



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered Charity number 276199)

<http://www.alkansociety.org>

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The Society's New President



Yonty Solomon was unanimously elected as the Society's new President at the Annual General Meeting on 31st March.

Yonty Solomon has enjoyed a distinguished worldwide career in recitals, concertos and chamber-music. His extensive repertoire includes the complete Bach 48 Preludes and Fugues, Goldberg Variations, all 32 Beethoven Piano Sonatas, the entire piano music of Ravel, Debussy, Janacek and Ives, as well as a broad spectrum of romantic and contemporary music.

After graduating with highest distinction in both Music and Psychology at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, he continued his studies with Dame Myra Hess, Guido Agosti and

Charles Rosen, winning several major piano competitions, including the Harriet Cohen Beethoven Medal.

Yonty Solomon has been soloist throughout the world with many of the most important symphony orchestras. He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Music, where he is currently Professor of Piano.

We are delighted that this distinguished exponent of romantic keyboard music – whose powerful rendition of the Bach/Busoni *Chaconne* made such a memorable conclusion to year's celebration in memory of Ronald Smith – has undertaken to serve as the Society's President.

Alkan's less-familiar works

The pianist Thomas Wakefield gave a recital of some lesser-known pieces of Alkan following the Society's 31st March AGM, and prepared the following notes for the programme, which are followed by an appreciation of the recital by David Goodrum:

This evening's recital consists of works by Alkan, many of which will be receiving their first performances in the UK.

Back in the days when the impenetrable mystique surrounding Alkan threatened to engulf even his first name, one thing at least was certain: he was the 'Berlioz of the piano'.

But how helpful was that sobriquet? For in addition to insinuating that he was not one hundred percent original (how would Wagner have liked to be called the "Liszt of the opera house"?) there is no doubt that many of those sensitive souls for whom the little things make the big things, feel alienated and somewhat alarmed by the distant horizons of these epic works, but respond instantly to the originality and depth of feeling of the miniatures,

But for most of us, the Concerto, the Symphony and 'Quasi-Faust' were where we came in. It showed good judgement on the part of the early Alkan pioneers to start with these works. Scintillating and electrifying, the perfect vehicles for the virtuosity of a Smith or a Lewenthal, they are through-composed in a homogenous style that immediately places Alkan.

Conversely the disorientation of one let loose among the miniatures must be as complete as that of the hapless wanderer who on falling foul of some sprite or leprechaun, finds himself transferred to Amazonian rain forests, where he gapes in wonderment at hitherto unimaginable life forms. Indeed, some of Alkan's miniatures are so contradictory, so mutually exclusive, one can only fully engage with one piece by (temporarily) forgetting another. Those chosen for the excellent selection of works in 'Alkan in Miniature' by Ronald Smith (published by Billaudot) ranges from severe asceticism, via rapt mystical contemplation and the pastoral, to sun drenched Latin exuberance.

Rather than lose our esteemed listeners in a pathless jungle tonight, we have therefore decided on a connecting thread for our selection, music that reflects Alkan's fondness for the intellectual discipline of classical forms and the poignant response it elicited.

In addition to reflecting Alkan's keen sense of musical history, the **Handel and Mozart transcriptions** show his razor sharp ear for original timbre and texture and preternatural ability to conjure them out of the piano.

Alkan's transcriptions have been described by Delaborde and Phillip as 'more orchestral than Liszt'. The difference is that Liszt paraphrases a work from the inside outwards; like a great character actor he lives out the part in a parallel universe to the original character putting core essence before mimicry. Alkan is like those artists who can instantly evoke a human face from an exact curve of an eyebrow or those sharp impressionists who mimic each other's acts for good measure. Had he transcribed movements from the Messiah in its original form, then in Mozart's re-orchestration and then as Liszt might have done it, we would all know which is which.

Alkan's stance as an upholder of the great tradition and his antipathy to new fangled compositional trends stemmed not from narrow mindedness but, like the man who cannot travel far without enduring home sickness, was triggered purely by his great love and knowledge of those traditions. **The Trois Menuets op. 51** are emblematic of that side of his nature. Perhaps he also thought that this aristocratic musical form, which had been in favour through Bach's lifetime, had received short shrift recently, being often side lined in sonata and symphonic music via its snappier cousin the scherzo, which provided greater contrast with the slow movement. Some famous minuets were written in binary form

but Alkan uses full-scale minuet and trio form, the minuet in ternary form returning after the similarly constructed trio to provide ternary within ternary. By turn resolute, wistful and jovial, they contain many interesting cross references.

