented 'ta-Da' at the peak of the following E flat melody (3:36). The ever-surprising *appassionatamente* cascade of filled octaves which bursts through the texture is pedalled to perfection, retaining clarity and power.

The development (from 4:20) gives us nine varied episodes which Alkan bases on only the opening few seconds of the movement. Once again, PW's clarity and great variety of touch discloses the ebb and flow of the drama throughout. This movement's climax is the 70-bar coda (8:56) which includes a march variation of the movement's opening motif in canon, in which PW accelerates towards the astonishing B major *fff* blaring of the second subject. This is preferable to Hamelin's soldiers, who seem to be tripping over each other. Staying with the composer's idea of a very strict tempo with crescendo would help with the clarity of the bass melody, which Alkan already 'accelerates' by omitting the rests. Though the movement's time signature is 6/8, the final two pages of this *étude* are a phrasal *melée* of quavers – eight sets of three, 12 sets of two, two sets of seven, two sets of five, sets of five pretending to be sets of three, and all ending in 3/4. To calm this down, PW all but doubles the length of the last seven notes, another unusual choice, and justifiable in that it certainly achieves that effect – with a lovely long final note.

Op 39/5 – Marche Funèbre

What is the nature of the gravitas asked for by Alkan's direction of 88 beats per minute (bpm)? Ronald Smith must have asked that question when he chose to record it at 58-65 bpm. PW sticks to Alkan's

recommendation – surely the maximum tempo. Any slight increase during the piece, as occasionally here, can jar slightly. *Pianissimo* playing is ravishing, and there's a real *Lento* in the last bars.

Op 39/6 – Menuet

This must be the most virile of minuets (Alkan 66 bpm, PW 78 bpm), and has the most hard-edged sound on the disc, but not uncomfortably so; it's given a very forceful personality. The extreme contrast of the *una corda* trio and its frilly variation is very expressive and keeps moving, right up to its hemiola cut-off when the opening returns impatiently with muscles flexing. It's exhilarating and tough – but for all that, it vanishes in a breath-catching twinkle.

Op 39/7 – Finale

And they're off!

Alkan's *presto* is an eye-watering 96 bpm, but PW's is 105 bpm. It beats 'a ride in Hell' – and you can quote me. Though the left hand's St Vitus' dance distracts from the second subject's *dolce* nature, this tour de force of a performance may attract – or not. Do you want to hear each note separate from those either side, or do you like the slightly more blended effect that this pace gives? The octave playing in this toccata-étude is pulse-raising. The shriek that comes five seconds before the end is spine-tingling.

Op 39/8 – Allegro assai

I listened more than once to the opening *tutti* just to savour the large palette of timbres on display. One example – I really do hear flutes at 2:29; it's uncanny. PW can uncork the Champagne brilliance, with nuanced dynamics, and there's no-one to touch him on Alkan's yards and yards of tremolos, however many notes per beat Alkan writes. This texture is vital throughout, and PW never gives short, smudged, or approximate measure – how very unusual, and what a major contribution to the vitality of Alkan's conception both rhythmically, harmonically, and towards the sensation of momentum. It leads me to disagree with an academic who opined that Alkan's multi-division of the beat was not to be taken literally.

Over 40% of this music is gentle and lyrical. Is there a more extended passage of Alkan in traditional 'RH tune-LH arpeggio' mode than from the second *solo* at 19:06 to 25:25? PW's style is *bell-canto* (sic) and persuasively moving all through. There are so many perfectly telling passages and moments that I can do no more than urge purchase. I must point out an oddity though. Between 16:32 and 16:56 in yet another lyrical section (the obsessive G sharps), do I hear the Glenn Gould Scriabin technique of recording from a microphone more distantly placed to produce an atmosphere of plaintive hollowness in a phrase that understandably asks for it?

All the superlative transfixing highlights of this work are in place, massively built-up climaxes, sky-ripping *lanciatos*, all lyricism in temporal proportion to the whole, the crazy yet controlled repeated notes and consequent transition to the following musical blaze. It's an overwhelming triumph of a composition in this player's hands.

Op 39/9 – Adagio

This performance is the other gem of the collection, because it has persuaded me that this is also a composition of great stature. I've been ambivalent about this movement for decades.

