

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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This has been something of a sabbatical year for the Alkan Society, or at least for its secretary. A shortage of news, an increase in work and a lack of dynamism can be cited. I can only apologise, not for the first time, to our members and others who have expressed an interest since the last Bulletin.

Enquiries do continue to arrive from several countries, inspired by a broadcast, a personal recommendation, a chance discovery in a record shop, or perhaps seeing our entry in any of several directories, and now the Internet site run by Jonathan Judge. Some are specific questions, often about availability of scores -alas, our collection in London is not complete and I cannot always help -and others about membership of the Society. I hope we can improve our service in the next twelve months. As always, our French counterpart has been of help in solving some queries, and their access to original sources has produced some scholarly articles of great interest in their Bulletins.

As always, out here in Salisbury I do depend on information supplied by members, and would like to thank Ronald Smith, Averil Kovacs, Robert Warwick, Richard Murphy and others for items of news and other suggestions. The invitation remains for anyone to submit articles or reviews of concerts and recordings. This issue, however, has been written by the Secretary and its scholarly content is at the usual low level.

Many thanks to several members who have renewed their subscriptions without receiving a reminder. I propose to carry these over to 1998, unless they wish to treat them as a donation, and will send out subscription reminders with the first Bulletin of next year. The bank account has had something of a sabbatical year too, and it would be unreasonable to ask for money at this stage.

We certainly wish to organise a meeting for members, on the lines of Alkan Days 1 and 2. While some material was offered for this year, it was not enough for a whole day and I wonder whether an experimental revival of the evening meetings might be an idea. Your comments will be welcome. However, the all-day meetings were popular and we would wish to continue with those if we can.

The obvious venue for meetings, the Guildhall School, is much easier for an evening booking, as we found when trying to arrange the last Alkan Day. I have heard of a new venue in Hampstead, the Belsize Music Rooms, which might be good for an all-day booking: the cost is more reasonable than for a central London venue, and most importantly, remembering our previous experience, it has good pianos! Anyone who knows the rooms, or has other suggestions for good venues, is welcome to let the Secretary know. More to the point, anyone who would like to offer an item, or can propose a guest speaker or artist, should please send details to me. A good venue is worthless without a good programme!

Enough of apologies and speculation: on with the Alkan news from 1997. I am assuming, as usual, that most Alkanians will be interested in other byways of the piano repertoire, and have included some items about those too, including the Husum festival in Germany, still one of the best haunts for pianophiles and seekers of the unusual or provocative.

The one new recording about which I know is an interesting recital of music for cello and piano on the Swedish Caprice label (CAP 21563). John Ehde and Carl-Axel Dominique play the Alkan cello sonata, as well as the sonatas by Debussy and Delius. They complete a well-filled disc of over 73 minutes with the fifth movement, *Louange à l'Eternité de Jesus*, from Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, that remarkable work premiered in a prisoner-of-war camp.

Averil Kovacs, who as usual discovered the recording hidden in the back pages of a journal, has made a few caustic comments about the performance of the Alkan sonata. I am a little more tolerant in my response. The tempo is reasonably close to, though always slower than, Alkan's metronome mark in the first movement, and the players show reasonable respect for the composer's dynamic markings. However, metronomic is the impression they sometimes give and the playing does lack a certain sweep and conviction.

The second movement, one of Alkan's slow movements that isn't particularly slow, and idiosyncratically marked *Allegretto*, is fairly successful, though again a little short of real character. The true slow movement is taken much more slowly than Alkan's tempo, to no great advantage, and indeed this speed might be the cause of some rhythmic inaccuracies from the pianist: for example, in bars 77 and 79 he plays the right-hand dotted crotchet-quaver rhythm in time with the left-hand 12-8 triplets. There are more than enough duple-triple cross-rhythms in the movement to suggest that this is not what Alkan intended. The trouble is that at such a slow tempo these cross-rhythms can sound pedantic if played precisely: at 66 beats per minute rather than 44, they would flow more naturally.

Again, in the finale, one could argue that Alkan's metronome mark is optimistic at *minim* = 112, but then he does mark the movement *Prestissimo*. Ehde and Dominique begin at a basic 100, dip down to the low 90s later, and interpret the *Pesante* marking for the move into the major key at bar 216 by dropping even further to just below 80. The *stanco* ("exhausted") section certainly sounds like it, and they never recover to anywhere near even their own initial tempo for the (usually) exhilarating, "lemming"-style conclusion. There is one deviation from the score which I do rather enjoy - a delicious slide by the cellist in his unaccompanied bar 118 from the high E harmonic down to middle C: a gesture which seems in character, if not in the best possible taste.

This is not a performance I would rule out by any means, but it is certainly no match for some of the others we know, like Chiffolleau and Gardon on the disc of the complete chamber works (Timpani IC 1013), who are a minute faster in the *Allegretto* (6.04 compared with 7.10) and over three minutes shorter in the *Adagio* (7.30 against 10.46). Henkel and Sermet (Valois V 4680), are over a minute faster (9.55 against 10.59) in the first movement (all these three recordings do observe the exposition repeat), and well over a minute faster in the *Prestissimo* finale (5.51 against 7.08). More to the point, the French recordings seem to have a more idiomatic grasp of the style too.

Anyone who heard Ronald Smith and Moray Welsh or Christopher Bunting play the work either in concert or on the radio in 1988 must be treasuring those memories all the more, since

the 1990 Smith/Welsh potentially definitive recording for Nimbus is *still* unreleased. Will this saga ever end? I know the artists are not giving up the attempt to transfer the master tapes to CD, but some delicate negotiations will be needed and I would advise members to be patient and avoid stirring up trouble...

The other works on the Ehde/Dominique disc are well played. The pianist, Dominique, is a Messiaen specialist who has worked with the composer, so his general piano technique is in no doubt. He provides the programme notes for the Alkan and Messiaen pieces: rather brief, if enthusiastic, in the Alkan section and with more personal reminiscence than hard information in the Messiaen. The movement from the Quartet is beautifully played: quite a lot more slowly than on, say, the recent Decca recording with Steven Isserlis and Olli Mustonen (with Michael Collins and Joshua Bell providing the clarinet and violin in other movements). But we have the composer's recommendation of a very slow tempo on the side of Ehde and Dominique. In any case, Mustonen tends to thump out his accompaniment in this and the final movement with the violin. However, that complete performance is in general very good, Collins's contribution in particular, and the Shostakovich 2nd piano Trio, conceived at about the same time during the war, is an excellent choice of coupling, outstandingly well played. I have good memories of a recording of the Quartet by Michel Béroff, Gervase de Peyer and others, though whether it is available on CD I do not know. Roger Smalley had a favourite moment in that recording at the end of the short fourth movement, *Intermède*, where one reviewer claimed that the final two cello pizzicati were inaudible: as Roger wrote in *his* review, and proved in a lecture in Cambridge, they *were* there, if you turned the volume up to maximum and put your ear to the loudspeaker. Presumably a digital reissue could restore the notes to a more sensible level.

The cellist's essay on Debussy and Delius is more informative and analytical. He too has a personal connection in that he met Delius's amanuensis, Eric Fenby, in 1988 (Fenby died earlier this year), and his performance in that work is particularly fine, with a slight tendency towards the sentimental, though his partner tends to over-pedal at times. Julian Lloyd-Webber (the more *musical* brother of the composer of musicals) is perhaps one of the best in the English cello repertoire, as his performance of the Delius in the Wigmore Hall showed last year. On that occasion he was superbly partnered by Bengt Forsberg, a player in Husum once and now best known as Anne Sofie von Otter's regular accompanist.

