



# THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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## **BULLETIN no. 74 December 2006**

### **Editor's notes**

- November saw the annual Alkan Piano Scholarship at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, with the winner being **Alex West** and the runner-up **Charles Curry**, both undergraduates at the College. Our congratulations to both. Once again the Society is extremely grateful for the support of Ken Smith and the College's Director of Music (Michael Downes, who this year succeeded Peter Tregear) for their support and enthusiasm, and to the College for providing premises and facilities. The annual recital, this year given once again by **Tom Wakefield**, was themed in with this year's Cambridge Music Festival, as the review below explains. An unusual feature of the concert was the participation of Messrs. Curry and West playing Mozart's Sonata for Piano Duet, K 497.
- The recent issue of **Stephanie McCallum's** account of the op. 39 Etudes, and her fascinating lecture recital on Alkan at the Royal College of Music, are both of great significance for Alkan appreciation and scholarship. A review of these, together with an interview with Stephanie, will feature in our next issue. For the present we are delighted to present in this issue a review by Stephanie of an Alkan ballet performance in her home town of Sydney, Australia (where she is a professor at the Conservatorium).
- We have recently had confirmation that **Marc-André Hamelin** will be playing the Alkan *Symphonie* (and Charles Ives's *Concord Sonata*) at the 2007 Cheltenham Festival in July. The Society will be undertaking part-sponsorship of this major event, which we hope will be an important opportunity to bring us to the attention of both Alkanistes and music-lovers in general.
- Recent months have seen two important publications about Alkan in the French academic press. **Anny Kessous Dreyfuss's** *Le parcours d'un Air* traces the route of a melody transcribed by Marcello to one of Alkan's *Trois anciennes mélodies juives*; whilst **Claudie and Jacques Blamont** have undertaken significant research on Alkan's genealogy. Both articles are surveyed in this issue.
- The 2007 membership renewal form will be issued early January 2007. **Don't forget** the society's AGM on 29<sup>th</sup> March (notice of which you have already received); and that **applications for the pre-AGM recital** must be returned to the Secretary by **28<sup>th</sup> February 2007**.
- The pupils of our President **Yonty Solomon** will be giving a recital, including music by Alkan, on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2007 at the Trinity School of Music, Greenwich. More details in the next Bulletin (and on our website).

## Mozart, Maths and Tom Wakefield

*This review of the piano recital by Thomas Wakefield at the Auditorium, Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, 11<sup>th</sup> November, as part of the [Cambridge Music Festival](#), originally appeared in the web journal of the Social Affairs Unit ([www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk](http://www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk)).*

The theme of this year's Cambridge Music Festival (continuing until November 25<sup>th</sup>) is 'Mozart, Maths and Music'. Mozart seems to me one of the least 'mathematical' of composers, but the theme at least offers a different perspective from which to compare and contrast his work with that of others, and Thomas Wakefield's recital took advantage of this. The (typically) idiosyncratic choice of programme and the incomparable technique and communication of this great, but elusive, bravura performer made for a remarkable evening.

We began fittingly with a pair of *Bach Preludes and Fugues* (no. 3 in C# major and no. 15 in G major), with a mathematical programme note informing us that the triumph of equal temperament, which enabled Bach's tour round all the keys, was to overcome the awkward fact that a perfect fifth, in the natural sequence, occurs not at 7 semitones above the keynote, but at 7.010550008654 semitones; a fact which I must keep in mind next time I am on 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire'. These spirited and authoritative performances however kept our minds on the flow of the music. The new (well, two years old) Fitzwilliam Auditorium, in internal appearance not much more than a concrete shoebox, has however excellent acoustics allowing the clarity and warmth of the performance to bloom. This clarity was echoed in the second half of the recital by a beautifully turned performance of Webern's *Variations for Piano op. 27*, a miniature encyclopaedia of dodecaphony (like so much else of the composer's work)

Following the Bach, Mr. Wakefield left the stage for Mozart's *Sonata for Piano Duet* (K. 497) to be played by two Fitzwilliam undergraduates, Alex West and Charles Curry. Both of them are reading mathematics, so here was the Festival's theme incarnate. The sonata conceals, beneath its suave surface, a number of tricky corners and these were carefully negotiated to produce a performance which will have brought a smile to the shades, not only of Mozart, but also the two composer-pianists, who, as the programme informed us, performed the same work in public in 1875, Camille Saint-Saens and Charles-Valentin Alkan - for the concert was also supported by the Alkan Society, and Alex West had won the previous day the Society's Piano Scholarship award, (in competition with Mr. Curry). A triumph then, not only for music, but for sportsmanship and for rapport between the Two Cultures.