- 00:00: It starts with perfectly controlled tone for the expressive cello lines in the opening ten bars.
- 00:36 It's an effective dramatic surprise when the last note is held for three beats, not one, and is followed by a two-beat silence.
- 00:44 PW responds to Alkan's direction *molto espressivo* by allowing the plaintive 3/4 melody to float free of the left-hand 9/8 triplets, with a gentle *accelerando* from the third beat to the first of the next bar.
- 2:44 A very tender throbbing melody in 9/8 emerges – with occasional added arpeggiation by PW...
- 3:09 ...where the left hand exquisitely counterpoints the continuing right-hand melody with its own first bar.
- 3:48 In a Mahlerian gesture-to-be, a halting waltz-like tune appears (with a frilly Tchaikovskian accompaniment), and surges briefly.

- 5:37 - 6:45 In an accompanied recitative, the once plaintive melody now rages over and under PW's very powerful tremolos, and grows in canonic fury until...
- 6:45 ...when, dreamlike, the picture suddenly changes to a pulsation of low drums, in fabulously articulated *pianissimo*, and earsplitting *fff* chords – cannon perhaps.
- 7.51 The drums overlap quietly with fragments of the waltz in which PW adds more pauses before...
- 8:46 ...when it has a final orchestral surge, then fades to a note paused for eight seconds.
- 9.50 Brings a return of the opening melody, shorn of its comfortable left hand which is now murmuring inarticulately in low register with great control by PW, and rendered bleaker by a gap of three to four octaves between hands (*cf* Madwoman).
- 10.57 The drum motif returns, interrupted by shattering *fff* chords – more cannon? Or anger?
- 11.13 The opening ten bars of cellos returns.
- 11.52 Drums haunt the last moments, while the first two bars of the melody are heard in a high spectral appearance – almost off-stage. The final smashed chord is not just Alkan slamming a door. Under the circumstances, it's cataclysmic !

On subsequent listenings, I've had to wait some while before being able to concentrate on the circus of the last movement. We have 'Pachalbel's Canon' and 'Mahler's Adagietto'. This is 'Alkan's Adagio' (published 1857), informed by Berlioz, with very strong notes of Mahler (born 1860). Paul Wee's imagination releases the full potency of Alkan's dramatic lyricism, which includes its beauty and tenderness. I feel that a new truth about this movement has been revealed.

Op 39/10 – Allegretto alla barbaresca

Alkan's piano writing is physically spectacular and multicoloured, and that's what we hear here! There's the occasional rush-of-blood, but to start the main tune at 120 bpm will necessitate other sections having to be played at 110 or even 100 bpm – which is the rate Alkan suggests. The possibility of elegance is obviated at too great a speed. I'd like to have heard the written accent on every second beat of the opening melody and consequent iterations which implies some physical movement, *e.g.* a stamping. In using the word 'barbaresca', Alkan could have been invoking the sounds of music from North Africa and Spain. At times, the piano does sound like an absolutely massive Spanish guitar, with every string in the box made to constantly vibrate. Paul Wee presides over this extraordinary celebration of the instrument with *élan*.

Chapeau bas! and huzzah! to this successful and daring recording *début*. What an event – to be re-amazed by this music.

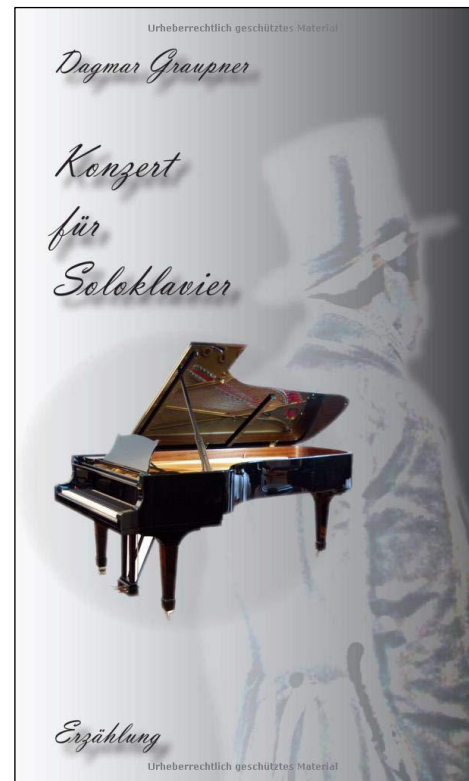
Book review

Konzert für Soloklavier, by Dagmar Graupner

Publisher: tredition GmbH (Hamburg), 2019, 114 pp
ISBN 978-3-7482-7860-3 (Paperback), 978-3-7482-7861-0 (Hardback)
Language: German