If you like cello music in general, this is a worthwhile programme of mainly rare works and can be recommended. If Alkan is your main interest, then perhaps it should be approached with a little more care and a broad-minded approach. The disc is handsomely presented, with a black finish on the non-playing side and minimal labels giving only surnames of performers and composers. The booklet contains notes in Swedish and English and a selection of glossy photographs, including part of the slow movement of the Alkan sonata: judging from the pagination and lack of 8vo signs, the Billaudot edition, though they cite Hugh Macdonald's Bärenreiter edition on the cover -just one more little mystery to ponder.

As previewed in the last Bulletin, the reissue of Raymond Lewenthal's first Alkan LP from 1965 has now appeared on Elan records, ELAN CD 82276. It contains the *Symphonie*, Op. 39 nos. 4-7, *Le festin d'Esope*, Op. 39 no.12, *Quasi-Faust*, the second movement of the *Grande Sonate*, Op. 33 and the *Barcarolle* from the third book of *Chants*, Op. 65 no.6. There is also the *Hexameron* variations on a theme from Bellini's *I Puritani*, co-ordinated by Liszt with other individual variations by Thalberg, Pixis, Herz, Czerny and Chopin.

The reissue has been welcomed by our French colleagues as well as by a major article in the American journal *Fanfare* of May/June 1997. "The Alkan revival began here", writes Adrian Corleonis, overlooking the much earlier contribution of Ronald Smith on the other side of the Atlantic. Rather than selectively quoting from the article, I have reproduced it in its entirety, for it does make several good points once one has got over that one glaring omission. It is good to know that Lewenthal's own programme notes, such an entertaining feature of his LPs, have been used, though understandably not in full, given the smaller format of the CD booklet.

I have not yet heard the CD, having the original LPs already, though in rather battered second-hand condition. But the sound should be an improvement: if the original "clangy" and "congested" sound of the RCA recording is still bound to be present, at least it should not have the pre-echo of the heavily modulated LP pressing, the "Dynagroove" being a little too dynamic here. That feature is even more apparent on Lewenthal's other Alkan LP for CBS in 1971, which I did buy new, containing "Grotesqueries" such as the *Funeral March for a Parrot*, the *Sonatine* and several *Esquisses* including *Les Diablotins*. The louder pieces can be heard starting one, and sometimes even two, revolutions early: while Sir Thomas Beecham relished the automatic second performance of new works in the Royal Albert Hall before new technology removed the echo, the opposite preview feature is not attractive. I'm fairly sure that this is an artefact of the LP pressing and not magnetic print-through from the master-tape. Whatever the reason, that is another recording which would be well worth reissuing – and there would be room for Liszt's *Reminiscences de Norma*, another Bellini operatic fantasy which was coupled with the *Hexameron* on the original LP. Both those Liszt performances are still among the best on record, and enough has been written about Lewenthal's Alkan recordings in earlier Bulletins to set them alongside the best from Ronald Smith or Marc-Andre Hamelin.

I believe that some members are having difficulty in finding the 2e2m recording (2e2m 1005) of Books 1 and 2 of the *Chants*, the Op. 60 piano pieces (*Ma chere liberte/Ma chere servitude*) and some short choral works, which was reviewed in the last Bulletin. Volume 3 in a long drawn-out series which began on the Adda label, now an ex-label like Alkan's parrot, it was recommended more for the content and the choral pieces than for the performances by Jacqueline Méfano. My copy was bought for me in France, and all I can suggest is that you contact a French shop if you know one, or write to the distribution company at Disques CONCORD, 15 rue des Goulvents, 92000 NANTERRE, France, or the record company at Ensemble 2e2m, 4 rue Proudhon, 94500 CHAMPIGNY SUR MARNE, France. Of course the societe Alkan could probably help too: the Secretary is François Luguenot and the Society's address is 145 rue de Saussure, 75017 PARIS.

Robert Warwick has recently reminded me that it is often possible to find out-of-print LPs at second-hand shops, often in excellent condition, now that some collectors are throwing out their LP collections in favour of CDs, whether or not the music is available in the new format. I recall one prominent Conservative MP and (apparently) music-lover, whom I shall not name, boasting of doing just that. Robert, for example, recently found John Ogdon's recording of Alkan's *Concerto for solo piano* in almost pristine condition at a dealer's in Watford, and described the whole shop as an "Aladdin's cave". The dealer was Mr Gale Andrews, 31 Estcourt Road, Watford, Herts., WO1 2PY, tel./fax 01923-253714. I have found rich pickings too in The Collector's Room in Suttons in Salisbury and Harold Moores in Gt. Marlborough St. in London, near Oxford Circus. Another LP shop can be found near Waterloo station. Several other LP shops advertise in the end section of the *Gramophone*. When the next Ogdon

anniversary comes up, his Alkan recording would certainly be one to reissue, though his discography was very extensive and it would be optimistic indeed to expect a complete series.

Jan Hoare of the Liszt Society tells me that Ronald Smith has recently recorded an all-Liszt CD for APR, who reissued his masterly, definitive (supply your own superlatives) Alkan Op. 39 last year on APR 7031. The producer is said to be particularly pleased with the recording of the B minor Sonata. The CD should be ready quite soon. I have heard no more of the proposal to reissue other classic Smith EMI recordings of Alkan on APR, but if we keep recommending the Op. 39 to friends -you have all already bought it for yourselves, of course - then they may appear in due course, contractual obligations permitting.

The series of Piano Rarities from Husum continues with a double-disc set from 1996 on Danacord DACOCD 479. The main disc contains as the main work Scriabin's early 24 Preludes, Op. 11, played in commanding, if idiosyncratic, style by the Scriabin specialist Igor Shukov (or Zhukov). He made his London debut, with mixed critical reception, at the age of 60 about a year ago. These Preludes are perhaps not the rarest of rarities: there is a recent new recording, together with some of the sonatas, by Mikhail Pletnev. If you like a literal approach to Scriabin's text, such as Hamelin's very fine complete recording of the sonatas for Hyperion, then Shukov's approach will require a large change of attitude. In live performance he is compelling -he also played the 8th sonata in Husum, *molto rubato* in traditional Russian style. There is certainly room for both approaches, but you have been warned.

The shorter works on the main disc include a hard-edged performance of Ravel's transcription of his orchestral showpiece, *La Valse*, again from Shukov. The audience in Husum will certainly never forget the performance, given with total commitment, and even the use of a clenched fist for one particularly loud bass-drum-and-gong stroke towards the end. It is also remarkably accurate, given that this was a live performance and completely unedited, like all Husum discs. However, the occasionally jerky rhythm and extreme dynamics may not be to everyone's taste. Remembering that Ravel was portraying a decadent Viennese society rather than taking an affectionate look at the Viennese waltz, Shukov's approach is arguably a valid one.

The rest of the disc is less controversial: Kathryn Stott, who also gave an outstanding performance in this year's festival, contributes two short Intermezzi by Poulenc. Piers Lane, another very popular performer who will certainly be invited there again, plays three contrasting pieces: *Filigran* by Sigfrid Karg-Elert, best known for his organ compositions; *Fragrance* from *4 Characteristic Pieces* by Frank Bridge, a fine and often radical composer, now best known as Britten's teacher; and Percy Grainger's "Cakewalk Smasher", *In Dahomey*, in an exuberant performance, with some amazing, if painful-sounding, glissandi, which loses nothing by comparison with Hamelin's celebrated recording. The Bridge piece, one of Piers Lane's encores, is in his pastoral- impressionist style; some of his more forward-looking music was heard in Kathryn Stott's performance of his Sonata later in the week.

