

# **THE ALKAN SOCIETY**

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## **BULLETIN NO.56: NOVEMBER 1999**

I begin too often with an apology for the long delay of our Bulletin. There was a shortage of news at the beginning of the year, and since the summer there has been a shortage of time and efficiency. As my French counterpart has reminded me in no uncertain terms, our Bulletins are our only contact with most of our members. Please be assured that the Society is still running; our bank account is well in the black; and we can look forward to some exciting events in the year 2000.

I must thank all the members who kept the faith by sending subscriptions or donations during this fallow year. Your contributions have all been recorded, and if you wish I will carry them over for 2000. If, in the usual rush to fill envelopes once the bulletin is printed and ready for dispatch, I enclose a form for subscriptions or donations which you feel is unnecessary, then please be assured that I will keep your name on the mailing list. As you will read later, we can certainly use some new funds, so any donations or subscriptions for 2000 will be welcomed and acknowledged. I intend to issue a receipt or membership card for the coming year, with each paid-up member allocated a reference number. This will enable you to obtain discounts on some products such as the new CDs of the chamber music and the CD from Symposium Records containing Nicholas King's organ recital. I will also be publishing a new list of members, which will be much easier to update on the new system described in the next paragraph.

As you can see, my sister's redundant computer has now arrived. I am still learning how to use it, and experiencing the usual frustrations of hunting through Bible-sized instruction books to see what facilities are available, or looking in vain at indexes to solve problems or find a desired procedure, when none of the words I think should cover it seems to be there. So please do not expect anything too fancy yet. I can now type letters with accents in most European languages except the *hticek* in Czech and Slovene and the *s-cedilla* in Turkish (which, oddly enough, even my 32 Kilobyte BBC could do with a lot of embedded codes and back-spacing), but I still cannot work out why typing " produces @ and vice versa. At least I can check the spelling, mainly to track down misprints, which are usually phantom k's and I's that this over-sensitive and rather dirty keyboard tends to insert: it was used by two young children whose school-work eventually overflowed its hard-disk drive, hence my good fortune in acquiring it in a cleaned-up version -magnetically cleaned-up, that is. Perhaps my fingers" more used to an "acoustic" (unplugged!) typewriter with definitely no millennium bug, are twitching over the "home keys". It never happened with my old BBC Acorn, which for all its limitations was, and still is, a well-built piece of kit. I just hope that its disk-drive holds out until I have transferred the address-files to the new machine -manually of course: the two machines are too different for any hope of electronic connections. But I do not want to use the change of computer as an excuse. That can be left to the National Insurance office in Newcastle-upon- Tyne, which took two months to tell me that they could not answer my question because of the new computer, then another six months to answer it; then, when I had filled in the space provided on the form they sent, told me a further month later that they could not organise direct debits after all - because of the new computer!

Since I am now working with Windows version 3.1, I am still some seven years out-of-date; so I regret that there is still no website, E-mail or other facilities that any self-respecting office should have. My apologies to our technophiles.

One more piece of "knocking copy" at Britain's expense before the Bulletin begins: overseas readers may need to know that some of our telephone numbers are changing again. You will have noticed that my rubber stamp still has my telephone number from before the last change, without the extra 1 after the zero (or the 44 for overseas callers). To follow the magnificent piece of forward thinking called "phONEday"! because of the extra 1, which should already have generated enough material, if sensibly allocated, to give fifty possible numbers to every man, woman, child and dog in Britain for several phones, fax, mobile, ISDN, E-mail and Internet, we now have another change which means that from 22 April 2000 (christened by the brainstorming marketing men "The Big Number" -aren't you excited already?) there are several new area codes. The most important ones are for London: 0171- numbers will be 0207- and 0181- will be 0208-. (Both numbers work now, but only the new one will from 22 April. ) Area codes for four other cities will also change: Cardiff from 01222- to 02920-~ Coventry from 01203- to 02476-~ Portsmouth from 01705- to 02392-; and Southampton from 01703- to 02380-. Northern Ireland will have 028- for all its numbers, and five- and six-figure numbers there will become eight-figure numbers. The other main features are: 00- for international numbers and 01- for most existing area codes, which will not change; 02- for new area codes and local numbers; 03-, 04-, 05- and 06- for "new numbers for the future" (I can hardly wait); 07- for mobile phones, pagers and personal numbers; 08- for special rate numbers, including "Freefone", "Lo-call" and "Nationalcall" (sic) rate numbers; and 09- for premium rate (officially "competitions, information and entertainment services" -in other words, sex lines, feeble-minded morning TV quiz questions, cricket scores for the masochists who follow England in the vain hope of a win, etc. ) and "multimedia" services.

All the Northern Irish numbers have changed, and for details of these, as well as solutions to any other confusion caused by my attempted summary, people in Britain can call the helpline on Freefone 0800-731-0202, and anyone can visit the BT website at [www.numberchange.bt.com](http://www.numberchange.bt.com) where the cyber-version of John Pendle" the "BT Number Change Programme Manager", should be - waiting for you. My own telephone and fax number remains the same, having followed me from my old house and changing only twice since I moved; quite modest upheavals compared with the five changes inflicted on my poor mother, all at the same address in Scotland.

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### **Ronald Smith's meeting at the Royal Academy of Music, November 1998: "The Alkan Saga"**

A well-attended meeting with over forty members and guests enjoyed a fascinating and amusing talk from our President about the long and complicated "Alkan Saga", or the story of how the chamber music came to be recorded by him nearly ten years ago, but so far not released on CD.

Many of his anecdotes must, for his and our protection, remain in the minds of those who were present, but a few salient points can be mentioned without exposing too many skeletons in the sizeable closet. Ronald related that he first encountered the score of the *Sonate de Concert* (Cello Sonata) Op. 47 when he was introduced to it by Robert Collet. As he tells in *Alkan Vol. 2: The Music*, its first performance was by Alkan himself and its dedicatee Auguste Franchomme in 1857.

He also included it in a *Petit concert* in 1875 with the younger cellist Leon Jacquard. The work was recorded in America in 1980 by Yehuda Hanani and Edward Auer; the LP may still be found in some second-hand shops but has not been reissued on CD. It is one of the few Alkan scores available in a modern engraved edition" prepared for Barenreiter in 1973 by Prof. Hugh Macdonald, the author of the Alkan entry in the "New Grove" and one of our Vice-Presidents.

As some members may remember, it was John Ogdon who gave one of the first European performances of the piece in the Netherlands, though I have not yet found the date in our archives, or the name of the cellist. Our Bulletin previewed a performance in Folkestone by Rohan and Druvi de Saram in June 1982, which our member Tony Webster reviewed for the January 1983 issue. There was also a performance on BBC radio by Moray Welsh and Linda Bustani, which my late father recorded for me but for which again I have insufficient evidence to give a date -perhaps a web-surfer or archivist could track it down in the Radio Times back issue.