Reviewed by Frederik Keygnaert, Leiden, NL

Dagmar Graupner (b. 1957) is a German novelist with a background in medicine and neuropsychiatry. Her novel *Konzert für Soloklavier*, published in German by tredition GmbH in 2019 and described by the author herself as a mix of reality and fiction, follows a German woman's discovery of the music of Alkan through her meeting with a male pianist. As she delves further into Alkan's music and the career of her new acquaintance, she discovers how both are somehow intertwined with her late sister's life. Graupner's love of Alkan's music shines through her book, as she has her leading character feverishly collecting biographies, CDs, and sheet music, and joyfully applying for membership of the Alkan Society. While the novel's genre does not call for deep musicological analysis, Alkan aficionados will appreciate the fervour with which many of the composer's masterpieces and their modern performances are described throughout the book, and thereby perhaps think back with fondness to their own enthusiasm upon discovering Alkan.



Letter to the editor

Sir,

Readers of the Bulletin might be interested to learn that a song based on Alkan's *La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer* (op. 31 no 8) is the first track, *Shattering Sea*, of Tori Amos's 2011 album *Night of Hunters*.

For further information about the album see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Night_of_Hunters

Listen to the track itself (*Shattering Sea*) at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t2WjbZKpkI

Yours faithfully,

Brian Inglis, London

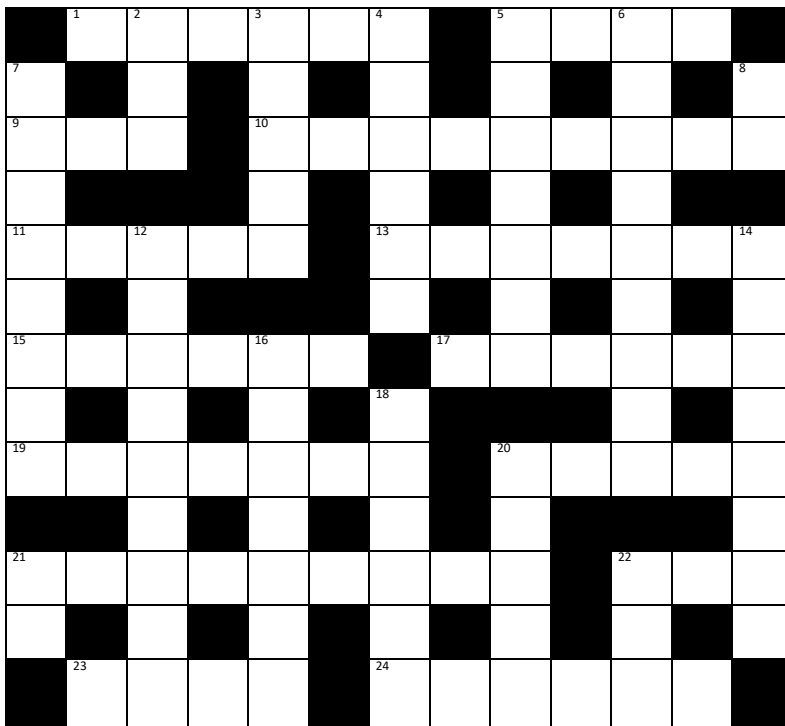
Distractions and diversions

Solution to Prize Crossword number 5 (*Know your opus numbers in Bulletin 98*)