The Trois Marches quasi da cavalleria op. 37 follow the same form but with more extended codas in bravura style. All are in essence 6/8 marches but the first and second sport 2/4 signatures with diligent use of the triplet sign. Totally absent is the vainglory of Souza's work in this idiom. The sorry truth that alongside the decorated war hero's returned poor mutilated wretches, was not lost on Alkan. After the nightmarish harmonies of the first, the stark resignation of the second and the tormented chromatic counterpoint of the third, its deliberately hollow, bombastic conclusion is a stroke of supreme irony.

We hear from contemporary accounts that Alkan could be a delightful companion when he chose, and his two self-portraits - **Ma chère liberté** and **Ma chère servitude op. 60** confirm rumours of amiability. They again contain many interesting cross- references.

During an all-Schubert recital by one of the greatest pianists of the day, an American virtuoso buff was heard to complain - "I don't dig it, it's all music". Should any of you feel that tonight's programme to have taken such a turn, deliverance is at hand - the **Etude alla-barbaro** (which was recently discovered by Marc-André Hamelin) and the **Etude in A minor** are both high wire show stoppers of the type only Alkan and Liszt knew how to write.

Beethoven's 3rd piano concerto is often said to date from 1800, although his habit of keeping numerous compositional projects on the boil at one time makes it hard to say for sure what was composed when. Alkan's motives for transcribing this particular work are somewhat obscure. Most performers who transcribe do so either to provide themselves with effective repertoire, or to popularise the music. Yet Alkan was a recluse who seldom played in public, and Beethoven's C minor Concerto was already well known. In a succession of audacious musical puns the **Cadenza's** startling references to an even better known piece which, suffice it to say, is by the same composer, in the same key and appeared four years later.

The manuscript of **Les Regrets de la Nonnette** is dated 7th July 1854. It first came to light when it came up for sale at Sotheby's a few years ago. It was bought by the owner of Symposium Records who has given permission for it to be performed this evening.

Meyerbeer's opera, **Le Prophète**, received its premiere at the Paris Opera on 16th April 1849. Comparing Alkan's pulverising arrangement of the Overture with his idiomatic treatment of **Choeur des Prêtres de Dagon** demonstrates his immense breadth of musical culture and consummate mastery of the art of the piano transcription.

Thomas Wakefield

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An appreciative audience of 28 members and guests was treated to a recital of Alkan rarities performed by Thomas Wakefield after the Annual General Meeting in the Concert Room of the Royal Academy of Music. Many of the works performed were receiving their first London airing, if not their first performance worldwide in modern times.

Thomas opened with **Choeur des prêtres de Dagon**, transcribed from Handel's *Samson* by Alkan. This was a bright and incisive performance. Stylistically, modern ears might feel some of the left hand octaves to be anachronistic, but the demands on technique were overcome effortlessly. Thomas followed this with the transcription of Mozart's motet **Ne pulvis et cinis**. In effect, this piece demanded control of a three-handed texture. Its mixture of lyricism and fervour was conveyed with conviction and authority, and whilst several of those present seemed to find this musically the least convincing item in the programme, there was no doubting the sincerity of conception or delivery.

There followed the three *Menuets* of op.51, each a full-scale work in ternary form. Thomas introduced these by speaking of their wealth of thematic cross-references and compositional ingenuity. The first two, in particular, contained some harmonic progressions which were startling to those able to identify them, yet unassailably Alkanesque in their logic: who else, having settled in the leading note key of D, would find his way back home to E flat by converting a dominant ninth from major to minor configuration? The third of these, in G, contained sublimely stretched melodies of the type we only find in Alkan.

Two of the *Trois marches quasi da cavalleria*, op.37, came next. The programme notes spoke of stark resignation in the second and tormented, chromatic counterpoint in the third. Both were performed with careful attention to detail in the inner parts, and more harmonic surprises sustained the interest of listeners, notably an extended passage in C sharp minor from an opening key of C minor for the third.

The *Deux petites pièces* of op. 60 were described in the programme notes as self-portraits. Ronald Smith's authoritative published study of the works somewhat dismissively describes them as "worth exploring at a domestic level though a rather thin middle section in the first becomes obsessive and tiresome". For once, one is inclined to argue with the great man. The first has more than a trace in it of *J'étais endormie* (from op.31), not least in its key and opening motif, whilst the second is again characterised by intricate harmonic progressions. Both were presented with sensitivity and command.