Of Wakefield's rediscovery of George Pinto I have written before (see Alkan Society Bulletin no. 72), and he presented the pastoral *Sonatina op 4. no. 3* and the haunting, posthumously published, *Minuetto* as testaments to this lost genius. But he is an even more redoubtable exponent of the Alkan repertoire, and took the opportunity to present during the recital two rarely-heard, and one virtually unheard, examples of the works of this great master of the keyboard who is only now coming to assume his deserved status .

The transcription for solo piano of the central movement of *Mozart's D minor Piano Concerto* ingeniously integrates the orchestral parts by way of spread chords and crossed hands, retaining the delicacy of the music despite the difficult technical constraints. More lurid is the ultra-romantic piece *Aime-moi*, descending irresistibly by thirds into ever more distant keys. As it starts off in A flat minor (key signature of seven flats) it is inevitable that eventually, to quote Mr. Wakefield's notes again, 'clusters of double-flats dangle like over-ripe fruit from trees' – something which he suggests risks looking like 'genetically-modified harmony.' Add to this that the melody is embellished by *grupetti* increasing at each return from two notes to

seven and we have a musical-mathematic ensemble that somehow summons to my mind Dürer's similarly intense and mathematical *Melancholia*. But Mr. Wakefield's performance entirely justified his statement that, despite the superficial mechanics, 'it works'.

The most startling of this group of pieces – and of the recital – was Alkan's op. 34 *Scherzo focoso* of 1847, long thought to be completely unplayable and being given, I think, its first public concert performance in Britain (the young pianist Lloyd Buck having given a great shot at it earlier this year at the Royal College of Music). Until now we have had to rely on Anders Rådén's pioneering electronic version<sup>1</sup> to get much idea of what this extraordinary music might be like; there are (as yet) no recordings played by humans. Generously proportioned – and containing before its final bars one of the longest pedal points in history, a bass note sustained and repeated over an immense number of bars until one is almost begging for release – the work is a compendium of every intricacy of speed, fingering and configuration known to keyboard virtuosity, delivered on this occasion impeccably. True to the work's title, we hear fire in every one of its forms, from deep heat glow to roaring flames, and if it is indeed a *scherzo*, then the joke is diabolic in the extreme. At the end the audience was prostrated, although Mr. Wakefield was as collected and inscrutable as ever. An absolutely heroic performance on every count.

The final work of the recital was another reminiscence of Mozart as conjured up first by Liszt, who left his *Fantasy on arias from The Marriage of Figaro* incomplete, and then Busoni, who took up the challenge of completing it and adding a few extra fireworks. Not musically a patch on Liszt's better known reimagination of *Don Giovanni*, the piece is a good old-fashioned barnstormer, although by this time we had no need to be convinced of Tom Wakefield's capacity. A nice touch was the Prokofiev encore, in folk-tale mode with a downbeat, throwaway ending. Let us please hear more of Mr. Wakefield, and more often – we have, after all, few enough British keyboard players who can convey so convincingly both the music and the thrills of this repertoire.

DC

## 'Esquisses' – An Alkan Ballet in the Antipodes

*Stephanie McCallum* gives us her impressions of a short ballet based on the music of Alkan, performed by the Royal New Zealand Ballet in Sydney.

I attended the performance by the Royal New Zealand Ballet at the Sydney Theatre on August 17. There were about five performances in Sydney and this, the opening night, was only moderately well attended, though very well received by the audience. The program was entitled "Trinity" and consisted of three highly contrasting works: 'Esquisses' with music by Alkan, was originally created for the English National Ballet and was choreographed by Englishman, Christopher Hampson; *Banderillero*, choreographed by Venezuelan-born Javier De Frutos was modern in style and costume; and Stravinsky's *Les Noces* was the highlight of the evening for the quality of the dancing and the originality of the ideas in the choreography by New Zealand's Michael Parmenter.

Turning in more detail to 'Esquisses', there was a fascination with rhythms in 5s coming out in the choice of repertoire, with *Zorcico*, Op.35 No.12 with its 10/8 time signature and the *Cantique des Cantiques* from the op. 31 *Préludes*. However the dancing itself was very Classical in nature with a great deal of group coordination of movement, dancing on points

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<sup>1</sup> A link to this is available on the Alkan Society website

and dark full tutus for costumes. It seemed very challenging for the company with quite a few moments of very slight loss of poise, something not apparent to me in the other two works on the program. There were two very beautiful solos – one female, one male – danced to two separated runs of *Vision* (the first of the *Esquisses*). The complete work must have been around half an hour in length.

The first and probably longest section was not a piece I knew – a rather weak piece in fact with much repetition of a slowish triple time melody with ever more decorative and virtuosic piano figuration, probably smallish chamber ensemble with piano, and one I found it hard to associate with Alkan. It was definitely not one of the three often-recorded chamber works. Also the recording quality of this was less than ideal. Following this, was the little *Zorcico* included in the Alkan in Miniature book (one of the Impromptus Op.32), then several *Esquisses* – *Vision*, *Increpatio*, *En Sonje*, a very lively one with lots of descending broken chords which I didn't recognize, a second dance to *Vision*, and then *Staccatissimo*. When I realised the next piece was Op.35 No.12, I listened hard to see if it was my recording – but no. It was a better quality recording than the previous pieces with a very clean performance which I thought at first must have been Ronald Smith playing. However, listening to his disc at home, his performance seems faster and more exuberant so I suppose it must have been Ringeissen. The final section was an extremely slow version of *Cantique des cantiques*, No.13 from the *Préludes*.