	P	A	S	R	E	D	O	U	B	L	E	
S		I		O		A		N		O		G
M	A	R		N	U	N	S	E	L	F	I	E
A				D		S		N		F		N
L	E	N	T	O		L	O	U	V	R	E	R
L		O				E		I		A		E
D	H	I	V	E	R		S	T	A	N	Z	A
R		R		N		L				D		N
A	L	C	E	S	T	E		P	I	E	T	C
F		R		O		V		E				I
T	H	O	R	N	I	E	S	T		C	H	E
S		W		G		N		I		O		N
	O	S	T	E	N	T	A	T	I	O	N	

The Society Bulletin can only flourish with a steady flow of input from its members. All members are encouraged to send articles, letters or comments to the Editor (Nick Hammond, email: treasurer@alkansociety.org, or by post to: Woodend House, High Stittenham, York YO60 7TW, UK)

Prize Crossword number 6 (Set by *En Songe*)



Notes:

- Nine of the solutions are 15 across 74 (or related): so smile
- Completed grids should be sent to the editor* to arrive by 1 February 2020. The first correct solution (drawn randomly from a hat) will win a CD of a rare performance of the *Symphonie* from op 39.

* treasurer@alkansociety.org, or Nick Hammond, Woodend House, High Stittenham, York YO60 7TW, UK

Need further hints? Send an email to *En Songe* at: EnSonge.Alkan@gmail.com

Across

- 1 See 16 down
 5 See 16 down
 9 A 22 down has two long ones (3)
 10, 13 Mix purer USA lemonade for a boat trip? (9, 3, 1'3)
 11 First name of mixed up sly male, arranger of Alkan (5)
 13 See 10 across
 15 Where work is numbered – in soup? (2, 4)
 17 Winter entertainment in slope race (1'5)
 19 Old partner with deranged meter leads to view on some of CVA's tempi? (7)
 20 Month of nearly equal pây? (5)
 21 He deserves our lament, sadly (2,7)
 22 See 2 down
 23, 8dn Fly backwards in bestest way (6)
 24 Month of disorder mourns lionesses (6)

Down

- 2, 22ac He penned an ode of love to Lydia, as 15 across 65 (6)
 3 Heartless private can be venomous (5)
 4 The river of Whitby – were Yorkshire in Spain? (3, 3)
 5 Op. 30 about to be played? (3, 4); or op. 40 by Spanish river? (4, 3)
 6 Berate sea to tickle grizzly, for example (5, 4)
 7 See 21 down
 8 See 23 across
 12 Poor weather madly stops germ (4, 5)
 14 Twisted idea null, be on one's own (8)
 16, 1ac A cold night? (3, 4, 1'5)
 16, 5ac A warm night? (3, 4, 1'3)
 18 Oddly, no envy at drab state (6)
 20 Almost aghast, confused, and sometimes pictured at bay (1, 4)
 21, 7 The withdrawal – perhaps to confused art atelier (2, 8)
 22 Beast of burden in cassock? (3)

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The Alkan Society

aiming to promote the education of the public in the knowledge,
understanding and appreciation of the life and work of Alkan

Registered Charity
no. 276199



The **Alkan Society**, founded in 1977, is an organization with members from across the globe. It is based in the UK and registered as an official Charity.

The Society promotes the life and work of the French composer and pianist Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888). It supports regular recitals, produces publications (including a regular Bulletin) and is the definitive source of information on Alkan's life and works.



About Alkan

Alkan was recognised by Liszt and Chopin as one of the outstanding musicians of their day. His music has been championed by such eminent performers as Claudio Arrau, Ferruccio Busoni, Jack Gibbons, Marc-André Hamelin, Raymond Lewenthal, John Ogdon, Egon Petri, Sergei Rachmaninoff and Ronald Smith.

His works cover a vast gamut of forms, moods and techniques, combining rigorous classicism with bold modernity. His individual use of harmony and rhythm, extraordinary imagination, and uncompromising keyboard writing guarantee his music a unique place in the repertoire, making him one of the great figures of the Romantic era.

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Annual membership fee: £20; Students £10

As a member you:

- ✓ Contribute to the aims of the Society
- ✓ Can purchase discounted tickets for our recitals
- ✓ Receive regular bulletins and other news
- ✓ Can contribute announcements and promotions to our website
- ✓ Can benefit from our expert query service on the life and music of Alkan

Join at:

www.alkansociety.org

Or contact: membership@alkansociety.org

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