In searching past Bulletins, I have also recalled that Richard Shaw (piano) and Jacqueline Shave (violin) gave what was probably the British premiere of the *Grand Duo Concertant*, Op. 21 (c.1840) in December 1983, in a public concert in Hampstead. The Piano Trio, Op. 30 (1841) was played by Andrew Ball and two Guildhall students, Brian Wilson (violin) and Sarah Butcher (cello) at a joint meeting of the Alkan and Chopin Societies in the Polish Institute in November 1983: a fine performance as I recall, the more so because some of the team had been obliged to learn the work in just two weeks due to the indisposition of the intended players.

The composer and musicologist Harold Truscott gave a lecture to the Society about all three works in March 1986. He criticised some aspects of the Duo, particularly its mixture of styles, but considered the Trio to be among the finest of the 19th century. Concerning the cello sonata, he concentrated on metronome marks -it is the only one of the three works to use them -and the undesirable effects in three recorded performances of seriously deviating from them.

Returning to Ronald's talk: it was indeed John Ogdon who was first proposed to make the recordings of all three chamber works; the names of some younger violinists and cellists who are very well known today were also mentioned at the time. Ogdon was very interested: his generosity towards all kinds of potentially uncommercial projects was well known. However, financial questions got in the way, the idea was never followed through and Ronald Smith was eventually the pianist who learned all three works -the Cello Sonata, the *Grand Duo Concertant* and the Piano Trio -and committed them to memory, a remarkable and unusual feat in itself for chamber music. Performances followed, including the Cello Sonata with Christopher Bunting at a meeting of the Society, and in the Alkan Centenary Festival in November -December 1988, the 150th anniversary of his birth, where they were joined by Nona Liddell for the Trio and the Grand Duo Concertant. In March that year, Alkan was the BBC Radio 3 Composer of the Week, and Ronald's performances, recorded in the BBC studio, of the Grand Duo Concertant with James Clark, and of the *Sonate de Concert* with Moray Welsh, were broadcast, as well as the long-unavailable recording of the Trio made in 1975 by the Mirecourt Trio (John Jensen, Kenneth Goldsmith and Terry King). In the same week, he and the same two players gave a triumphant performance of all three chamber works in the Wigmore Hall, London, on the 100th anniversary of Alkan's death. There were other performances during that year, including Winchester and Salisbury, where Nona Liddell and Moray Welsh were Ronald's partners.

Eventually it was decided that Ronald, James Clark and Moray Welsh would record the works for Nimbus. Since with all repeats observed, the total length just exceeded the capacity of one CD, Ronald added several solo works, including three major-key Etudes and the satirical *Capriccio alla Soldatesca*, which he had only ever recorded on a historic piano for Oryx in his first Alkan LP. It was the first recording made in the new Nimbus concert hall, and a second series of sessions were used to improve the sound of the solo works. The forthcoming release on Nimbus has appeared in the discography ever since, but the release never came. In the meantime, two complete recordings on a single CD, with some repeats omitted, were released: from the German Trio Alkan for Marco Polo and a French team for Timpani. A third recording on CD of the Duo and the Cello Sonata

appeared in France on Adda and Valois respectively. But still no Nimbus...

At this point, much discretion is needed, and all I should say is that after many years of waiting, with no sign of a CD release, the raw "unedited" and incompletely labelled Nimbus tapes were at last made available to Appian Publications and Recordings (APR), the company which has already re-released Ronald's 1977 recording of the complete Op. 39 minor-key Etudes and other works, originally made for EMI. The matter was not at all simple even then: the Nimbus digital tapes used a unique 'U-Matic' format which first had to be transcribed to give a conventional DAT, a process in which Eliot Levin of Symposium Records gave much technical help. Then the studio tapes were all long "takes" of whole movements, which has always been Ronald's favoured method, and there had been no "patching" sessions to correct short passages or small mistakes, which are bound to occur in such technically demanding music with three simultaneous players. Naturally, almost ten years after the sessions, making such corrections now is out of the question. The final edited result would thus be unlikely to be note-perfect in the modern way.

After this somewhat gloomy introduction, the meeting then heard several complete single "takes" of movements from each of the three works, as well as of the *Capriccio*, in their "raw" unedited form. Immediately things seemed much more optimistic. The performances were already stunning: the virtuosity and sweep of the music was plain to hear, and the accuracy was also impressive. If a number of equally good takes of each movement were available, the editing to give an acceptable performance for CD suddenly seemed a real possibility. During the question-and-answer session which followed, it was clear that all present felt very enthusiastic about going ahead with the project, and that the Society should give what help it could.

APR, as is well known, mainly deals with archive recordings and does not have its own digital editing facilities, which can be very expensive to hire from a large company. However, a much more economical arrangement could be made, and the Alkan Society has been able to help with these costs, which came to just under £500 plus V A T for the first, second and final editing sessions. To put this in context, this represents about three of our regular six-monthly War Stock receipts from Julian Keauffling's legacy, and about a sixth of our bank balance at the end of last year. In return, we are to be allocated a page of the CD booklet for publicity, and our members will be offered a good discount on the direct-order price of the CDs, which is itself already several pounds less than the typical price in a London shop. We are also supporting what will probably be the best available performance on record of these fine works. The work has continued throughout this year, and has reached the test-pressing stage.

The CDs, which have already been allocated the number APR 7032, are due to be released in March 2000, with a booklet containing texts in three languages. This should coincide with several other events: firstly, the publication of the revised single-volume paperback edition of Ronald's two books about Alkan's life and music, with the latest discography, appendices about the two Alkan societies based in Britain and France, new information and corrections. There will also be the release, again on APR, of Ronald's new Beethoven disc, containing the *Waldstein*, *Appassionata* and Op. 111 sonatas. And it will be the fiftieth anniversary of his recording career, which began with the famous record of the Bach triple concerto with Denis Matthews and Edwin Fischer.

## Concerts

The Liszt and Alkan Societies were both well represented at Leslie Howard's Wigmore Hall recital last January, in which he played an interesting programme including Alkan's *Symphonie* for solo piano and his transcription of the *Cavatina* from Beethoven's Op. 130 string quartet. "Interesting"

means here that it was not a capacity audience, possibly because he was playing Alkan rather than Liszt. It was a brave choice of programme, especially because the recital took place shortly before the completion of his exhaustive, and exhausting, recording on almost 100 CDs of the entire output for piano of Liszt, including every fragment, revision, or alternative version known. The rest of the programme was Beethoven, but no sonatas: instead, the strange Fantasy in G minor, Op. 77, the Op. 33 Bagatelles and the 32 Variations in C minor.

The main point of interest for me was the Beethoven transcription, which I had never seen nor heard. It was a very "straight" transcription, faithful to the score, and perhaps the only sign that it was by Alkan was the occasional very large stretch. Leslie Howard played it very well. The Symphonie was played, shall we say, in the right spirit, with tempi all very close to Alkan's metronome marks. However, there were a number of inaccuracies, mainly minor lapses of memory, including one passage of rather desperate flailing in the finale until he got back on track. All the same, I enjoyed the performance: it was in the right style, with discipline in the speeds and "orchestral" in the sense of avoiding over-expressive "pianistic" rubato. Howard always does his research -his CD booklets for the Liszt series are admirable: worth binding into a book for anyone who cannot afford to buy the discs -and the response of the audience, who were certainly not all Alkanians, should encourage him to continue to play Alkan's music. I would go to hear him play Alkan again.