Thus far, Thomas had felt constrained by recent illness to perform from score. The remainder of the programme, comprising more familiar fare in his repertoire, was given from memory. The first half of the concert was concluded by the *Etude alla-barbaro* and the *Etude in A minor*, both relatively short but heavyweight studies of compelling pianism, in the second of which a fearsome series of cat's cradles between the hands and repeated notes and chords engrossed those who had taken the precaution of sitting in view of the keyboard.

The second half of the recital opened with Alkan's transcription of the first movement of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto in C minor*. As with the Handel which had opened the programme, some aspects of the transcription might have sounded odd to modern-day ears, though familiarity with the *Concerto* from op.39 would have prepared most for the way in which the piano is used to represent both orchestra and solo parts. Alkan's cadenza converts the rising scale of C minor which opens the piano exposition of the movement into the C major scale which characterises the fourth movement of the later *Fifth Symphony*, an allusion which was not lost on those present; many other aspects of figuration were also reminiscent of Alkan's own *Concerto*, and may indeed have influenced the way in which he approached these movements of his minor key studies.

Les Regrets de la Nonnette is a piece which our late President had made particularly his own following the discovery of the manuscript and its purchase by the owner of Symposium Records, and has more recently attracted a wider audience through its inclusion in the graded syllabus of one of the major examining boards, in an edition by our Secretary. Thomas gave this an evocative and thoughtful reading before launching into his final *pièce de résistance*, the transcription of the overture from Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*, which some of us had heard previously at the University of London recital last September. Even in itself this would have been a remarkable *tour de force*; that it concluded a programme of such considerable pianistic demands was all the more amazing, particularly bearing in mind that Thomas was not in the best of health. In acknowledgement of the generous and deserved applause at the end of the recital, he gave us a reprise of the A minor *Etude* to send us on our way reflecting that if we sought a continuing advocate of the Master's work following the lamented loss of our late President, here is a foeman who is more than worthy of his steel.

This introduction to many pieces previously dormant or unperformed was a remarkable experience for those present, and the Society is hopeful that they may soon be committed to recorded form.

David Goodrum

Rejcha.....and others

I cannot claim to be any sort of authority on the composer Antonín Rejcha but attempting recently to play through some of his fascinating keyboard compositions I have been unable to resist wondering about his possible influence on Alkan.

Rejcha was born in Prague in 1770 but moved to Bonn in his teens where he befriended Beethoven. Beethoven introduced him to the music of Bach, and both were admirers of Haydn. They remained in contact and Beethoven owned a copy of, and was perhaps influenced by, Rejcha's 36 Fugues dedicated to Haydn, written around 1803. Rejcha was very interested in musical and mathematical theory, claiming that 'the study of mathematics helps to regulate the fevered imagination'. There is apparently an unpublished manuscript in German '*Philophisch-praktische Anmerkungen*', written about the same time as the fugues. His published writings include treatises on composition and stage-music, written during his later career in Paris, when he modified his name to Antoine Reicha. He was appointed professor of counterpoint and fugue at the Conservatoire in 1818 – a year before Alkan began there as a pupil in solfège - and remained there until his death in 1836, succeeding Boieldieu at the Académie in 1835. Amongst his pupils were Berlioz, Gounod and Franck. Although Reicha is not mentioned in Ronald Smith's Alkan biography, it seems impossible that Alkan cannot have known his music, or, indeed, the man himself.

Recordings I have of Rejcha's chamber music and of his '*Te Deum*' display interesting and well-constructed work with a nice sense of colour and melody – thoroughly attractive and individual. (It would be interesting to hear the lost – or perhaps never-written – octet mentioned in his memoirs, which consisted of a wind quartet in E minor and a string quartet in G major which could be played separately or simultaneously). But the keyboard pieces I have been looking at – the 36 Fugues and '*L'Art de Varier*', op. 57, also written around 1803 - often appear seriously wacky.

The op. 57 consists of a theme and 57 variations (could it have inspired Mr. Heinz?), whose layout and technique often seem to presage early and middle Alkan:

The image displays three musical staves from Rejcha's 'L'Art de Varier', op. 57. Each staff is a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The first staff is labeled 'VAR. 2' and features a forte (*ff*) dynamic. The second staff is labeled 'VAR. 21' and features a piano (*p*) dynamic. The third staff is labeled 'VAR. 32' and is divided into three sections: 'Un poco allegretto' with a piano (*p*) dynamic, 'Adagio' with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, and 'Allegretto' with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and rests.