Marc-Andre Hamelin himself can be heard in three short pieces called *Choro* by the Brazilian composer Radamés Gnattáli, whose pieces he has been playing as encores in recent recitals. These are delightful examples of light music, with an idiomatic and authentic use of rhythm which makes something like Milhaud's *Saudades do Brasil*, though attractive enough pieces themselves, sound very "square" by comparison. Hamish Milne, another Husum regular, plays a Prelude by the Russian composer Alexander Goedike inspired by Maeterlinck's *Les Aveugles*. Goedike is ignored in the smaller musical dictionaries, though there is an entry in the "New Grove", and I have seen one of his pieces in a recent graded

collection published by the Associated Board (where his name is spelt Gedike, approximately as in the Russian script).

The second, "bonus", disc is even more of a curiosity. It was made at the extra concert of "Pastiche and Parody", which was arranged to give a light-hearted send-off to the tenth series. The first two pieces here are a "Souvenir de Chopin" by Honegger and a piece in the style of César Franck by his pupil Vincent d'Indy, taken from a didactic set of 24 pieces "for children of all ages". The aim was to provide a set of pieces in styles ranging through the history of music, but to avoid the use of over-long works found in some anthologies of actual pieces by the composers in question. Whether this was an artistically viable idea can be discussed elsewhere...

The major piece on the disc is mainly for Germanophiles and is - deep breath - "Anton Notenquetscher am Klavier" (Anton Note-crusher at the Piano), a parody by Alexander Moszkowski of the "Student's Scene" from Goethe's "Faust", with musical illustrations by Moritz Moszkowski, written in 1896 to celebrate the 70th birthday of the piano manufacturer Carl Bechstein. Fortunately there is a very good translation of the text provided. Anyone who knows "Faust" well will appreciate the full subtlety of the parody. Others may care to know that the musical examples begin a little over 15 minutes into the track. They consist of a theme (a popular song of the time), played extremely badly (intentionally) and variations in the style of eight composers of increasing brilliance as Mephistopheles's magic gradually works on the Student. In other words, it is a rather Germanic version of Joseph Cooper's "Hidden Melody" round in the late, unlamented TV quiz "Face the Music".

The pianist on the second disc is Peter Froundjian, the creator and artistic director of the festival, a pianist of considerable ability himself - his discography includes a very impressive recording of pieces by Ignaz Friedman for the Etcetera label. The evening had included several other parodies of Chopin as well as d'Indy's impression of Chabrier from the same collection. There was also a four-hand version of another even heavier set of parodistic variations, "Eskapaden eines Gassenhauers" (Adventures of a popular song) by one Karl Hermann Pillney (1896-1980), in which the (apparently) well-known song "Was machst du mit dem Knie, lieber Hans?" (What are you doing with your knee, dear Hans?) is transformed into the style of composers from Bach to Schonberg. It would have been quite a funny piece at half the length and, frankly, if it had been played better by the duo I shall not name here. The curious may like to know that there is a two-hand version in print, published by Breitkopf & Hartel (ref. no.6510), and even a recording of an orchestral version.

I should also say that, while normally the Husum audience is one of the quietest I know, it does make its presence felt during the "Faust" performance. ..It will be interesting to see how the discs are reviewed in due course.

There were three other good recitals in the 1996 festival by Artur Pizarro, winner of a recent Leeds piano competition, Abdel Rahman el Bacha, another competition winner in Brussels, and Carlo Grante. However, either the artists or their agents were unwilling to allow them to appear on the record, which was a pity. Pizarro played the Dukas E flat minor sonata in convincing style, and with a completely different approach to Hamelin's a few years earlier: less rhythmic drive but perhaps greater depth in the expression allowed by his freer tempi. There was also the solo version of Faure's Ballade, Debussy's two-handed version of his late duets *Six épigraphes antiques*, and a stunning transcription by Camille Chevillard of Chabrier's *España*.

Pizarro could be said to be a once-removed pupil of the Portuguese pianist Jose Vianna da Motta, having been taught by a pupil of da Motta, a well-known name to Alkanians for his arrangements of several pedal-piano pieces and his performances of Alkan. He also won first prize in the da Motta competition in Lisbon before his triumph in Leeds. He had therefore heard much about Alkan, though sadly does not currently include him in his repertoire.

El Bacha was an immaculate performer, but evidently too much of a perfectionist to allow himself on to the CD. He played pieces by Falla, the third Sonata by Schumann, a Faure Nocturne and Rachmaninov's Chopin variations with total command, accuracy and good taste, and included some of his own compositions as encores. His name was unfamiliar to many, but is now well worth remembering.

Carlo Grante played an exceedingly difficult programme including the world premiere of a Transcendental Study by our old friend Kaikhosru Sorabji and an entire half of Godowsky arrangements: six Schubert songs and nine Chopin Etudes, besides some Liszt rarities such as the first, more difficult, version of the 6th Paganini study, and a Clementi sonata (the one which begins like the *Magic Flute* Overture). By his own standards he was disappointed, but there were many fine things in the recital.

Carlo has also come across Alkan, and even played from memory the first page of the *Grande Sonate* for me in a friend's house later in the week. We also got through two of the Op. 40 duets before he abandoned the third, partly because of the frustration of sight-reading the faint Billaudot text, and partly because he found it so banal! I think Alkan's sense of humour has not made it to Italy yet... the out-of-step bass line in the third March is surely not to be taken too seriously. However, we do have to thank Carlo for talking me into buying the fax/answering machine as soon as I came home last year.

Grante has played all 53 Chopin-Godowsky Etudes in the Newport Festival in New York, and has recorded them in three volumes for Altarus Records. I have had Vol. 2 on order for nearly two years in my local shop, although I know it exists, and Vol. 3 is either unreleased or even harder to find. Now he is embarking on a complete Godowsky series for Music and Arts Records, and has already recorded a huge amount of Scarlatti, not to universal approval. Whether one pianist can really achieve all this convincingly is open to question. Even Leslie Howard's complete Liszt series for Hyperion, while mostly of a very high standard and including programme notes of daunting scholarship, has had its critics for certain volumes of the forty-plus released so far.

It may be that the Naxos approach for their projected complete Liszt, or Marco Polo for Godowsky, using several pianists, is potentially a better one. Certainly the first release from Naxos (8.553852) is outstanding: a wide-ranging selection of pieces including the solo version of *Totentanz*, the fantasy on Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, the transcription of Saint-Saens's *Danse macabre*, and some late pieces including *Nuages gris* and the two versions of *La lugubre gondola*. All are played superbly by Arnaldo Cohen and equally well recorded in St George's, Bristol. Other early volumes in the series will be played by Jëno Jandó, a long-standing and prolific Naxos stalwart, Philip Thomson and Oxana Yablonskaya.