In June came the eagerly-awaited three-concert series of Marc-Andre Hamelin which included a performance of Alkan's *Grande Sonate* in the first recital. After his outstanding CD of the work, which has been described by some writers as the best Alkan disc ever (I would prefer to say one of the best), expectations were bound to be very high. I heard Ronald Smith's first modern-day performance of the work in 1974, and Hamelin's in Jersey three years ago: only two hearings in over twenty years make any performance a special event, and there were many good things this time, even if some aspects were disappointing. My chief concern was that the first movement did seem too fast for comfort: Ronald Smith in concert, and on record, brought out the cross-rhythms better. The lyrical second section also suffered from a certain restlessness in the tempo. The final page is of course horrendously difficult, and a few mishaps can be forgiven: far better to take the courageous approach than to play safe and lose the carefree spirit of the 20-year-old depicted in the piece. *Quasi-Faust* was altogether more satisfying, and as so often happens with this pianist, the more extreme the difficulty, the more eagerly he commits himself to the music. It was very impressive; and even if he adopted some of Lewenthal's suggestions to share some of the leaps between the hands for accuracy, and preferred to avoid Smith's, and Alkan's, "symbolic" crossed arms at the start of the recapitulation, it was only a visual matter, for the left hand is so strong that the ear would never have picked up the difference. The performance continued to enthral the listeners in the two slow movements: the pessimistic ending is so far in mood, and indeed in elapsed time, from the exuberance of the first two movements that suitably enthusiastic applause is slow to arrive; but arrive it did, and my initial misgivings were largely set aside. It was a moving performance, as any committed "rendition" of this unique, strange work is bound to be.

The rest of the programme contained Medtner's *Sonata Romantica*, a haunting work some of us had heard in Blackheath last year, and Sophie-Carmen Eckhardt-Gramatte's 6th Sonata, *Drei Klavierstucke*, which is an unconscious tribute to Alkan in consisting of movements for left, right and "reunited" hands -not merely reunited, but combining the very different material of the first two movements. Hamelin introduced the work in his characteristic humorous style (though possibly too quietly for the back rows). These sonatas are very rarely heard in concert even from Hamelin, who recorded them for Altarus ten years ago, though he did play the third and longest at Husum in 1992. Once again a technically challenging work brought out the best in him, and the complex textures were presented with remarkably clarity. More rarities followed in three encores: Cécile Chaminade's *Theme varié*, Massenet's *Valse folie* (which was indeed a mad piece), and John Field's

*Andante inedit.*

Unfortunately there seemed to be very little press coverage of this series. The only review I found was from Andrew Clements in *The Guardian*, which was concerned with the second recital of Schubert's last Sonata in B flat (D. 960) and Medtner's largest sonata, *Night Wind*. He found very little good to say about the Schubert, and considered the Medtner to be a "remorseless piece, with...overblown rhetoric and miscalculated architecture". It would be a waste of space to quote any of his many criticisms of the Schubert. I could not hear this recital, but I have heard Hamelin play both works before: while one obviously tends to go for rarities with him, he is a highly intelligent musician who can turn out a perfectly good performance of classical repertoire. If he sometimes seems less involved with the piece when the technical challenges are less obvious, that is an impression caused more by his relaxed appearance at the piano than by any aural evidence. His pianissimo playing is as fine as any I have heard. There are too many critics who refuse to take him seriously because he chooses the more difficult career path in preference to churning out several dozen identical programmes around the world. Let us leave Mr Clements to his Beethoven and Chopin and concern ourselves no further with him.

By most accounts from members of the audience, the standing ovations were saved for the final recital, with more Medtner (the final *Sonate-Idylle*), seven of Godowsky's extravagant recastings of Chopin studies, and Rzewski's modern classic, *The People United will Never be Defeated*. Again, Husum was several years ahead of London: Hamelin played the Rzewski there in 1990, and it was an overwhelming experience then. His recording of the work for Hyperion reached the final stages of the nominations for the *Gramophone* awards this year, and I thought it was a strong contender for the 20th century Instrumental award. His Medtner sonatas too were outstanding both as performances and for recorded sound: though also 20th century, if not particularly radical, they surely deserved to do well in the main Instrumental section. Unfortunately, three of the final six choices in the 20th century section were Hamelin recordings: the complete Medtner sonatas, his Reger *Each and Telemann Variations*, and *The Composer-Pianists*. His total votes easily outweighed the winner, the Berio *Sequenzas* played by members of Ensemble InterContemporain. but until some kind of single transferable vote system can be implemented -or Hamelin stops releasing so many good records in the same year -the ultimate British prize appears to elude him.

David Christophersen has given a performance in Cambridge this year of Alkan's Mozart transcription of the D minor concerto (K. 466), on 1st March in the Faculty of Music concert hall. You may recall that a earlier performance previewed in the Bulletin had to be postponed, but I am sorry that there was no chance to publicise this one. If any members in the area did hear the concert, I would be interested to have your impressions. His programmes usually contain several items which are rarely heard elsewhere, and this one was no exception: apart from Liszt's D flat Concert Study, there were Three Pieces by Maniam, the first performance of Freedman's "Horizons", and Ginastera's Sonata No.1. Incidentally, the Secretary is hoping to play one movement of the Mozart transcription in his programme, mainly of works for woodwind and piano (Poulenc, Glinka, Debussy and Janacek) for Salisbury Chamber Music Club on the last Saturday of February. He hopes that any members of the Salisbury Sinfonia, with whom he played the work two years ago, using Clara Schumann's cadenzas, will not feel too left out if they happen to be in the audience.

There have been several recent performances of Alkan's Concerto for solo piano by Mark Latimer, including one which I heard in Bristol, but I shall cover that later when previewing his London performance of the same programme in St John's, Smith Square on January 31st, a "flier" for which is enclosed with this Bulletin.

## Broadcasts

There have been occasional reports of Alkan broadcasts in programmes like "In Tune" with no pre-published running order - one vaguely mentioned an Alkan study, but could not remember the piece or the artist, merely a torrent of notes. The main scheduled broadcast about which I know was in Piers Lane's "The Piano" programme, one of the better new series, now extended to a whole hour on Thursday afternoon, but losing its Wednesday evening slot. One programme had the theme of "Rarities", and after the opening examples of rare Smetana and a movement from Beethoven's 9th arranged by Wagner, it concentrated on live recordings from Husum, which included Ronald Smith's performance of Alkan's "Les regrets de la nonnette" which was recorded in 1995. Piers had a well-chosen range of examples, and it was rather flattering to hear him drawing some of the material in his commentary from the CD booklets, which have been written by the Secretary since that year .