The work itself had great charm but was very emotionally restrained, and the virtuosic dancing on points was perhaps rather overdone or extended. As so often with ballet presentations, one could wish for better recordings and better speaker quality.

## **A National Treasure – Joyce Hatto (1928-2006)**

*Brian Doyle pays tribute to a great British pianist and Alkaniste.*

There is a programme on BBC Radio 4 entitled “Great Lives”, in which a guest is invited to discuss with the presenter, Matthew Parris, the life and achievements of someone they particularly admire. Previous subjects include Charles Darwin, Trotsky, Max Miller, Stanley Baldwin, Nina Simone and Eleanor Roosevelt. A varied choice but all are familiar names to most people. If, in the unlikely event that I was asked to be a guest on the programme, my choice would probably be completely unknown to most listeners. She is the English pianist Joyce Hatto, who died on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2006 at the age of 77. I hope that after reading about this remarkable woman, you will think her a more than worthy choice.

Joyce Hatto was born in North London on September 5<sup>th</sup> 1928. Her father was an amateur pianist and pianophile. “*Even before I could read he would play for me every evening before I went to sleep*”. He was a great admirer of Rachmaninoff and attended all his London concerts. The next day he would read the programme notes to her and then play some of the easier pieces. After some early lessons from her father, at the age of five she began lessons with a professional teacher. One of her earliest teachers was Marion Holbrooke, sister of the composer Joseph Holbrooke, but the lessons were soon terminated, to the sadness of both, when the family moved to North West London. Her parents were insistent that she have a good general education and that the piano was to come second. Soon after they moved, her father bought her a beautiful Bluthner grand piano. “*I spent every available hour and minute practising. Within three years I had worn the ivories down and I was only ten*”.

At the age of twelve she auditioned at the Royal Academy of Music. Though pleased with her performance, she was told that the musical profession was a very hard and precarious life and

it might be better just to play for pleasure. That advice and the atmosphere of the place decided that it was not for her. Later, her then teacher, the Russian Jewish émigré Serge Krish, arranged for harmony and theory lessons. Soon she was advised “it is really more important for a young girl like you to be able to cook a good roast dinner and not bother with all this”. Not long after she left to study with Mátyás Seiber. As well as Krish, her other piano teachers were Zbigniew Drzewiecki (in Poland) and finally Ilona Kabos, the wife of Louis Kentner. The teaching of Kabos was a revelation to her and she had to completely change her piano technique. It was this method of playing which enabled her to play the most demanding of works late in life.

Serge Krish was a great influence on her. He introduced her to Moisewitsch who became a good friend and advisor, and to the Medtners who were close neighbours. She became a regular visitor and played to him four of his *Sonatas* and the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Piano Concerto*.

Krish was a former pupil of Busoni, this meant that she could trace her teachers back to Beethoven via Liszt and Czerny. He had heard Busoni play Liszt in Berlin, and it was through Busoni that he came to know the music of Alkan and instilled in his young pupil a great passion for both composers. Hatto’s interest in Liszt had already been kindled after reading Sacheverell Sitwell’s biography. During the war she scoured the second-hand book and music shops for copies of his music. She also acquired a large collection of Alkan first editions.

In the 1950s Liszt’s reputation was at a low ebb and Alkan had virtually disappeared off the musical map. Rachmaninoff is known to have played a few Alkan pieces – *Comme le vent* Op. 39, the *Marche funèbre* Op.26 and the transcription of the *Gavotte from Gluck’s Orphée* (also frequently performed by Joyce Hatto). Having the courage of her convictions she gave complete recitals of both composers. In 1953, ten years before Raymond Lewenthal’s Alkan broadcasts in New York, she gave two Alkan recitals in London’s Cowdray Hall, a popular venue at the time. She sent tickets to the BBC which were returned saying that “they were of no particular interest at the present time”. She also wrote to the BBC asking if they would be interested in her performing the complete Op. 39 Etudes. They replied saying “this repertoire is not of great interest to programme producers”. It was around this time that, during a break in rehearsals for a choral concert, she took the opportunity to play Alkan’s *Symphony Op. 39* to Vaughan Williams. He thought it was a “splendid piece” and asked her to repeat some sections during which he made some notes. Throughout her performing career she often included an Alkan piece as a “mystery” encore.