The first two Godowsky releases for Marco Polo are played by Konstantin Sherbakov, another name to watch: he has also recorded for Marco Polo the very difficult Transcendental Studies of Liapunov, which complete the key-sequence begun in Liszt's twelve. One of these was played in Husum this year by Kathryn Stott: the spectacular *Lesginka* in the style of

Balakirev. Sherbakov recently made a great impression in a London recital in the art gallery containing the Wallace Collection. He has also released a set of Johann Strauss (son) transcriptions, including quite rare examples by Schutt, Grünfeld and Reger (the "Blue Danube") on the budget-priced EMI "Debut" label (5-69704-2) : they may not swing as well as Piers Lane's set for Hyperion, but as a display of relentless technique they are hard to beat. One could mention that, inevitably, the Reger transcription can be heard on a Husum disc from 1993 (DACOCD 419), further modified by Roberto Cappello and incorporating a quotation from the cadenza of Tchaikowsky's B flat minor concerto.. .

The "Debut" label, selling at about £7 -less than half the cost of full-price discs, though more than Naxos -has made a promising start with a wide-ranging selection of music and artists. The two most intriguing discs are an album of works by the astonishingly talented (and young) pianist, conductor and composer Thomas Adès; and transcriptions for two *accordions* of Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. I think further comment is superfluous.

Bryce Morrison -pupil of Ronald Smith and enthusiast for Alkan and all piano music, who introduced Marc-Andre Hamelin's QEH recital last year -reviewed several Husum discs in the *Gramophone* of April 1997, now available as a boxed set or separately: the discs from 1990-2 and 1994 (DACOCD 379, 389, 399 and 429). There are far too many pieces to mention more than a few, but he particularly liked Bernard Ringeissen's performance of Poulenc's *Pastourelle*, several by Hamelin including Thalberg's *Don Pasquale* Fantasy, his own *Triple Etude* combining all three A minor Chopin Etudes and Walter Giesecking's *Schorschi-Batschi* Foxtrot, which he learned in a day after discovering it in the exhibition. (The Thalberg and Giesecking are on the same disc from 1994, DACOCD 429, as the Alkan Barcarolle which he also played as an encore.) Of the longer works, he admired Benedikt Koehlen's performance of the Janacek I.X.1905 Sonata (in which Koehlen played one note in the final chord with his nose in order to avoid an arpeggio), and Hamish Milne showing "magisterial command and conviction" in the half-hour Liszt-Busoni *Ad nos, ad salutarem undam* Fantasy and Fugue, transcribed from the organ work. These discs are evidently now easily available in this country, and I suggest you see that issue of *Gramophone* for further details.

The 1995 Husum disc (DACOCD 449), mentioned in the previous Bulletin, received a generally favourable review in *Fanfare* of January/February 1997 from Peter J. Rabinowitz. He understandably concentrates on the Sonata by Vincent d'Indy, played by Marie-Catherine Girod, for which alone "this disc is a substantial addition to the catalog". Concerning the shorter pieces, he describes Daniel Berman's Liszt/Horowitz 19th Hungarian Rhapsody as "sturdy, rather than stellar" ; and doubts whether "the recently discovered Alkan scrap [*Les regrets de la nonnette*, given its German premiere by Ronald Smith] - for all its pale, wistful regret - really adds much to our understanding of the composer". (Ronald also plays two Chopin Mazurkas on the disc, the composer's first and last.) He prefers Piers Lane's studio recording of Tausig's version of Strauss's *Wahlstimmen* to Roberto Cappello's live performance, but says that Anton Kuerti' s "high intensity makes a strong case for Czerny's dramatic acuity" in the movement from the 19-year-old's Sonata No.1. He also likes Philip Fowke, "a sadly underrecorded artist" , showing "his remarkable range by juxtaposing a passionate and hard-hitting account of the Dohnányi [Rhapsody in C, Op. 11 No.3] (a performance that plays up its contrast of modernist and romantic leanings) with a whimsically celestial account of the Tchaikowsky standard [Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy]". Finally he puts the Secretary of the Alkan Society in his place with the laconic conclusion: "Decent sound and notes. Recommended." Still, better "decent" than "lousy".

After some delay, a review of Ronald Smith's reissued Op. 39 and other pieces (APR 7031) appeared in the *Gramophone* of August 1997. Michael Stewart describes the release as "superbly transferred and annotated". He writes that the two " .. most famous solo piano pieces -the *Symphony* ..and the *Concerto*- ..have had their champions over the years from Egon Petri. .through to Raymond Lewenthal, John Ogdon and more recently Marc-Andre Hamelin and Jack Gibbons. But few would deny that it is Ronald Smith to whom we perhaps owe the greatest debt of gratitude for rescuing these particular pieces from musical oblivion. Other studies in the set include the curiously titled and innovative "Le festin d'Esopo" and the finger-blistering "Comme le vent". As fill-ups we also get the breathtaking *Allegro barbaro* from the Op. 35 *Etudes* (which is said to have influenced Bartók's similarly titled study), the atmospherically titled and even more bizarre sounding *La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer*, and the *Trois petites fantaisies*, Op. 41.

"As for the performances, well, we are talking about one of the supreme exponents of Alkan's music here, and someone who had lived with and performed these pieces for many years prior to these recordings. Hamelin and Gibbons (the latter on a two-disc set) bring greater flair and precision perhaps, [a debatable point -Ed.] but dedicated Alkan enthusiasts will not hesitate in purchasing these classic recordings. For those approaching Alkan's music for the first time this set would be an ideal starting place."

A few other recent discs are worth mentioning. One of our Vice-Presidents, Roger Smalley, has made a CD of eighteen piano sonatas by John White, on NMC D038. White has written well over 100 piano sonatas, 25 symphonies and many other ensemble pieces, and currently works as a composer of music for the theatre. His style is highly eclectic and hard to summarise, but he mentions Alkan as one of many influences and avoids the extremes of the atonal 20th century schools. The disc received five stars in a BBC Music Magazine review as well as favourable comments in the Musical Times. I rate it as very enjoyable: obviously the pieces here are all quite short, and the variety of style holds the interest. The notes by Dave Smith -another composer influenced by Alkan - guide one through the pieces well. Incidentally, White has also written a large symphony dedicated to the memory of Alkan.

Returning to the 19th century, Piers Lane has followed his recording of two concertos by Eugen d'Albert (biographical notes by our committee member Eliot Levin) with a collection of his solo pieces, on Hyperion CDA 66945. This is an excellent performance of some stunning short pieces as well as the ambitious half-hour Sonata, a surprisingly serious piece ending with a triple fugue. With over 79 minutes of music the disc is as full as it can be: highly recommended.

Concerning recordings of Alkan: It did take Tall Poppies several months to reply to my inquiry about Stephanie McCallum's CD (TP 081), but I can also report that once I faxed my order and details of a debit card, the discs arrived from Australia within a week, safely packed and in good condition. The Alkan *Symphonie* is played as well as I expected, and Magnard's *Promenades* make up an excellent programme, along with Alkan's *Chanson de la folle*. Her earlier CD of Alkan's major-key *Etudes* is still available (TP 055), and for the more ambitious , "Notations" , a collection of contemporary music (TP 037) .The details again: prices by air are \$AUS28 per CD: phone +61-2-95-52-40-20, fax +61-2-95-52-43-95; e-mail tallpopp@magna.com.au and ordinary mail PO Box 373, Glebe NSW 2037, Australia. Belinda Webster told me that they do plenty of business by Visa Card etc., and regrets the lack of distributor in the U.K.

As 1998 moves on, three new discs with Alkan music have appeared. The American Record Guide of February 1998 carries a review of 4-hand opera transcriptions by Thalberg, Herz, Czerny, Pixis and Alkan (Don Giovanni Fantasy), played by the Duo Alkan on Agora 105 (Qualiton). The music is described as "dated", but "charming in its idiotic way" and requiring a virtuoso technique, which Baldrighi and Ricciardi have, as well as style (their first names are not given). "They produce a sonorous tone, play with spirit, and appear to have a lot of fun with these daguerrotypes" (sic).