Since the arrival of Roger Wright as Controller, the quality of Radio 3 seems to be improving. The worst excesses of the over-matey presenters have gone, and there have been some excellent live concerts. "Composer of the Week" is consistently informative, and has been restored to its old position at 9 a.m., though the evening repeat the following week has gone, and I am told that it is unlikely to be restored. The inclusion of composers from the theatrical and jazz worlds, such as Richard Rodgers or Duke Ellington, has also been refreshing, and for all but the most conservative, the serious treatment of biographical material by an expert guest and the copious examples, many specially recorded for the programmes, must surely answer any accusations of "dumbing down". Only fourteen more years remain before it should be Alkan's turn for the five-hour treatment in his bicentenary ...

## Festivals

Husum continues to provide stimulating programmes for the inquisitive in search of rare repertoire. 1999 may not have been the best year of the eleven I have heard, but two recitals stood out in particular. Alexei Lyubimov, often known as a player of the fortepiano in classical repertoire played on period instruments, played a particularly challenging and well-designed programme of great variety. His skill in pianissimo playing was shown in an early John Cage work, "In a Landscape", and in Konstantin Silvestrov's "Kitsch-Musik", which was an exercise in clichés of melody and harmony found in light music. This was just as well in view of another work he played, the 6th Sonata by Galina Ustvolskaya, a relentless fifteen-minute onslaught of tone-clusters and stark two-part writing which almost caused a small scandal: the Husum audience will always give a fair hearing to any new piece, but the ultra-modern styles of the 20th century are not often heard there. As the brutal sounds continued, with clusters using fingers, the palm of the hand, or both forearms at dynamics up to six-fold fortissimo, there was certainly a feeling of restlessness in the room. Small wonder that some emergency retuning of the piano was needed in the interval. Elegies by Rachmaninov and Bartok, and two late Liszt pieces ( *Unstern! Sinistre! Disastro* and *Bagatelle without tonality*) completed the first part of his programme. After the interval came a masterly performance of Ives's "Concord" Sonata which some writers compared with the best moments of earlier years such as Hamelin's Rzewski in 1990.

The other impressive recital for many, and for completely different reasons, was given by the young British pianist Nicholas Walker, who played a large programme including John Field (two Nocturnes), Rachmaninov (Etudes- Tableaux op. 33), Beethoven (*Waldmärchen* variations) and a Balakirev group (he is recording the complete works for ASV) including an unusual impromptu built on two Chopin Preludes, and the impressively virtuosic "Life for the Tsar" paraphrase after

Glinka's opera. These were all played from memory, as was a major work he had learned especially for Husum, the Sonata in F minor (1908) by Liapunov. This is currently unavailable on CD, and if the recording turned out well it would be a good choice for next year's selection of highlights. Liapunov wrote in a post-Lisztian style influenced by Balakirev, and he also wrote twelve Transcendental Studies which completed the key sequence begun by Liszt. Nicholas Walker was himself very impressed with the work, rating it one of his most welcome discoveries of the last few years. His modest platform style, sound technique and thorough preparation certainly pleased the German audience, and I awarded him my usual unofficial accolade of the best *cantabile* of the week, by no means an easy achievement on a bright Steinway D in a small room.

The major disappointment of the week was Kathryn Stott's indisposition for the opening concert, particularly as she had one of the most interesting programmes, including Stenhammer, Faure, John Foulds (1880-1939), Villa-Lobos and Ernesto Lecuona (her CD of whose music was chosen as one of the "CD Review" records of the year on Radio 3). However, her substitute, found at two days' notice, was Piotr Anderszewski, and while he could offer only half a programme of rarities (Bartok 14 Bagatelles, op. 6, and Szymanowski's Masques, op. 30), his performance was intensely musical, both in those works and in a Bach English Suite and four Chopin Mazurkas. It was Anderszewski who became famous in a paradoxical manner by effectively disqualifying himself from the Leeds international competition: after a wonderful Beethoven Diabelli Variations, he took a very long pause, returned to the platform, and was emotionally unable to complete the very short Webern Variations which should have completed his semi-final recital. He is evidently a highly complex person, almost unworldly in his absorption in his music: a recent Wigmore Hall recital had the entire Bach French Overture as an encore. And in Husum he changed the order of his programme without prior warning, which must have caused great turmoil in the radio station as the recital was being broadcast live! But a major musician without doubt, and his five encores in Husum were likewise chosen for expressive musical reasons rather than shallow display: a late Beethoven Bagatelle, Mazurkas by Chopin and Szymanowski, and two Grieg Lyric Pieces.

The other recitals all contained individually good performances -Frederic Chiu's 5th Prokofiev sonata made up for a rather dull set of 24 Pensees fugitives by Alexis de Castillon, which he played well enough but were fairly thin as music -an Alkan sequence would have been much better! Vladimir Stoupel had some interesting music including a Theme and Variations by Camille Chevillard (1872-1923) and the Five Arabesques by Erwin Schulhoff, the Czech composer who was influenced by jazz and was a fine pianist too, but whose prolific output was silenced by the Nazi regime because he was Jewish, a Communist and showed "degenerate" (*entartet*) influences in his music; he died in a prison camp. Andreas Bach played a mainly classical programme of Schubert Sonata in A flat, D. 557), Beethoven (Fantasy in B minor), Schumann (Fantasiestücke op. 111), Liszt (the first Ballade, heard much less often than the second) and Brahms (Schumann variations op. 9), but also an early Debussy Ballade, two pieces by Eugen d'Albert and one by Stephen Heller. Fazil Say, a Turkish pianist, began with Webern (Sonata movement from 1906 and Variations op. 27) and a Gershwin group. He then moved on to music from his own country by Ulvi Cemal Erkin (1907-1972) and by himself. His own style was described as "lukewarm Mokka-Jazz" by the critic of the *Kieler Nachrichten*, Michael Struck, and little more needs to be added: he had a fluent technique but the music made only a shallow impression.

The final recital was a fairly lightweight, but extremely well played, evening of transcriptions, many by the pianist himself, the Dutch musician Frederic Meinders. His own *Rosenkavalier* suite was hugely impressive, as were several transcriptions of Schubert and Gershwin songs, which he interspersed with Schubert-Godowsky, and in particular four virtuosic performances of Rachmaninov songs, again transcribed by him, as well as two Kreisler violin lollipops including *Tambourin chinois*. His opening work, four movements from Liszt's version of the Beethoven Septet, was also

well played: Liszt here giving one of his most restrained transcriptions in a faithful adaptation of the score, in the same spirit as his Beethoven symphony series. Naturally the critic of the *Husumer Nachrichten* did wonder whether such a programme really comprised "rarities", but his was a lone voice among the general appreciation of some very fine piano writing and playing. One of his encores was a cheeky and delicious combination of "Over the Rainbow" from "The Wizard of Oz" and Bach's "Jesu, joy of man's desiring", if you can imagine such a thing.