Also in Cowdray Hall she gave a series of four Liszt recitals promoted by the Liszt Society. She included the first known performances of the complete Beethoven/Liszt Symphonies. In the third recital she included Alkan’s transcriptions of the first movement of Beethoven’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Concerto. She also played the three versions of the Liszt *Transcendental Etudes*. The series received little critical attention.

It was characteristic of her to seek out other musicians, whose knowledge and insight would benefit her own interpretation – Haskil on Mozart, Sviatoslav Richter on Prokofiev and Cortot on Chopin, a composer central to her repertoire. “Cortot taught me that it was essential in all Chopin performance to rid ones self of the sticky sentimentality that is so often presented as being authentic. Chopin is a big composer and the sentiment expressed in his music is masculine – not effeminate”.

She seemed to enjoy large, challenging programmes. In 1953 she played all of the Field and Chopin *Nocturnes* in one day. The Chopin scholar, Arthur Hedley wrote the Chopin programme notes. Of her performance he wrote “she is unusual, rather unique among English

pianists in understanding the darker side of the composer. She does not strive for pretty effects and her projection of Chopin as a big composer sets her aside from most of her contemporaries. Her often quite astonishingly ample technique always allows her additional scope in conveying her interpretive views. It is a considerable achievement of will that she never allows her own forceful personality to intrude on that of the composer”.

Throughout the 50s she championed British music here and abroad. She regularly programmed works by Bax, Bliss, Bowen, Ireland and Rawsthorne. It was Constant Lambert who suggested to her to take on Bax’s *Symphonic Variations*, a 50-minute work with a large, taxing part for piano. Hatto played the piece through to Bax, and he was astonished that, not only could she play the horrendously difficult part, but actually understood it.

Apart from Mátyás Seiber, she also studied composition with Boulanger and Hindemith. Hindemith recalled - “an unusual pianist and not one of a breed I am destined to meet these days. Her performance of my *Ludus Tonalis* was so beautiful in some of the quieter moments that I was moved to tears. There were no technical problems for her and her understanding of my intentions, even when not ideally realised in my notation, showed that she was a musician not a technician. Her wonderful independence of line would have surely seduced Johann Sebastian into composing another “48” just for her”.

In 1956 she was invited to tour Poland to represent British women musicians. She played Chopin in factories, hospitals, old people’s homes and schools. An experience she found extremely rewarding. It was during this tour that she visited Auschwitz. It was only 11 years since the war. She met people who had been in the camp. The personal belongings of those who perished were still piled high in room after room. The visit left a lasting effect. She said that it was something she would never forget.

1970 proved to be a turning point in her life. At the age of 41 she was diagnosed with cancer. An operation was not possible, but she managed to recover enough to undertake a tour of the USSR later in the year. Touring Iron Curtain countries on her own did not seem to bother her, even if she often found that her only companions on train journeys were Russian soldiers. During her tour of the USSR she was booked to play four Concertos – Mozart’s *K488*, Brahms’s *D minor*, Chopin’s *F minor*, Beethoven’s 3<sup>rd</sup> (with Alkan’s Cadenza) and Bax’s *Variations*. The Bax was a particularly great success. Eileen Joyce’s advice stood her in good stead – “take a fur coat, mink hat, fur gloves, warm underclothes and at least a couple of hot water bottles”.

She received great critical acclaim on her tours of Poland, the USSR and in Scandinavia. In 1972 she returned to Sweden. One review entitled “Joyce Hatto, the astonishing English pianist”- “her performance of the Rachmaninoff’s 3<sup>rd</sup> *Piano Concerto* (which she performed there previously in 1962) has not dimmed but become even more impassioned. The alternative big Cadenza in the first movement would seem almost impossible for a diminutive woman pianist. In the thrilling finale she completely dominated her Steinway and it was noticeable that it was the orchestral players that were sweating, not the soloist. The explosive reception she received demanded six encores. These ranged from an incredible *Mephisto Waltz* to equally fine performances of Rachmaninoff’s *C minor and G minor preludes*, ending with three Scarlatti Sonatas to calm an emotionally charged audience”. Her performance, in Stockholm, of Schubert’s final Sonata also received an equally enthusiastic response.

Throughout the 70s, she played regularly at the Wigmore Hall and the South Bank. She embarked on a planned series of 10 Liszt recitals in which, again, she included the Alkan Transcription of Beethoven’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Concerto (June 1976). She was also continuing with her battle against cancer. Treatment had only been partially successful and she was often in pain. The constant threat of having to cancel at the last minute, and an unkind remark of a critic on

her pained expression, made her decide to give up public performances and she gave her last public recital in 1979.