The budget label Naxos has issued its second Alkan disc, this time a Naxos original rather than recycled selections from several Marco Polo discs. It contains what is described as Alkan's "Complete Works for Piano and Orchestra" (Naxos 8.553702): in fact, the two Concerti da Camera, a movement called "Concerto da camera No.3 in C sharp minor" and the "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 39". The third piece is in fact the Andante Romantique in C sharp major, orchestrated by another of our Vice-Presidents, Hugh Macdonald. Prof. Macdonald has traced this piece from two published descriptions of a concerto and added a discreet and tasteful string accompaniment to flesh out the published solo piece.

The most substantial piece is Klindworth's orchestration and adaptation of the first movement of Alkan's Concerto for solo piano, Op. 39 No.8. This version is defended at some length by Allan B. Ho in his programme notes as well as by the pianist on the recording, Dmitry Feofanov. I am glad the piece has been recorded, though it is no substitute for Alkan's original. Some of Klindworth's treatment is quite laughable and his alterations of the piano part are often misguided. In the introduction to his orchestral version (a copy is held in our Guildhall School collection), Mark Starr gives a fairly detailed critique of Klindworth but concludes that it is a "travesty".

However, I welcome this disc, particularly because they have had the confidence to issue it at budget price. It has some seven pages of detailed programme notes, as well as a shorter, different, article in French by Frederic Castello. The performances by Feofanov, with the Razumovsky Symphony Orchestra, conductor Robert Stankovsky, are adequate, though the first two Concerti da camera cannot compare with Hamelin's scintillating versions on Hyperion. There is one sign of haste in the editing - the second Concerto seems to have seven quavers in its first bar instead of six - but otherwise the production is quite respectable.

One day this Bulletin may be a Hamelin-free zone, but I must also report a new disc from him, entitled "The Composer-Pianists", on Hyperion CDA 67050. This appears to be connected with a forthcoming book by Robert Rimm of Philadelphia: "Related Keys: The Pianist as Composer from Alkan to Hamelin" -but Hyperion has chosen to issue the disc in its own right. (Surfers can find details of the book at www.88keys.com.) The Alkan pieces are two Esquisses -Le premier billet doux and Scherzetto (Op. 63, nos. 46 and 47) -and a transcription, previously unknown to me, of the slow movement of Haydn's "Surprise" Symphony, No.94 (known in Germany as "Mit dem Paukenschlag" rather than "Überraschungssymphonie", as I have found to my embarrassment). I must ask Hamelin where he found this transcription when I see him in Husum: it is not mentioned in the usual literature.

The symphony transcription is fairly faithful, with just a few Alkanian flourishes. The two Esquisses are beautifully played: Scherzetto is extremely fast, but a check with the metronome shows it to be spot-on with Alkan's mark, so blame the composer. Nine minutes of Alkan would be rather short measure, were it not for the fascinating collection of other

pieces on the disc, all played to the high standard we would expect. Anyone who has heard Hamelin's own pieces as encores will certainly welcome his three contributions: his version of Rossini's Tarantella "La Danza" , a bizarre wrong-note version of Chopin's "Black Key" study, and his own Prelude and Fugue. If you know Liszt's already quite difficult transcription of the Rossini, add to that some double-note passages, a few cross-rhythms and some bluesy chords, and you might be somewhere near Hamelin's version.

The rest of the recital is equally fascinating, with pieces by Godowsky, Medtner, Skryabin, Rachmaninov, Busoni, Feinberg and Sorabji: mostly original works, though the Sorabji is based on a song from Rimsky-Korsakov's "Sadko" and one of the Feinberg pieces is a Bach Chorale transcription. Pianophiles will need no further recommendation.

I can also confirm that Ronald Smith's new Liszt CD contains the B minor Sonata and some Hungarian Rhapsodies, and is available on APR 5557.

A few notes and news items

Our French colleagues made a few comments about Roderick Munday's "jeu d'esprit" in our last bulletin. I think they may have missed the mainly humorous intention of Roderick's piece, but there are a couple of corrections worth mentioning. The letter quoted on page 13, dated 31 January 1860, in which Wagner was criticised, was from Alkan to Hiller and not vice versa. The statement on page 17 that Alkan admired Rossini's music is also denied: his mocking quotation from *La gazza ladra* in the *Funeral March for a Parrot* is cited as evidence, as is a letter to Hiller: "Rossini, c'est l'Antichrist en musique".

A programme note for the recent Testament Records collection of John Ogdon playing Liszt mentions that he played Alkan's Etude for the left hand in the 1956 Queen Elizabeth piano competition in Brussels. "None of the other contestants (that year they included Ashkenazy, John Browning, Cecile Ousset, Lazar Berman, Tamas Vasary and Peter Frankl) programme more demanding fare. Alkan's Etude for the left hand only, Brahms's *Paganini Variations*, Liszt's *Dante* as well as B minor Sonatas, Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata and Balakirev's *Islamey* were merely a few of the works offered".

The composer, writer and broadcaster Robert Simpson died in November 1997. He was a great supporter of composers he believed to be undeservedly neglected, and in a long career at the BBC was responsible for some of the most stimulating programmes. I believe he was responsible for a series called "The Innocent Ear", in which the composers were announced only after the piece was played: certainly a piece by Alkan was included in that series. He may well have been responsible for Ronald Smith's memorable Alkan broadcasts in 1968, if Berthold Goldschmidt's recollection was accurate. He wrote fine books on Bruckner and Nielsen and was foremost in bringing Havergal Brian's music to the radio.

His own music was based on strong traditional structures, and in the end it was this aspect which caused him to quarrel with the BBC at a time when it was supporting the avant-garde styles at the expense of worthy, but less controversial, British composers. He wrote a trenchant pamphlet about the Promenade Concerts and was only rarely heard on the air after 1980, moving to Ireland: I remember the joy of hearing his gravelly voice in a telephone interview a few years ago.

What he would think of the current Radio 3 I can hardly imagine, but it is good to see that he is being accorded the usual courtesy to composers once they have died, with a performance of his Piano Concerto at the Proms, no less, by Piers Lane on August 6th.

Martin Anderson wrote an excellent obituary notice for him in the Independent newspaper, though even there it took second place to the article about the death, allegedly self-inflicted, of the singer Michael Hutchence, the member of the Australian "beat combo" INXS (pronounced "in excess"). Apart from his contribution to popular music, Hutchence was best known recently as the father of Paula Yates's daughter Heavenly Hiraani Tiger Lily, who is therefore the half-sister of her children with Sir Bob Geldof, Fifi Trixibelle and Peaches.

This is information which I really do not need.

Broadcasts

The decline of Radio 3 continues apace. Last year its introductory guide mentioned Andrew McGregor's early morning programme "On Air" . " ..(His) careful selection of music will please fans of mainstream repertoire, while pointing the way towards unexplored yet related territory: for example, the works of Chopin and Alkan Vivaldi and Roseingrave, Mozart and Myslivecek might appear in the same programme." And indeed, pieces by Alkan were occasionally played. However, since then, he has been replaced by one Petroc Trelawney, imported from Classic FM, purveyor of "duckspeak" and short, hackneyed popular classics. Did they learn nothing from the Gambaccini debacle? A letter in the current "Radio Times": "Oh no! Petroc Trelawney is back from the seaside, and straightaway long-suffering Radio 3 audiences are regaled with a "chi ldren ' s corner" of *Ride of the Valkyries* and Borodin's *Notturmo*. I'm taking bets on how long it will take this early-morning slot to descend through the *Nutcracker Suite* to *Nelly the Elephant*. To help punters study the form, *Moonlight Sonata* gets *another* outing in the 8.20 tomorrow. II It hardly seems worth buying "Radio Times" when this three-hour programme is given such a sketchy outline, and my radio is tuned somewhere else at breakfast-time.