These must surely have been known to the composer of *'Le Festin d'Esopé'*.

The 36 fugues (op. 36, of course) also display an unusual approach. Rejcha felt that the old rules of fugue were too constricting and took a lenient view of consecutive fifths, the key of entry of new voices, and so on. No. 5 is a 'rewrite' of Bach's G major fugue from book 2 of the 48; no.3 takes its theme from the slow movement of Haydn's quartet op. 20 no. 5, no.7 from the opening of Mozart's 'Haffner' symphony. No. 15 alternates bars of 6/8 and 2/8. No. 13, composed according to Rejcha's 'new harmonic system' suggests the world of Alkan's preludes on plainchant modes:



No. 12, which starts in A minor but ends in G, has the following baffling subject and includes, in its progress, several intervals of silence from one to three bars, anticipating John Cage (give or take 4 minutes 25 seconds).



It does not of course detract from Alkan's originality in any way that other composers of his era also had original ideas which resulted in fascinating and genuinely musical results. It would be interesting

to hear this and some of the forgotten music of Alkan's contemporaries and near-contemporaries in a recital together with his own music so that we can savour the context.

Recently, for example, when listening to the new recording (by Piers Lane, on Hyperion CDA67394) of Moscheles's 'Characteristic Studies' op. 95, written in 1836/37, I was struck by how close in mood, harmony and texture many of them were to Alkan's 'Chants' – not perhaps totally surprising given the influence on both of Mendelssohn. Here are the beginnings of no. 1 ('Anger') and no. 6 ('Bacchanal').

1. *Allegro non troppo. ♩ = 116.*
energico sf

6. *Allegro con spirito. ♩ = 96.*
pp
sotto voce
a tempo
ff strepitoso
riten.
ten.

If this is not actually Alkan country, it is very close to the border. Now that Alkanistes have to a great extent succeeded in establishing the recognition of Alkan as a significant composer, it could be appropriate for us to work more on the links between his music and that of others.

David Conway

Editor's Notes

- The Society's venture into CD recording (kindly assisted by Symposium Records), containing the music played at the celebration of Ronald Smith last year, has been a success, to the extent that it is now sold out. We seem to have created an instant collector's item!
- The world of Alkan recordings seems to have been quiet in recent months, except for Franck's version of the 'Prière' op. 64 no. 5 appearing on a Christopher Herrick recital on Hyperion (CDA 67436). However, new excitements are on the way. These will include a projected complete recording of Alkan's organ works on 3 CDs by Kevin Bowyer. He will be including items such as the op. 31 Préludes, normally heard on piano but for which Alkan provided detailed comments for organ performance, and the unpublished '*Pro Organo*'. We hope to have an interview with Mr. Bowyer in the next issue of the Bulletin.
- The Society's website still attracts regular attention and interest. It also brings in enquiries about Alkan and information from all over the world. Recent e-mailers have included a gentleman in Mexico who is making a new orchestral arrangement of the first '*Concerto da Camera*', an American enquiring about Alkan's songs and a Dutchman with a query on his biography. We hope to continue to develop our reputation as a major source of Alkan information.
- We also welcome a new web site, that of the pianist John Kersey (<http://www.johnkersey.org>). Mr. Kersey provides downloadable mp3s of a number of Alkan items of great rarity (including the unpublished '*Palpitemento*') none of which appear to have been issued yet in commercial recordings. He also provides recordings of many of Alkan's contemporaries, including Heller, Leybach and S. S. Wesley. This is a really valuable resource.
- Slowly but surely, the remainder of the society's Bulletins are being posted in the Members' Section of the website. Only Bulletins nos. 1–26 now remain to be processed, so there is some hope this can be achieved in the present year. We are also hoping to finalise arrangements for posting the remainder of the Bulletins of the Société Alkan in the near future. Members are reminded that the **passwords for the members' section will be changed as from May 13th**. The new passwords will be found on the back of the 2005 membership cards being sent with this bulletin. For those receiving the bulletin by e-mail, membership cards will arrive separately by post.

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The Society's Treasurer mentions that, because it is convenient for the Society to group all credit card payments together, the subscription for members paying in this format may not appear on their statements until a little later in the year. We are grateful to all who have added donations to their subscription payments - thank you!