It remains a mystery why Joyce Hatto was not recognised as one of the leading pianists of her day, especially when one reads the enthusiastic reviews her performances garnered during her visits to Poland, the USSR, Finland and Sweden. She seems to have been ignored by the critics in her own country. Neville Cardus appears to have been an exception when he wrote, “at last a British pianist to challenge the German supremacy in Beethoven and Brahms”. English audiences tended to overlook home grown talent in favour of performers from abroad. I could quote plaudits from Michael Tippett, Humphrey Searle, Wilhelm Furtwängler (she was his rehearsal pianist in Beethoven when she was nineteen), Jorge Bolet, Annie Fischer, Witold Malcuzyński and Stefan Askenase, but this would only add to our puzzlement. I have heard that she had a “following” among concertgoers, especially those interested in unusual repertoire and in particular Liszt. She made many recordings for some of the smaller labels, including the enterprising Saga Records, but she was never signed by one of the majors, never performed with our leading orchestras and was ignored by the BBC. Her last performance in 1979 seems to have brought to an end a career that promised, and certainly deserved more than it achieved. Never one for self-promotion she always put the composers before herself. She bore the relative disappointment of her career with great fortitude. She was fond of quoting Mohammed Ali: “*knock me down and I’ll get up immediately*”.

After her retirement from the concert platform, her name quickly faded from the public memory. Wilson Lyle’s “A Dictionary of Pianists” (1985), with 4,000 entrants, does not list her name. She continued private teaching lessons, something she did throughout her career, and, unlike many pianists, she enjoyed it. She included Alkan works in her teaching repertoire and one of her pupils played Alkan in her South Bank Pupils Concerts. Her peers must have held her in the highest regard as many sent their pupils to her for further study. She also took under her wing several “star” pianists who came to her for help in order to prolong their careers.

Freed from the rigours of public performance, she now had plenty of time to build on the knowledge and skills gained through years of performing the works of the keyboard masters. In 1989, at an age when most of us are looking forward to retirement, she began the series of recordings that her reputation now rests on. Joyce Hatto met her husband, William Barrington-Coupe, when he was the A&R manager of Saga Records, and they were married in 1956. He later formed his own company, Concert Artist Records, which he still runs today. Thus Joyce Hatto was in a position most pianists can only dream of with a studio in Cambridge at her disposal, she was able to record when and whatever she liked. The piano she always used is a magnificent 1923 Steinway D - “an elderly piano with a naturally beautiful sound. Completely restored, it offers a big sonorous tone without the edgy, clangorous and hard-edged sound of the modern Steinway”. It is the same instrument that Rachmaninoff used on his visits to the UK. She enjoyed recording but eschewed the modern method of splicing and editing. Having meticulously prepared a work at home, she was able to record in long takes that give the impression of a live performance.

On September 5<sup>th</sup> 2003, to celebrate her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, she recorded, for the second time, the complete Chopin Etudes. The following year she recorded the complete *Chopin/Godowsky Studies*, the first by a woman and certainly the first by a septuagenarian. She had been introduced to these works by Krish, a friend of Godowsky, and she began to study them at the age of 13 years. She continued her recording schedule up until three weeks before her death. By then she was confined to a wheelchair. Her husband said, “I believe the illness added a third dimension to her playing, she gets at what is inside the music, what lies behind it”.

The size and breadth of her recording legacy is probably unique in the history of recording. It is even more awe inspiring when one considers that her last years were punctuated with frequent visits and admissions to hospital.

So far over 100 CDs of her recordings are available. They include all the Sonatas of Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert and Prokofiev. The complete works of Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Ravel and Dukas. The major works of Rachmaninoff and 8 CDs devoted to Liszt. The *Etudes* and *Préludes* of Debussy, Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, 80 Scarlatti Sonatas, Iberia by Albéniz, the Goyescas of Granados, the *Chopin/Godowsky Studies* and Messiaen's *Vingt-Regards sur L'Enfant Jésus*. Her concerto recordings include all those of Brahms, Liszt, Chopin, Saint-Saëns, Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky. Also those of Grieg, Schumann and Gershwin. Still to come are the Beethoven *Piano Concertos* (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Concerto with alternative Cadenzas by Beethoven, Alkan and Liszt), Mozart's *Concerto in D minor* with Alkan's Cadenzas, the *Beethoven/Liszt Symphonies* nos. 1,2,6,7 and 9, the Sonatas of Haydn and Scriabin, Scriabin's *Piano Concerto*, Shostakovich's *Preludes*, Samuel Barber's *Sonata*, Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis*, and last but not least her Alkan recordings – the *Op. 39 Etudes*, *Grande Sonate Op. 33* and the *Préludes Op. 31*.