After Peter Hobday's "Masterworks" , a reasonably good beginner's guide to standard repertoire which many a proper musician could do much better, chatter is again the order of the day: in "Artists of the Week" , Joan Bakewell tries to convince us that there are enough musicians worth interviewing for five half-hour programmes, with a 75-minute reprise on Sunday. Then comes "Sound Stories" with Richard Baker, an hour of talk with short musical examples. All three are good broadcasters, no doubt, but they are not musicians!

To be fair, there was one "Sound Story" which featured Alkan and Chausson, as two musicians who met bizarre deaths. So the old, and now discredited, story of Alkan and the bookcase was trotted out again. I have given up writing to the BBC about this, after it came up again in a quiz: why spoil a good story with Prof. Macdonald's research into the truth? The selection of music was certainly made to stress Alkan's bizarre side: the 3rd Grande Etude and Le Chemin de Fer, played by Laurent Martin; the Funeral March for a Parrot, in Lewenthal's recording, Les Diablotins (pianist not announced, but I think Lewenthal again), and "Promethee enchainep,..eptthe Grande Sonate, played by Ronald Smith. Alkan's reclusive nature, and its probable cause (his failure to get the Conservatoire post), was covered well enough, but with such an extreme selection of pieces I wondered whether his cause benefited much from the programme. I can think of many people who might have presented a better case.

I was recently telephoned by a producer for Jerry Sadowitz, who was looking for someone to interview about Alkan in the new series of "The People versus Jerry Sadowitz". I was given to understand that it is intended to have a more serious style than the last series, when interviewees were ritually humiliated. Sadowitz is best known as a Scottish comedian and magician whose patter is usually at the obscene end of the scale, and while the TV exposure might have been amusing, I could not think of anyone who would have been willing to be subjected to the Sadowitz treatment. Sorry. If anyone is willing to volunteer, it may not be too late to get in touch with Lee Connolly on 0171-261-3609. Apparently Mr Sadowitz also plays the piano, though I doubt whether his repertoire extends to Alkan. ..

One quite promising series is entitled "The Piano" and presented by Piers Lane. At first it was broadcast on Wednesday evenings and repeated the following afternoon, but now that the Proms have started, it seems to be confined to Thu~sday afternoon, which is a pity. Piers has a wide range of interest, and while some of his script is rather trite -it is hard to say much in 45 minutes mostly occupied by music -he has played some excellent recordings, including one Alkan piece in a programme about studies -Hamelin's performance of the 3rd Grande Etude. This is a series "which could run and run" , and for once its menu does merit a full listing in "Radio Times" .

Alkan's music seems mainly to be banished to late-night slots. During the Christmas holidays, a recital by Huseyin Sermet was broadcast between 3.55 and 4.45 a.m. It included excerpts from the Op. 31 Preludes, the Trois Petites Fantaisies and Allegro Barbaro. Not having access to my usual machinery, and being unwilling to set the alarm, I missed this one. It was evidently taken from a live recital, but I have read in "Classical Music" magazine, and the recent French Bulletin, that he is planning to record those pieces for Astree-Auvidis (including three Preludes from Op. 31) and the Trois Marches Op. 40 for four hands with Jean-Claude Pennetier. I hope this is good news: Sermet has made a fine recording of the Cello Sonata and Grand Duo Concertant with violin, but his disc of solo pieces is among my least favourite.

The most recent broadcast, beginning at 1 a.m. on 2nd August, would have been known about by (a) the psychic or (b) anyone who remembered reading about the recital in a back number of the French Bulletin -namely, not many people. It was a recital given for Radio France by Marc-Andre Hamelin (it's that man again) .The "Radio Times" mentioned three works: Dussek's Sonata *Le retour à Paris*, Moscheles's Rondo Brillant, *Les Charmes de Paris*, and Liszt's Grand Fantasy on themes from *Les Huguenots*. Assuming that Dussek's sonata was not of Alkanian dimensions, that did seem rather thinly spread to occupy 1 hour and 55 minutes. And indeed there were two other items taking it to the 1 hour 30 min. mark (unbilled choral items made up the remaining time). Namely, Alkan's transcription, with cadenza, of the first movement of Beethoven's 3rd concerto, and the *Hexameron* variations "by Liszt" , or so we were told by Donald Macleod, whose researchers had not told him about the variations contributed by Pixis, Herz, Thalberg, Czerny and Chopin.

It was good to hear that Hamelin really can play the Beethoven transcription "live" , just in case one had not believed the evidence of his Wigmore Hall live recording (the first Alkan Grande Etude had certainly undergone some discreet correction), but it was pure luck that led one to the performance at all. The late-night broadcasts often have some interesting material, but the timings can be very unreliable, particularly when a live concert has over-run earlier in the evening. A Koechlin recital a while ago began half an hour late, for example. (However, I did record enough to discover that his set of Esquisses has even shorter pieces than Alkan's.) The announcements also seem to be recorded without much reference to the pieces: the Bach-

Busoni "Wachet auf, uns ruft die Stimme" transcription was said to be "Nun komm der heiden Heiland", and plenty of other "howlers" could be quoted. So unless you are willing to wake up for these, I strongly advise allowing a very generous over-run on the timer. A cassette recorder has inadequate playing time and therefore a video-recorder or a DAT machine would be advisable.

Finally, now that Nicholas Kenyon is to leave Radio 3, except for overseeing the Proms, let us hope that a good replacement is found: one who is not going to heed the marketing department and continue its transformation into another Classic FM. Could we even hope for a professional musician? (Kenyon is a former music critic, which just about counts.) The only hopeful sign is that I think the ubiquitous David Mellor - ex-MP, lawyer, pundit on football, politics and music - is not being encouraged to apply, in spite of his large CD collection. (Apologies to our overseas readers who are lucky enough not to know who this man is.)

Performances

Recent performances have included the Three Marches played by John White and Sarah Walker, and of course several of Ronald Smith's recitals. James Giles played Alkan's cadenza in a performance of Beethoven's 3rd concerto with the London Soloists Chamber Orchestra in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, on 16th March 1998. Forthcoming ones will include:

Jack Gibbons will be playing Alkan's Symphony for solo piano in a recital at the Holywell Music Room in Oxford on 25th August at 8 p.m. This "Piano Spectacular" will also include Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*, Balakirev's *Islamey*, the Bach (-Liszt?) Fantasia and Fugue in G minor and in the Oxford Festival of Contemporary Music. The next performance of the piece will be on 19th September in the New Hall, Winchester College. The Winchester recital also includes Sibelius's *Idyll*.

Nicolas Hodges has recently given the premiere of Michael Finnissey's *Alkan-Paganini: an imaginary portrait* Schumann's *Humoreske* and the Beethoven-Liszt 5th Symphony. Other performances of the Finnissey piece are planned. I do not know his music, but have read that it is highly virtuosic, and that he is an excellent pianist himself.