Apart from Lybimov's and Walker's recitals, the other abiding memory of Husum 1999 will be the lecture given by Dr Lev Ginsburg, the son of Grigory Ginsberg, an astonishingly fine Russian pianist who never gained the international recognition he deserved because he was never allowed to travel beyond the Communist bloc. Fortunately he left many recordings, which are now being rediscovered. His set of two CDs in the Philips series "Great Pianists of the 20th Century" (456 802-2), with a booklet written by Dr Ginsburg, is one of the most revelatory so far, including some wonderful Liszt Hungarian Rhapsodies, a Medtner sonata (*Reminiscenza*), Scriabin, the big Tchaikovsky G major sonata and two paraphrases from his opera *Eugene Onegin* by Liszt and Pabst, the latter containing virtuoso playing of the first order. His quieter pieces, such as the Schubert/Liszt *Serenade* (Standchen), are equally moving. Unfortunately the set does not include the Liszt transcription of Schubert's *Die Forelle* which we heard in the lecture: with luck that may become available elsewhere.

The Blackheath *pianoworks99* festival moved into October this year, but avoiding the Proms season seemed to have little effect on the attendance, which must have been disappointing after such a promising start last year. The scope of Blackheath is much wider than Husum, with several events each day, and including solo recitals, a "Homage to Chopin" in this 150th anniversary year (containing not a note of Chopin's own compositions), chamber music, masterclasses, two-piano recitals with and without percussion, an evening of concertos with the BBC Concert Orchestra, another concert of concertos in chamber versions with string quartet (Chopin no.2, Mozart K. 414, and Malcolm Arnold's concerto for piano duet) a children's concert, a recital of new British music, several works by Kenneth Leighton, who died eleven years ago, including a first performance of his final Five Preludes, a Latin-American evening, a silent film with piano accompaniment, and the final "PianoBash", this year with only two pianos instead of six, but including an orchestra for Michael Daugherty's *Le tombeau de Liberace*. The last work had Artur Pizarro in a silver-lamé suit, an absurdly frilly shirt and a flamboyant cape, and a piano lit up with fairy-lights, recreating the outrageous style of the American popular pianist. The same composers "Lounge Lizards", a witty tribute to the cocktail pianist, was also heard in the festival and a section broadcast live on "Brian Kay's Sunday Morning". With a cast of pianists including three Leeds prizewinners (Frederic Chiu, Stephen Coombs, Piers Lane, Vladimir Ovchinnikov, Artur Pizarro, Jonathan Plowright and Kathryn Stott -happily recovered from her injury and playing brilliantly), there was no shortage of star names either, and one can only imagine that Blackheath is just too far from central London, or the copious publicity simply missed its target. The BBC recorded nearly all the proceedings, so there will be broadcasts to follow, and it is to be hoped that the finances will allow this enterprising venture, the creation of Stephen Coombs, to continue into a third year .

Certainly Jeremy Nicholas has promised some Alkan for next year's edition of his fiendish music quiz for "Pianoraks", this time including our own member Martin Anderson (critic and musical obituarist for *The Independent*) as a late substitute teamed with the BBC announcer Stephanie Hughes. As usual, the combined forces of the audience were the overall winners, but in the official quiz the glamour of Martin's team ( at least, of half of it) lost out to the scholarship and experience of the historian and writer Robert Matthew-Walker and the Hyperion producer Mike Spring.

Blackheath will be the venue for an Alkan event next May, which is previewed in more detail later.

## New Records

The two CD releases which were previewed in the last Bulletin have been released, both rather later than planned. First came the first of two John Ogdon albums in the Philips series "Great Pianists of the 20th Century" (2 CDs, 456913-2), originally intended for release in December 1998 but arriving several months later. This contains his performance of Alkan's *Concerto for solo piano* (Op. 39 nos. 8-10 of Studies in the minor keys) which he recorded in September 1969 (named as "Valentin Alkan" in the CD booklet). The original LP had a striking cover of Alkan's outline with luridly- coloured and distorted pop-art style piano keys on an abstract background, which was briefly seen, by the extremely observant, over the Secretary's left shoulder when he was filmed playing a medley of Swedish music (by Hugo Alfvén, and Benny and Björn of ABBA) for the BBC "Watchdog!" programme a year ago, in an item about IKEA, which had lost the goods he bought in their Croydon store and still not found a replacement two months later. [The BBC tracked the items down in Nottingham, delivered them to Salisbury, and even managed to follow the visual instruction sheet for the linguistically challenged which IKEA assumes to be its customers, and they assembled it on camera for a greatly speeded-up sequence in the programme. So this viewer will gladly pay his licence fee again next year, at least.]

To return to Ogdon: the Concerto recording is a legend among members, but has long been unavailable except to lucky customers in second-hand LP shops. Compared with the performances by Ronald Smith or Marc-André Hamelin, it may be rather rough in parts, and the final movement is curiously slow, but nothing Ogdon played could ever be ignored, and it can be thoroughly recommended, especially at the two-for-one price of the set. In addition, Ogdon's recording of the Busoni concerto was equally a classic in its day. The set also has Busoni's Variations and Fugue on Chopin's C minor Prelude, the 1931 version of Rachmaninov's 2nd Sonata, and Scriabin's 4th Sonata, one of his most approachable and tuneful.

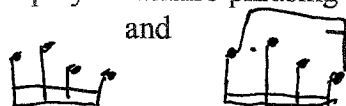
The recorded sound is very acceptable, though it seems to have been taken from the final master or the LP rather than studio tapes, because the bar that was missing on the LP is still missing on the CD. So in a sense, Ogdon's was not the first *complete* performance of the Concerto. Ronald Smith's first recording for EMI in 1970 (with a unicorn on the cover) contained several cuts, ingeniously devised by him, to the first movement which "tightened" the structure and allowed a superior sound for its 22-minute duration, without going as far as Alkan's drastic forty-page cut, but still omitted the most lyrical section and perhaps gave the impression of a more relentless piece than it really is. By 1977, the technology had improved to allow an uncut first movement of almost half an hour, and it is that version on the APR re-release of Op. 39 that is *the* essential Alkan album for newcomers.

Incidentally, the missing bar is in the finale at 9.40 - in the score, it is on the penultimate page, second system, first bar .

The other re-release is Raymond Lewenthal's second Alkan album for RCA, which is included in its entirety on an Elan double album entitled "Raymond Lewenthal - the Concerto Recordings" (Elan CD 82284). This release did not arrive in my Salisbury shop until September this year, which means that the original advertisement in the *Gramophone* was almost a year too soon. However, it was worth the wait. The Alkan disc contains the *Sonatine*, *Petit conte*, *Le tambour* (sic), *Marcia funèbre* (sic), *Sulla morte d'un pappagallo*, *Les diabolins*, *Etude in A flat*, *Scherzetto*, *Gros temps*, *Les soupirs*, *Barcarollette*, *Héraicles* (sic) *et Democrite* and *Le frisson* -and that is exactly how they

are listed on the CD case and in the booklet, with no indication of opus numbers or the suites from which they are taken. Indeed, the documentation is by far the poorest I have seen for a long time: there are no notes about the music, only a biographical note about Lewenthal, on a single folded sheet of four pages, of which the first is the cover picture and the last advertisements for two other Elan releases by Lewenthal and Earl Wild. This is a great pity, especially in view of the thorough documentation with the first Elan re-release of Lewenthal's first Alkan album with the *Symphonie*, *Quasi-Faust*, *Le festin d'Esope* and the Op. 65 *Barcarolle*, as well as the *Hexameron* variations by Liszt and others, which reproduced much of his programme notes for the original releases.