Only an elite few could have known of these recordings as they appear never to be reviewed or broadcast. The first public acknowledgement that they existed came from Germany. The respected critic, Frank Siebert, published an article in Fono Forum Review in 2004. He particularly praised her Bach *Goldberg Variations*, Chopin and Rachmaninoff – “the listener who opens up to her “silent” virtuosity, will be rewarded with enduring experiences”. Then the critic, Richard Dyer, published an article in the Boston Globe in August 2005 entitled “A hidden jewel comes to light”. He began “Joyce Hatto must be the greatest living pianist no one has ever heard of. I have only heard about a third of her CDs but all of them are excellent and the best of them document the art of a major musician”. Probably most of us in the UK will have first come across her name when the Gramophone, in March this year, published an article by Jeremy Nicholas. Having listened to 30 of her recordings he declared her as “one of the greatest pianists I have ever heard”. This article stimulated the BBC to make amends and on April 8<sup>th</sup> this year BBC Radio 3's “CD Review” played many examples from her recordings. Rather late in the day she was getting some recognition.

Further plaudits came from Donald Manildi, curator of the International Piano Archives in Maryland. After listening to around 60 of her recordings so far, he says, “with only one or two exceptions, I have yet to encounter one that is less than outstanding”. Ivan Davis, a pupil of Horowitz, who gave a talk on Joyce Hatto in October at the World Pedagogue Piano Conference in Atlanta said “she is a British national treasure. Her legacy is monumental. I know of no pianist in the world who is superior musically or technically. I think she gives one an audio blueprint of the score, never changing the composer's instruction but setting them forth through her personal vision – both poetic and passionate. I think she will have extraordinary posthumous acclaim”.

It was only in the last few months of her life that she, belatedly, received some public recognition for her achievements. There were many articles and interviews published around the world. This led to her receiving many letters from the public, particularly from New Zealand and the USA. They were moved by her courage and fortitude during her long illness. Many were from people who were not particularly interested in music, but were given hope to overcome their own problems. She was very touched by the attention, and endeavoured to answer, by hand, as many letters as possible.

Always modest and self-effacing, she kept no scrapbooks or mementos of her public career. She had no interest in self-promotion, only in communicating the composer's thoughts and ideas. I think that I shall leave the final words to Joyce Hatto herself:

*"I have always loved the piano. For me there is a frisson merely to see the sight of the piano open and standing alone on the concert platform, waiting for the pianist to appear, sit down and launch into the adventure of a performance".*

*"What it really takes to be a pianist is courage, character, and the capacity to work. As interpreter, we are not important; we are just vehicles. Our job is to communicate the spiritual content of life as it is presented in the music. Nothing belongs to us; all you can do is pass it along. That's the way it is".*

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After reading this article some of you may be curious enough to want to listen to some of her recordings, but be rather daunted by the size of her discography. I have compiled a short list of some of her recordings, which give a good idea of the range, quality and insight of her performances. These recordings are particularly recommended by Ates Orga, Ivan Davis, David Manildi and Richard Murphy – Scarlatti *Sonatas*, Mozart *Sonatas*, Prokofiev *Sonatas Nos 6,7 and 8* (the War Sonatas), Chopin *Etudes* (75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary), *Waltzes* and *Preludes*, Chopin/Godowsky *Studies*, Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes*, Brahms *Paganini Variations* and Schubert *Sonatas D664 and D960*.

All are on Concert Artist/Fidelio Records ([www.concertartistrecordings.com](http://www.concertartistrecordings.com))

## Stephen Fry on Alkan

*Stephen Fry, the actor and writer, was a recent guest on Radio 3's "Private Passions" presented by the composer Michael Berkeley. Brian Doyle caught the broadcast.*

During the programme Fry expressed a great enthusiasm for the music of Sorabji and Alkan. First he related the now refuted story of the fallen bookcase. He continued –

SF "A marvellous composer. I suppose you could say a minor one, who I have always been very fond of. He is one of a type, although they do not appear to have much in common. I am thinking in particular of the great pianist, composer Sorabji, who I am particularly fond of. People who like Sorabji always like Alkan and I am not sure why".

MB "There is a kind of maverick quality".

SF "I think that's what it is. They are mavericks. Sorabji lived an incredibly long life and produced a massive literature for the piano, probably the biggest".

MB "Are you a member of the Havergal Brian Society".

SF "No I am not, though there is a web ring of the Sorabji Society and they inform me when there are any concerts and things around, which there are plenty of. I could not choose a Sorabji piece as they are all four hours long, but the Alkan is a piece I learnt to play myself very badly, but it is such a delightful melody, apart from anything else. It is called "*La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer*". (After listening to the piece). Not difficult to play but incredibly difficult to play that well, I have to say".

MB "Such a shame that people do not include more obscure things amongst the Beethoven".

SF "Exactly right. People would often find it difficult to go to concerts of only strange music, but it's a perfect opportunity that popular pianists have to introduce things like that, because no one else could listen to that without being enchanted by it, I would have thought".

## New Alkan Research

Anny Kessous Dreyfuss: *D'un psaume de Benedetto Marcello à une 'Melodie juive' de Charles-Valentin Alkan: Le parcours d'un air*. Acta Musicologica LXXVIII, 2006, pp. 55-74

Claudie et Jacques Blamont: *La famille de Charles Valentin Morhange, dit Alkan, pianiste et compositeur français (1813-1888)*. Revue du cercle de généalogie juive, no. 83 (juillet-septembre 2005), pp. 2-11.