Another Alkan-inspired work, long planned, will be given its premiere in the Greenwich piano festival this September. This promising new venture, based at the-Blackheath Concert Halls, is the idea of the pianist Stephen Coombes, and includes performances by Stephen Hough, Leslie Howard, Kathryn Stott, Coombes himself, and Marc-Andre Hamelin. It runs from 3rd-6th September and ends with a "massed piano extravaganza". There is a tribute to Percy Grainger, and Hamelin's programme on 6th September at 4 p.m. includes Ronald Stevenson's "Le festin d'Alkan". I have not a specific number for the festival, and it would be worth checking on all the above details. However, the telephone number of Blackheath Concert Halls is 0181-388-8822 and fax 0181-852-5154.

Two final items: The Benedictus, Op. 54, is in print once again. The edition from Billaudot is printed on three staves. It is described as "pour orgue" on the cover, and "pour piano a clavier de pedales, ou piano a 3 mains" at the head of the score. That is possibly why it is not in the latest piano catalogue from United Music Publishers. That also has the "Concerto Op. 39 in G sharp minor" listed under "Two pianos -Reductions: arrangements of works for piano and orchestra" but I have not checked whether that really is correct. Incidentally, Alkan is listed complete with his "extra" name (Charles-Henri-Valentin), presumably the mistake of UMP rather than Billaudot! United Music Publishers Ltd. is at 42 Rivington Street, London EC2A 3BN, tel. 0171-729-4700, fax 0171-739-6549.

Ronald Smith's pupil Freddy Kempf recently took third place in the international Tchaikowsky competition in Moscow. You may remember a report of his success in the BBC Young Musicians competition a few years ago. According to Michael White in the Sunday Times, Freddy was far and away the outstanding performer, and the audience's favourite, but in Mr White's view local pressures once again forced the jury to favour Russian competitors in the final decision. I presume that Freddy still has plenty of Alkan in his repertoire, and hope he will be playing him in his British concerts when he builds on this tremendous success.

Any apology for this very late bulletin would be inadequate, but I apologise all the same and hope to improve the service in the future. Future plans for meetings should include a talk from Ronald Smith about the "Kafkaesque" saga of the chamber music recording. The latest news is that Nimbus is willing to release the master tapes to APR for future issue: however, there is a technical problem of incompatible systems and we await further progress.

Peter Grove

From "Fanfare", May/June 1997

RAYMOND LEWENTHAL PLAYS ALKAN AND LISZT. Raymond Lewenthal, piano. ELAN CD 82276 {ADD}: 65:05. Produced by Natalia Rodriguez. (Distributed by Albany.)

ALKAN: Douze Etudes dans les tons mineurs, op 39: Symphonie (No.4, Allegro moderato; No.5, Marche funèbre-Andante; No.6, Menuet; No.7, Finale-Presto); No.12, Le Fésin d'Esopé. Grande Sonate, op. 33' No.2, Quasi-Faust. *Chants -Troisième recueil.* op, 65 No.6, Barcarolle. LISZT-THALBERG-PIXIS-HERZ-CZERNY-CHOPIN: Hexaméron - Grandes variations de bravoure sur la marche des Puritains de Bellini.

It began here. Busoni, of course, played Alkan - with glee, as an act of provocation - and encouraged his pupils to work through the Etudes, ops, 35 and 39, which he recommended for republication in 1910 to Emil Hertzka of Universal Edition as "the most significant after (those of) Chopin and Liszt." According to Allan Evans. Etelka Freund (1879-1977), whose recordings have been enjoying a recent small vogue, frequently played Alkan, And Busoni's "disciple," the great Egon Petri, resurrected the Symphony and the Concerto for a series of BBC commemorative concerts over , 938-39 in what may have been their proper premieres, to have them pronounced by one London critic 'a monumental fraud' Though any number of composers and pianists would sell their souls to be capable of such "fraudulence". these ephemeral revelations. however brilliant. were not sufficient to establish Alkan in the concert hall Petri's only surviving go at Alkan is an informal tape of the Symphony knocked off before a primitive recorder in a Mills College practice room in the early 50s- from out-of-focus sound beset by shatter and rumble there emerges a fluently magisterial performance-which became available only in 1992 (*Egon Petri-Volume II*, Pearl (GEMM CD 9966). Thus, it was left to Raymond Lewenthal to reinvent Alkan for our time.

The task could not have fallen to more capable hands, Keenly aware of style (i.e., the many styles of playing still in evidence at the turn of the century and utterly drowned in today's deluge of generic pianism) and alive to the rich and colorful lore of the piano. Lewenthal was that rarest or rare birds-the pianistic giant gifted with a narrative air which, in chromatically scintillant prose, not only transformed mere history into entrancing fables but projected that aura of the fabulous in compelling performances. Collectors will lovingly recall *The Operatic Liszt* (collector's item LP RCA LSC-2895), the revelatory 1966 album from which this recording of *Hexameron* is drawn. with its extensive chatty, and richly informed chapter - the jacket-size illustrated brochure running to some seven closely printed pages (excerpts of which are reprinted in the CD booklet) - which captured, with a masterly grasp, in telling detail, the

Romantic piano's most exuberantly abundant moment of flowering, accompanying what remain, a generation later, the finest, grandest, most fully realized performances of *Hexameron* and the *Norma Fantasy* on discs (the latter, sadly, just a couple of minutes too long for inclusion here), True, other pianists - preeminently the young Alfred Brendel - were going over the same ground and making the same points at the same time. hut no one came close to revealing the art of the still derided operatic fantasy so persuasively, opulently. and decisively as Raymond Lewenthal. Indeed, the "Romantic revival" that has over-taken us with such crushing vengeance may be said to have been spearheaded by Lewenthal's recordings of works by Scharwenka, Rubinstein, Henselt and Liszt, among others. I have it, by the way, on the authority of Donald Manildi, curator of the International Piano Archive at the University of Maryland, that Lewenthal recorded the complete but never issued *Années de pèlerinage* for RCA - a self-commending candidate for immediate release.

But it's the Alkan revival that concerns us On November 30. 1963. Lewenthal presented a now legendary two-hour program on WKAI. New York. in which he discussed and performed Alkan's music (the piquancy of his palaver may be heard on a bonus disc that accompanied the superb *Funeral March for a Papagallo and other Grotesqueries of Alkan* - a collector's item LP (Columbia M 30234). Overwhelming public response led to critically acclaimed recitals (Town Hall Carnegie Hall. and on to London, his richly edited selection of *The Piano music of Alkan* (New York. G. Schirmer, 1964), and the 1965 recording (RCA LSC-2815) reproduced here -the first and greatest Alkan recording ever. This pride of place has been retained for over a generation by virtue of an unerring sense of style which - as Lewenthal's close and extensive annotations to the work. he chose to republish make clear - permeate, the smallest detail, given wing by colossal technical and unabashed showmanship, Although currently out of print, *The Piano music of Alkan* should be required study for every piano student, if only because it introduces, under the rubric *style sévère*, the forgotten face of piano playing - sec (and sparing of pedal,. rhythmically precise and in strict time- lacking a working knowledge of which the works, not only of Alkan hut of Chabrier, Saint-Saens, Fauré, Bizet and Ravel, among many others, lose essential point. The *style sévère* may be heard in recordings by Saint-Saens, Yvonne Lefébure, vestigially in the poised clarity of the sadly underrated Jean Doyen, and with etched acerbity here. Its perhaps acidic charms may seem rebarbative until mellowed in the ear, after which nothing else quite suffices in this music If I may be allowed a personal reminiscence, I well recall my own astonished moment of indecision when in the fall of 1965, a clerk at the Walter J Moses Company in Richmond, Virginia,. insisting that I hear the latest thing, pulled Lewenthal's album and dropped the needle on that "tune distinctly more Semitic than Hellenic" that opens *Le Festin d'Esope*, crackling with a curiously, dry, wry, effervescence - "What is this? Some kind of joke?" - before I capitulated, utterly enthralled As in everything he published. Lewenthal's brilliant straightforwardness. laced with facetious *bonhommie*, may divert one from the fact that he is saying important things, Introducing *Le Festin*, for instance, he admonishes the would-be performer that "if you have no sense of humor,. stay away from this music. If your audience doesn't laugh during *Le festin*, something is wron g~ either with them or you!" Then, glossing the opening. he tells you that ,