All the same, it is good to have these performances on CD at last, with a better sound than the LP and no pre-echo from the over-modulated original pressings. The performance of the *Sonatine* is particularly highly regarded, with fast tempi and a really spirited approach. Lewenthal was also one of the few pianists who observed and played Alkan's phrasing in the Scherzo as he intended, showing clearly the difference between



For the benefit of relative newcomers to Alkan's music, a more complete list of the music is as follows:

*Sonatine*, Op. 61 (Allegro vivace, Allegramente, Scherzo-Menuetto, Tempo giusto)

From *Esquisses*, Op. 63: *La vision* (no. 1), *Le frisson* (7), *Les soupirs* (11)

*Barcarollette* (12), *Héraclite et Démocrite* (39), *Les diabolins* (45)

*Scherzetto* (47)

From *Les mois*, Op. 74: *Gros temps* (no. 10)

From *Two Caprices*, Op. 50: *Le tambour bat aux champs* (no. 2)

*Petit conte* (without op. no.)

From *12 Etudes in the major keys*, Op. 35: No. 8 in A flat (*Lento-appassionato*)

Funeral March on the Death of a Parrot (Italian title: *Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un pappagallo*; - French title: *Marche funèbre sur la mort d'un papagallo*), for SATB voices, three oboes and bassoon

[Titles as printed in Billaudot edition]

The "Parrot" has the *basso profundo* recitative, presumably from Lewenthal, but is otherwise a faithful performance of the piece, and all the other piano pieces are played well too. The rest of the album has concertos: the 4th Rubinstein in D minor, the Henselt in F minor, the finale of Scharwenka's 2nd in C minor, and the Liszt *Totentanz* - the last in Lewenthal's unique and bizarre arrangement, with tolling bells and sepulchral acoustic. The Henselt is, of course, available in a modern recording by Hamelin, together with the two Alkan *Concerti da camera*, but Lewenthal's performance compares well. The Rubinstein too is a very attractive work, with a rollicking finale that is instantly appealing.

The previous Elan release of Lewenthal's first Alkan album (CD 82276), with the *Symphonie*, *Le festin*, etc. and *Hexameron*, has been duplicated by BMG Classics on the new "High Performance" label, though also at mid-price (09026 63310 2 BIEM/GEMA). This may seem rather pointless, but the RCA has much to recommend it, particularly for anyone who did not buy the Elan version. It has been remastered with 24-bit technology, compared with 20 for Elan, and a 96 kHz sampling rate, and the sound is noticeably superior. Whether that matters or not, the other advantage is that the CD booklet is even more detailed than Elan's, with all the original liner notes and also the original cover art, with a glowering Lewenthal in concert-suit by the piano, which certainly drew my attention to it when I discovered it in the Liverpool record library over thirty years ago. Rob Cowan welcomed the release in *The Independent* of 25 June 1999: "Open the booklet...and you see him standing there, a Harry H. Corbett look-alike draped in a black cape and posing manfully against a dramatic backdrop of clouds... few later recordings have ever matched the sheer bravura of Le-

wenthal's manic selection.

"Aesop sets things in motion with a gallery of animals as suggested in 25 dazzling variations, each more outlandish than the last and based on an impish little theme that lodges obstinately in your memory." [It was certainly that piece which, coming at the start of the album, made the most immediate impression on me and Roderick Munday at Birkenhead School, and indeed was the music used as the signature tune for a TV arts programme, "Look of the Week".] "Quasi-Faust" is the second movement of Alkan's Grande Sonate and in some respects anticipates Liszt, while the four-movement "Symphony" is - like "Aesop's Feast" - extracted from a massive set of 12 studies in minor keys. The first movement hints at Mendelssohn, the second (a tongue-in-cheek *Marche funèbre*) at Prokofiev, and the whole is wickedly witty in a way that Haydn might have been had he lived 100 years later.

"Modern scholarship tells us that Alkan wasn't, in fact, crushed by a falling bookcase (this particular rumour persisted for many years and even the CD booklet perpetuates it), though even stranger notions are suggested in his music. Lewenthal plays at white heat, both for Alkan and in an equally zany set of variations on a theme from Bellini's *I Puritani* by Liszt, and in works by Thalberg, Pixis, Herz, Czerny and Chopin. " [Either Mr Cowan or his sub-editor is confused here. Liszt wrote the introduction, the arrangement of the theme, one variation, several link passages and the finale; the other five composers wrote a variation each.] "The recordings are brittle but impressive. "

An entirely new recording on the Italian label Agora (AG 105.1) by the "Duo Alkan" (Alberto Baldrighi and Anne Colette Ricciardi) is entitled "L'Opera a Quatre Mains" and includes Alkan's *Don Giovanni* Fantasy. The whole disc is delightful, and extremely well played. The other works are by Herz (variations based on a march from Auber's "Philtre" [I have not yet found the original title of the opera -one piece of library work for which there has been no time ]), Czerny (Fantasia elegante on a theme from Bellini's *Norma*, and Introduction and variations on a theme from Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*), Pixis (Dramatic fantasy on themes from Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*), and Thalberg (Fantasy on themes from Rossini's *Moses*) -most of the *Hexameron* composers, in other words. The last-named is a transcription by J. Benedict of Thalberg's original piece for two hands. It is brilliantly co-ordinated and played by the two musicians, though it gains nothing on the original and perhaps loses some of that version's sense of danger. A good performance of the original by Roberto Cappello is on the 1993 Husum disc (Rarities of Piano Music from Schloss von Husum, Danacord DACOCD 419) and on the complete recording on two CDs of his debut recital there (Roberto Cappello /"Ticket to Concert", Artist Memory Club, AMCCD 93002-2).

Agora records are distributed in Britain by a small but efficient company called "One for You". My local shop had been visited by their representative recently and obtained it for me very quickly at a good price. In case of difficulty, you can try the company directly on 01223-504620, and the price will be £14 plus £1 postage and packing. The CD booklet, incidentally, has texts in Italian and English.