These two important articles show that there is still much to be researched and revealed about Alkan, both the man and his music.

The article by Anny Kessous, a member of the Société Alkan, is only part of a very detailed musicological study she has been preparing on the '*Trois anciennes mélodies juives*', the manuscripts of which are held at the Conservatoire in Geneva. Some members may recall their being performed at an English society lecture a few years ago, and more recently at the concert celebrating Ronald Smith at the Royal academy. These three tiny pieces have a long and complex musical genealogy which Kessous has examined from every aspect.

The article concentrates on *mélodie* no. 3, which Alkan scores for pédalier, without voice, although the Hebrew words of the specified psalm (no. 114) can be easily fitted to it. Benedetto Marcello (1686-1739) made a number of transcriptions of the music of the Venetian Jewish congregation for chorus and accompaniment in his *Estro poetico-armonico* of 1724. These were republished in France in a modern edition in 1841 and Alkan gives a jubilant transcription for piano solo of Marcello's rendition of Psalm 18 (*I cieli immensi*) in his *Souvenirs des Concerts du Conservatoire* of 1847 (which curiously Kessous omits to mention). But otherwise she seeks every opportunity of examining Alkan's *mélodie* in terms of rhythm, harmony, implicit text and possible cabbalistic or mystic significance (even bringing in a comparison with the esoteric musical philosophies of Cage and Satie). Valuable in itself, Kessous's detailed analysis points to the enormous riches which might be uncovered if one were to apply similar techniques to some of Alkan's large-scale works, including the *Concerto*, which often seem to be almost bursting with hidden content.

The Blamonts apply themselves to solving the mystery of Alkan's personal ancestry, on which topic members may recall previous attempts have been set out in this Bulletin (issues 61-63), and it was gratifying to find references to these in the notes to this detailed study.

Many new finds are reported – including the presence of Alkan's father (as 'Morange Alkan') in the list of Paris Jews of 1809/10, residing at rue Barbette with a sister, Agathe. It identifies Alkan Morhange's father 'Marix' as Mardochée (Mordecai) Morhange, son of Alexander Anshel Morhange and Gittl Mayence. Mardochée worked as a master printer for the Hebrew press of Moses May (1717-1793) in Metz, who attempted to print a complete edition of the Talmud but went bankrupt in the process. (Perhaps this was yet another element which eventually fed in to the 'urban legend' of Alkan's death). This clearly shows us the relatively cultured/intellectual background of the Alkan family, although it still gives no clue as to how Alkan Morhange was able to acquire the musical skills that were to enable him, in the 1820s, to run a musical school. Nor alas can we yet find any links to the German musical family of Siegfried Alkan.

Having established Marix's origins in Metz, the authors are able to plot his ancestors back to the seventeenth century. The most distant ancestor of whom they can be sure, Myer Morhange, had for father either Alexandre de Morhange (d. 1673), himself the son of Nathaniel Moshe born about 1585, probably in Morhange, or Alexander ben Avraham (d. about 1700). Interestingly, the first of these married the wife of a *chazzan* (synagogue cantor) and many others in the tree held positions in the synagogue. Nearly all the maternal lines have

been worked back to the seventeenth century as well. The ancestry of Alkan's mother, Julie Abraham, is not so clear, but certainly extends to the beginning of the eighteenth century in Metz region.

These researches would seem to establish that the Morhanges were not part of the Jewish emigration to the Rhine area of the middle and later seventeenth-century, but are likely to have been part of the very-long established Jewish community of the region, settled there over many centuries. Alkan's origins are as special as his music.

DC

## Alkan to Fétis (1)

We hope over future issues to present for the first time in English translation some of the surviving correspondence of Alkan with the Belgian musicologist François Fétis (1784-1871). The correspondence survives in the collection of the Swedish collector Daniel Fryklund (1879-1965), now in the Music Library of Sweden and (for its many instruments) the Stockholm Music Museum, to which it was bequeathed in 1965. The letters sent to Fétis, acquired by Fryklund, are of major importance for the history of 19<sup>th</sup>-century music. Based in Paris, as a critic, composer, journalist and, not least, compiler of the *Biographie universelle des musiciens* (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1835-44), still a valuable work of reference, Fétis knew everyone and everyone wanted to know him.

Many famous names are represented in the Fryklund collection, but the letters from Alkan show that their relationship became more than professional and led them to debate many more philosophical aspects of music. I am most grateful to Brian Doyle for providing me with copies of the letters themselves and to François Luguenot for providing a clear transcription of them, and for his notes.