Right from the beginning of this piece we are faced with Alkan's demand for strict rhythm, ...Take Alkan literally and play strictly in time at his metronome mark. and *with* the machine. Do not simply use it to set the tempo and then turn it off. thinking that your sense of rhythm will do the rest. It will not. The only variations you will be unable to bring up to tempo, even with practice, will be numbers XVII and XVIII. which no one is likely to be able to play at the speed of four notes to M.M. 252!

Such direct. prescient. practical advice is seldom encountered either in teaching or in the literature (though one finds it in the editions of Busoni, Godowsky and Cortot) - we prefer

our certainties to be decently abstract and neutrally pedagogic, and do not trust them unless they wear an air of dour pedantry. Lewenthal, on the other hand, takes you avuncularly by the arm at every turn through the often bewildering labyrinth of Alkan's works. If I labor the point it is because pianists, even very good pianists, so often bypass or miss it in their rush to commit to disc fatuous, uninformed, and out-of-focus performances that convey Alkan to the public as an overhyped bore. e.g. Bernard Ringeissen at his timorous lows (his disastrously plodding account of the Symphony), Mark Salkind (who, like Ringeissen, compounds his offenses by repeating the exposition of the Symphony's first movement), Alan Weiss, and Jacqueline Méfano, among others. Here, long overdue, is the needful corrective.

Moving to the big league, Marc-André Hamelin, one of the greatest of living pianists, takes the little Barcarolle (Hyperion CDA66794. *FIII!filrl!* 19'2) as if it were by Chopin – muted, lingering, rather self-consciously *nuance*, not unmoving, but ultimately soporific. *Chez* Lewenthal, the melody, shackled to its obsessive (or "hypnotic") accompaniment in strict time, takes on a disquietingly, mordant character – pure Alkan – rising to the surprising "crushed tones" of the middle section, which Lewenthal aptly calls "Gershwinian" ("for Alkan, in experimenting with polymodality, has happily hit on precisely the combination used in the blues"), and which Hamelin bowdlerizes by playing down. Not unnaturally, for there are similarities and perhaps even a direct influence, Hamelin laces into the *Quasi-Faust* (1847) as if it were the *Liszt/Sonata* (1853) at its stormiest, with great flexibility of *tempo-rubato* in the best sense – in which the surging ahead and holding back complement one another to a mighty *Sturm und Drang* effect. But Lewenthal's crisp, occasionally rattling, tone and rhythmic relentlessness strike off more dazzling coruscations, owing more to the hand than to the pedal, with an even more powerfully gripping élan. Hamelin's are grand, staggering performances, but Lewenthal surpasses him by projecting, through the fireworks, those integral quirks in the Alkanistic quiddity quite inadequately indicated by such habitual terms as *obsessive*, *grotesque*, *hypnotic*, *eldritch* or *bizarre*. Something of this elusive quality was touched upon by Busoni's friend, the composer Bernard van Dieren, which he noted in Alkan "the 'texture' of the gnarled oak-bark next to the silkiness of a lily petal". Nor should it go unremarked that Lewenthal's is the only recorded performance to bring off wholly and persuasively the awesome, impossible nine-part fugue – of which most pianists make a shamefully appalling hash – near the end of the *Quasi-Faust*. Hamelin essays it valiantly, keeping things moving and balanced until just before the end, where he seems to lose concentration and becomes swamped in the plethora. With Lewenthal, and only with Lewenthal, the fugue conveys that sense of a mysterious, healing alchemy justifying the radiantly triumphant burst with which the movement concludes.

At least as early as *The Piano Music of Alkan* in 1964, if not earlier, Lewenthal was referring to "my book on Alkan," always announced as if it were just on its way to the printer. In 1981, following Lewenthal's notes for Alkan's cello and piano *Sonate de concert*, op. 47, performed by Yehuda Hanani and Edward Auer (a collector's item LP, Finnidar SR 9030), we were still being told that "his monumental biography of Alkan, representing thirty years of research, will soon be published." Meanwhile, in 1976, Ronald Smith's *Alkan: The Enigma* was published in London by Kahn & Averil. No one who cares for Alkan can be other than grateful for this, though its 110 pages of scarce documentation, fading glimpses, and conjecture amount to little more than confirmation of van Dieren's remark that "The best one could do in an attempt to making something of his life would be to suggest that it was wrapped in mystery". But Lewenthal studied with Olga Samaroff who, in turn, had been a pupil of Alkan's natural son, Elie Miriam Delaborde – perhaps he inherited inside information. Those who have seen the manuscript say that it is monumental indeed, an adventurously researched life-and-times biography strutted in Lewenthal's most flamboyant

manner. Forced to abandon the concert stage by recurrent heart trouble, Lewenthal passed on in 1988 without having found a publisher, though, as his remaining correspondence (now in the International Piano Archive) attests, it was not for lack of trying. That American publishers should have passed up this coup is nearly incredible and wholly disgusting. The manuscript remains in private hands, but there is talk of overseas publication in the not-too-distant future. Perhaps a show of interest or outright lobbying might expedite matters. Any (of you pianophiles on the Net care to get this going?

It remains to say that this is a superb production, introduced by fine, informed liner notes on Lewenthal by Lisa Kingsley, who has wrung the neck of Lewenthal's eloquence by abridging his notes from the LP albums. Familiar illustrations and photos of the artist from the originals evoke a touch of nostalgia. At climactic moments the sound can turn clangy and a bit congested, and inevitably there is hiss-yet other legacies of original time and place-which one ceases to notice in the onrush of splendor. Elan continues to command the grateful respect of all piano aficionados by breathing new digital life into key, landmark, classic performances that the volume-obsessed major labels have forgotten or won't touch. Elan gave us not only Michael Habermann's Sorabji (see *Fanfare* 19:2) - far and away the most persuasive introduction to this arcane fare and a *ne plus ultra* of recorded piano literature - but has rescued recordings of the Scharwenka and Paderewski piano concertos from 1969-70, respectively, with the great Earl Wild at the electrifying top of his form (Elan CD 82266). As with Lewenthal's Alkan, these are items which, if the avid concern of a mere niche market, deserve by intrinsic merit to remain permanently available; and through Elan, with such adventures supported by a solid catalog of critically acclaimed recordings by Santiago Rodriguez, they are more likely to do so than if they had been reissued by RCA. Let us count our blessings - and grab this immediately. The Alkan revival began here, with Lewenthal's definitive performances, against which all later comers must be judged, and from their renewed availability one confidently predicts that the growing interest in Alkan can only take on, so to speak, a new élan. *Sine qua non!*

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