Surfers of the Internet have discovered a few other reissues of Alkan LPs. They include the Michael Ponti performances of minor-key Etudes from the old Vox Candide recording, on a double CD set (Vox Box 2 #5151); one disc contains Nos. 1-7 and 12 (*Comme le vent, En rythme molossique, Scherzo diabolico, the Symphonie* and *Le festin d'Esopé*). Ponti always had a good technique and a broad repertoire, though his performances have not always been very subtle: he was the first, and probably the loudest, pianist I heard at Husum. His performance of *Le festin* includes the bizarre interpretation of the tied notes in Variation 2, which he plays as repeated notes throughout: an impressive piece of pianism, but surely not what Alkan intended. Certainly I have never heard another pianist play them in that way. The rest of the set contains studies by Hummel (24 Etudes, Op. 125), Moscheles (nine: six from the 24 of Op. 70, and three from the 12 of Op. 95), Moszkowski (one, "Per aspera ad astra, No.6 from 15 *Etudes de virtuosité*), Tausig (two Concert. etudes, Op.

I nos. I & 2), Rubinstein (one: the well-known "Staccato" Etude, No.2 from 6 Etudes Op. 23) and Henselt (12 Etudes caractéristiques, Op. 2). All are played by Ponti except the Hummel, which is played by Mary Louise Boehm. This information came from the site of amazon.com and their price was \$9.49.

The Bulletin of the societe Alkan has reported on a curiosity from Japan: a performance, produced with the aid of a computer, of the Op. 39 Etudes, *Le chemin de fer* Op. 27, and the Mozart D minor Concerto arrangement, the last-named work being otherwise unobtainable on CD. The number is JNCD-1006. The perpetrator of this is Michael Nanasakov, an alter ego of Junichi Nanasawa. The booklet is only in Japanese. My colleague is not very impressed with the musical qualities of this "performance", comparing it with the sound of a sewing-machine, with the occasional extremely artificial-sounding "rubato", and it is evidently one only for the "completists".

Finally, the new Husum disc from 1998 is available (DACOCD 519). I have to say that it is not one of the best, though there is enough interesting material to please most people. In addition, it is marred by a poor quality of proof-reading in the booklet -in fact, I was given only enough time to write the essay and send it to the translator, and there was no chance to proof-read it at all. As a result, there is a fair sprinkling of obvious typing errors, but also some more serious mistakes. Florent Schmitt is credited with a Piano Quartet as one of his finest works -and frustratingly, the correct *Quintett* is in the German translation. I am supposed to have been guilty of the solecism "adaption", which although the spelling-check fails to find it, is not a word in my Concise Oxford Dictionary. And my expression "forbidding complexity" comes out as "forbidden" in the section on Medtner. In the contents list, Balakirev apparently lived from 1837-1849 (the death date carried over from Chopin's entry) instead of 1910. The essay is also rather long and printed in a very small typeface: again, a more reasonable allowance of time would have enabled me to edit it to a better length. But the music itself is often interesting and well played.

As usual, Marc-Andre Hamelin is one of the stars, being allocated nine of the eighteen tracks. They include a foretaste in live performances of two Hyperion albums: four pieces by George Catoire (that disc has now been released) and three Godowsky-Chopin Etudes all based on the "Black Key" study Op. 10 No.5; in the recital Hamelin had played all seven versions, not including the "Badinage" which combines the two G flat studies ("Black Key" and "Butterfly" from Op. 25). There are also Godowsky's "Gardens of Buitenzorg" from his Java Suite and Medtner's "Primavera", one of his favourite encores last year. The Chopin-Godowsky complete Etudes (53) should be released soon, and it is quite a catch to be able to include these live performances when he had already set them down in the studio, or was just about to. Piers Lane was to have had three tracks, including Busoni's *Erscheinung* (Apparition), but that had to be omitted because the final pressing would have been just too long in duration for some CD players. He is therefore left with two Delius arrangements from early operas made by Ravel and Florent Schmitt: they are certainly rarities, and he played them well, but perhaps are likely to appeal only to listeners who are very keen on Delius. Oleg Marshev contributes three pieces in good performances: two Concert Etudes by Emil von Sauer (he has recorded all 30, and some Waltzes, for Danacord), and an encore by Shchedrin, the "A la Albeniz" parody. Boris Bloch, who substituted for another pianist at short notice, gave a good performance which is represented by two Balakirev pieces, a *Dumka* from 1900 and a *Berceuse* (with a nightmare episode in the middle) from 1901. Janina Fialkowska had a struggle on the first evening with a poorly prepared piano - it was greatly improved by the technician by the next day - and she contributes just one piece, the Mazurka in A minor, "Notre temps" by Chopin. And some- where near the bottom of the barrel is Franz Vorraber's rather dull and pedestrian performance of Alfred Grünfeld's Johann Strauss paraphrase on themes from *Fledermaus* and other works, a piece which is heard to much better advantage on Konstantin Scherbakov's EMI "Debut" label, with several other Strauss arrangements.

I hear on the grape-vine that Scherbakov is on the list for Husum 2000, as well as Hamelin and a duet team with a good reputation, the Duo Tal and Groethuysen, and possibly Marie-Catherine Girod and Enrico Pace. Girod is reported in the latest Bulletin of the Société Alkan as having played some Alkan in the Saint-Lizier festival: the 2nd Concerto da camera, accompanied by a string quartet plus bass. This is an interesting development, for when I last saw her in Husum she had no Alkan in her repertoire. But she is a pianist who is keen to investigate all kinds of repertoire -she has made recordings of the Bax sonatas ( on two CDs) and a York Bowen album, both composers almost totally neglected in their own country - and her Husum recitals have always been very fine. But the official details about Husum 2000 will be sent out in March or April, and details can be obtained from Buchhandlung C.F. Delff, Kramerstrasse 8, D-25813 Husum, Germany; tel. +49- 4841-2163 and fax +49-4841-81686. The Danacord website is also worth investigating: see <http://www.danacord.dk>

#### Forthcoming recitals

A "flier" is enclosed for an interesting concert in St John's, Smith Square on 31st January. Mark Latimer, who was a friend and protégé of John Ogdon, played Alkan's *Concerto for solo piano* in the Purcell Room on the South Bank in London in July 1985. He has this year been playing an unusual programme with the Concerto in the first half and a set of his own jazz pieces, with drums and double-bass, after the interval. I went to hear the programme in St George's, Brandon Hill, in Bristol, and enjoyed it very much. He has a very secure technique: the Alkan was played at a terrific pace and some of the hardest passages came off brilliantly. His tempo was not always steady in true "orchestral" style, and he tended to double bass notes in octaves quite often, certainly more than Hamelin's very few indulgences in his recording for Music & Arts. But it was an interpretation to be taken seriously, and he played the almost hour-long work from memory with very few slips.