The earliest Alkan letter dates from July 1847. It is a response to an article by Fétis in the Parisian *Revue et gazette musicale* of 25<sup>th</sup> July, reviewing the two *Marches* (opp. 26 and 27) (one funeral, one triumphal) and the op. 31 *Préludes*. The *Revue* was a major musical institution. Founded by Fétis as the *Revue musicale*, it was merged in 1835 with the *Gazette musicale de Paris* which was run by the music publisher Maurice Schlesinger. Fétis continued as editor although the paper retained elements of being the Schlesinger 'house' magazine, often strongly supporting its composers (who included Chopin, Berlioz, Meyerbeer and Halévy – and Alkan) against those published by others (an attitude which displeased Wagner, who spent some time during his 1839-1842 stay in Paris working as a hack for Schlesinger). When Schlesinger sold out to his manager Brandus in 1846, the connection between the publishing house and the *Revue* continued.

Fétis's detailed review of Alkan (which is covered in Ronald Smith's *Alkan: The Man* on pp. 38-39, and is reprinted in the *Bulletin de la Société Alkan* no. 14, January 1990) in general praises the works, whilst criticising 'unjustifiable harmonic audacities' in the *Marche Triomphale*. Fétis concludes, with a clear dig at Alkan's social and musical reticence and 'difficulty', 'Alkan is not just a great pianist, he is an original composer stirred by the sacred fire [...] An artist is a missionary; he owes it to himself, his time and his epoch to allow his creative faculties all the development of which they are capable. God gifts such faculties on the condition that they are used.'

Here is Alkan's response, which demonstrates, amongst other things, his perfectionist habit of holding back works from publication until he was completely satisfied with them.

Dear and illustrious *maître*, I must thank you from the bottom of my heart, for the article you dedicated to me in yesterday's number of the *Gazette musicale*, so long, so

flattering and so kind. To tell you that I am only susceptible to praise which comes from on high will not be enough to sufficiently convey to you all my delight; I will add therefore that I have always prevented, as far as I have been able, any show of interest from the gutter press, musical or otherwise, even at the cost of impoliteness, and often wounding the amour-propre of writers; this will make you understand how, on the other hand, I feel such joy in seeing a man like you concerned with my modest works, and dealing with them in a manner so kind and encouraging.

Passing now to the observations you wish to make to me concerning the harmony of the *marche triomphale*, I will say in excuse that all these things are effected more by instinct than by reason; it's not without a certain effort I can make myself go back and analyse them; and that it is nothing less than the extreme lucidity of your examination which constrains me. That's obviously an extreme simplification, but my customary absence of analysing completed work forces me to do myself violence [*me faire violence*] by finding it so. That is not at all to say that I do not hold at high value the excellent lesson you wished to convey to me, and that I will not hope to take advantage of it. – That which you say about the substitution of the sixth for the dominant in a concord in this piece, (and which you follow with a doubly-pointed apostrophe)<sup>1</sup>, induces me to send you a small piece from a small work I have been engaged on for some years, but which has not yet been performed.<sup>2</sup> Here there is a simple chord but used, I believe, in a hitherto unprecedented way. And as regards this work, to my great regret not performed, I reply to another reproach you make of me, surrounded by so many obliging comments; in truth, more to excuse myself in your eyes than because of any resentment I feel about it. That is, I don't want to produce only short-winded pieces [*choses de court haleine*]. Up to now I have published little; that's for many reasons which it would take too long to enumerate here, but which you perhaps already understand, since I have set them out at length. Anyway, please God, I hope to have appearing this year both music composed very recently and music rewritten over one or several years; not ensemble music, which I am keeping for later<sup>3</sup>, but works for piano developed in a way quite other than that of those of which you have so kindly given an account. Thus: a long sonata; a scherzo and an overture for piano of broad dimensions; some studies, amongst which several are worked up on a large scale; etc. etc. etc.<sup>4</sup> However, dear Sir, I repeat all my thanks, and greatly hope, some day, to be able – I will not say to be as obliging to you as you have been to me today, that were too ambitious – but to avow to the limit of my abilities what you have done for me.

C. V. Alkan

Sunday 25/7/[18]47

DC

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<sup>1</sup> Fétis exclaims, with a mention of Alkan's teacher at the Conservatoire 'O Zimmermann! My worthy friend! Thou, the determined antagonist of such a substitution, where art thou?'

<sup>2</sup> The work referred to here is unknown. Could it be a piece from the *Esquisses*, op. 63, published only in 1861?

<sup>3</sup> The only chamber work published after this date is the cello sonata (1857). The comment therefore must apply to lost works, perhaps including the 'quintets and sextets for strings' mentioned in a *Revue* article of 1844.

<sup>4</sup> Presumably the *Grande sonate* op 33 (published by Brandus in 1848), the *Scherzo diabolique* and *Ouverture* of op. 39 (published eventually as part of op. 39 in 1857) and the *12 Etudes dans les tons majeurs* op 35 published by Brandus in 1847.