The article from "Classical Music" may give an impression of a rather conceited person who likes to insult his audiences. In fact, he was charming in person, and while he does like to talk to the audience, the insults were very few, and usually only aimed at absent Welsh people (his agent is based in Monmouth, which may have something to do with that). Some of his jokes and puns were a bit obscure for the slow of thought, but it was all very good-natured. His programme notes are amusing: stuffed with puns and long words, they seem to be sending up the "Ates Orga" school of programme notes suitable for "Pseuds' Comer" in *Private Eye*. His music likewise is full of musical puns: before the Alkan, he played Victor Borge's wicked treatment of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata turning into Cole Porter's (?) "Night and Day" and "Happy Birthday to You". Before his own suite, "Exhibitionist at the Pictures" (which includes movements entitled "Le Giblet" and "Great Gate of Chicken Kiev"), he played the first page of Ravel's *Le Gibet* from *Gaspard de la Nuit* (extremely well) and gradually turned it into Thelonious Monk's *'Round Midnight*, the whole confection being named "Cirque Minuit". If this kind of approach appeals to you, do give the "gig" a try .The jazz seemed very good to me: his partners were extremely skilled players, and the only amplification used was a gentle boosting of the double-bass. At one point the drummer played an extended solo in a fast 7-8 time ("without the aid of an abacus"), while Latimer and the bass player wandered to the edge of the stage for a quick few hands of cards. It will be rather amusing to see which half of the programme attracts the audience, and whether any of them go under the impression that Alkan is a jazz composer. Certainly the Bristolians responded enthusiastically to both parts of the programme.

Next May comes a very special event: a "Marc-Andre Hamelin Weekend" at Blackheath Halls,

running from Friday 12th May in the evening to the Sunday afternoon, May 14th. There will be two solo recitals: the Friday one contains the Schubert A major sonata (D. 959), Godowsky's Passacaglia on Schubert's "Unfinished", and the 2nd version (1931) of Rachmaninov's 2nd Sonata in B flat minor. On the Saturday afternoon he has a two-piano recital with Piers Lane, with the Brahms sonata in F minor Op. 34a (a version of the Quintet with strings), the second Rachmaninov Suite and Grainger's "Porgy and Bess" Fantasy. His wife Jody Applebaum joins him for their cabaret evening on the Saturday -they go back to the real roots of cabaret and this is highly recommended. On the Sunday morning there is a Coffee Concert with the Leopold String Trio, with the first Fauré piano quartet and the Brahms G minor piano quartet (with the Hungarian finale) which Schonberg orchestrated in exuberant style. Then comes the final recital on the Sunday afternoon, with two Liszt Transcendental Studies, Kapustin's Sonata No.2 and Alkan's Symphonie for solo piano, Op. 39 nos. 4-7. I have not heard Hamelin play the Symphonie before, and there are rumours of a new Alkan CD from Hyperion to include the Symphonie, though the programme had not yet taken shape when I last heard about it.

Details of the weekend can be obtained from the Blackheath Halls, 23 Lee Road, London SE3 9RQ; telephone 0208-463-0100; website [www.blackheathhalls.com](http://www.blackheathhalls.com)

### **Alkan in Literature**

I discovered Alkan's name in a most unlikely place recently, in Stephen Fry's entertaining fictionalised autobiography, *Moab is my Washpot*. (The line is from Psalm 108, verse 9.) On page 171 of the paperback edition (Arrow Books) appears the passage: "It was in King's Lynn that I swam into the orbit of a most extraordinary circle of intellectuals... who were led by a bespectacled fellow called Chris and a glamorously half-French Baron called Paul... Paul, whose father was the French honorary consul, could play the piano excellently, specialising in *outré* composers like Alkan and Sorabji, although he was also capable of delighting me with Wolf and Schubert Lieder."

I have had a number of telephone conversations during the last couple of years with a very well-known British actor who is planning to write a stage play about Alkan. The project was shelved for a while because of acting and other writing commitments, as well as some difficulty in obtaining funding, but seems to be going ahead now. It will be some time before I can report on any progress, but I hope to keep you informed of any developments.

Our French colleagues have just published a review of a new romantic novel based on Alkan's life, *La Grande Sonate* by Claude Schopp, published by Fayard (who also publish the François-Sappey symposium on Alkan). This was written with the co-operation of the Societe Alkan and so their Secretary admits that it is hard to give an unbiased review; but he considers it to be a good book. There are a few minor quibbles about inaccuracy of facts and names, but most of the detail is authentic, and his main criticism is that it perhaps does not deal enough with the spiritual life of the composer, in particular the conflict between Judaism and Christianity. Several scenes ring true, in particular the pianistic duel between Liszt and Thalberg at the salon of Christine de Belgiojoso, the commissioner of the *Hexameron* variations, while Alkan remains in the garden calming the dogs. The parrot Jaco (or Jacquot) is also introduced -and "sacrificed". It certainly sounds like a "good read". My branch of Waterstone's is obtaining it for me, at an estimated price of £ 17.50, and it is likely to take about four weeks, given the usual Christmas delays on top of the usual problems. You may have a better way, either via friends in France or the Internet. Any opinions or reviews of the book will be gratefully received, since I am not really qualified to write literary criticism, especially of a book in French.

## **Obituary**

I am sorry to report the death of Dr W.J. Alkan in Israel. He had been a member of the Society since its early days, and was an active correspondent, supplying me more than once with useful articles from around the world. I was never clear of his exact relationship to the composer and his family, and if anyone has more details I would be glad to hear them.

Also this year I heard of the death of Mr H.J. Gawlik, of Dingwall in Ross-shire, Scotland, another member of many years' standing. We send our sympathy and good wishes to their families.

## **Future Bulletins**

I am planning to publish a translation of Marmontel's essay on Alkan from his book *Les pianistes célèbres*. The original text has appeared in the French Bulletin, but I do not think we have ever published a translation. After my severe criticism of Husein Sermet's last Alkan disc, one correspondent in Germany wrote to ask why there was so much wrong with the use of rubato in Alkan. One answer is clearly found in Marmontel's account of Alkan's playing. I was able to borrow a copy of the book through our inter-library loan service, and it came from the stock of the British Library.

I am also hoping to write an essay about Alkan's Mozart transcription (of the D minor concerto, K. 466) mainly from a pianist's point of view, because I do not recall seeing much about this particular work in the literature. The Beethoven 3rd concerto transcription and cadenza have been discussed at some length in Ronald Smith's book and in an article for the Bulletin by Roger Smalley. Roger is one of the few pianists who has incorporated Alkan's cadenzas into a performance of the work with orchestra. Performances of the solo version have been very rare, and as discussed earlier, there is no recorded performance apart from a disastrous computerised attempt. It would be interesting to know exactly why Alkan made these transcriptions -were they a preliminary exercise while preparing for his own Concerto for solo piano, or do the dates not support that?

As always, any contributions from members will be welcomed. I tend to write anecdotal material rather than rigorously researched scholarly articles, and have to blame lack of time and academic training for that. Be that as it may, I will do my best in the new year to keep in touch more regularly. In particular, I would like to apologise to well over twenty readers of *Classic CD* magazine who responded to our small advertisement several months ago. I did not have enough duplicates of our last Bulletin to send out, and preferred to give you something more up-to-date; unfortunately the delay in the appearance of this bulletin has not given a good impression. But thank you for your interest and I hope to welcome some of you as members in due course.

**Peter Grove**  
**Salisbury, December 1999**