

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Reg. Charity no. 2761991)

BULLETIN - APRIL, 1984

REPORT OF MEETING held on Tuesday, January 17th, 1984 at the Thomas Coram Foundation:-

The remarkable pianist Thomas Wakefield, a member from Manchester who came down to London specially for the occasion, gave the Society a truly memorable evening recital at the Thomas Coram Foundation, Brunswick Square, on Tuesday 17th January. The first exhibition of his pianism to the Society last year ensured an agreeably numerous audience which heard the following works:-

BACH (trans. LISZT), Fantasia & Fugue in G minor for organ, BWV 542; CHOPIN, Ballade no. 1 in G minor; GOTTSCHALK, Souvenir de Porto Rico (marche des Gibaros); ALKAN, Salut, Cendres du Pauvre op. 45, L'Incendie au village voisin op. 35, no.7, Etude: Le Chemin de fer, op. 27. (Interval). ROSSINI/THALBERG, Mi manca la voce, Grand Fantasia on the prayer from the opera Moses in Egypt; ALKAN, Sérénade (from Les Mois, op. 74); SCHUBERT/LISZT, Serenade, Liebesbotschaft; RIMSKY-KORSAKOV/RACKMANINOFF, Flight of the Bumblebee; GODOWSKI, Gamelan (from the Java Suite); STRAUSS/GODOWSKI, Concert paraphrase on the Artist's Life. Encores: Le Chemin de fer (repeated) and Carnaval (from Les Mois op. 74).

Under the title of Transcriptions and Descriptions the recital brought together some contemporaries of Alkan (1813-1888), namely Chopin (1810-1849), Liszt (1811-1886), Thalberg (1812-1871) and Gottschalk (1829-1869). Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908), Godowski (1870-1938) and Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) are also within the Alkan span.

The life and music of Sigismond Thalberg is an especial study of Daniel L. Hitchcock, a member of the Alkan Society in Wichita, Kansas, USA, who has in mind a book on the subject. Thalberg's great evocation of the Prayer from Rossini's Moses op. 33, was recorded by Raymond Lewenthal, also an American member, in 1975 on Angel S-36079, but it can have few if any concert performances in this country in the last 60 years or more. It was a perfect vehicle for the virtuosity of Thomas Wakefield, as well as exhibiting Thalberg's famous three hands effect so that a third hand appears to embroider the music in a shimmering background. In the main presentations of the Prayer the whole of the keyboard was manifestly in sound.

The etude Le Chemin de fer was the sensation of the evening. It was announced in October 1844 by La France Musicale (ALKAN, Vol. 1, Ronald Smith, 1976). In the previous year the railway from Paris to Orleans was opened and the enthusiasm excited by the event might well have moved Alkan to write the piece, although he would presumably have been familiar with the first and shorter line from Paris to Saint-Germain, inaugurated in 1837. The work makes nineteen pages of score, the appearance of which gives little indication of its immense power and drive when realised by a pianist such as Thomas Wakefield. It is marked vivacissimamente (minim=112) and at once the familiar throbbing beat of steam locomotive exhaust is heard. There are two episodes, et bien chante, with Alkan in one of his characteristically sunny moods. Towards the end the hammering figure in the accompaniment is chordally thickened on the first and third beats, suggesting to those who feel so disposed, another and more powerful locomotive with a different cylinder figuration (should not railwayphiles be apprised of this work?). The whole piece demands wrists of the legendary steel sort and the ability to realise staccato under the most taxing conditions. As an encore, knowing that a curiosity about the piece existed

amongst members and the rarity of its exhibition, Thomas Wakefield delighted his auditors by repeating it in an even more striking fashion, if that were possible. It has not yet been committed to disc, although Rudolph Ganz made a piano roll of it (Hupfeld 14744/51330). One hopes that when Thomas Wakefield makes a record Le Chemin de fer will appear on it.

Of the other works space does not permit of a proper dilation, save that all was played with tremendous verve, insight and understanding, for which only such descriptions as transcendental or glittering can suffice. The Godowski paraphrase was in itself a mnemonic feat and the ear waited eagerly on every note of the Alkan pieces.

Charles Hailstone expressed the thanks of all those present for the opportunity and privilege of hearing Thomas Wakefield again.

Charles Hailstone.

REPORT OF MEETING held on March 17th, 1984 at Trinity College of Music:-

14 members, including our President, were present to hear David Gammie, a member from Surrey, give a most fascinating and delightfully presented talk on 'Alkan and the Pedal-Piano', with illustrations on the piano (helped by Gerard Brooks of the Westminster Cathedral Choir School) and on the organ. Because of the limitations of the latter instrument, no longer in its prime, the programme had to be somewhat modified. Otherwise it closely followed the preview which David so kindly provided for the January Bulletin.

We heard the Prières nos. 8 and 11 of op. 64 to begin with, played on the piano, and Prière no.9 on the organ, with excerpts from nos. 4 and 5 on the piano, followed by Canon no.4 in A^b, from Schumann's Pedal-Piano Pieces and a Toccata, by Boëly, written shortly before his death (1858). The programme ended with a performance (on the piano) of:-

op. 64 Prières Nos. 1 & 5
op. 66 Préludes nos. 1,4,6,7,9 & 10.

The last a most engaging Slavonic romp, provided an exhilarating conclusion to a wholly enjoyable evening. Arthur Saville thanked David Gammie and his fellow-performer on behalf of the Society.

Trinity College of Music tell us that they are shortly having a new organ installed. Maybe, at some future date, David Gammie could be persuaded to let us hear what we missed on this occasion. In the meantime, David has most kindly agreed to write a fuller account of his talk, which we hope to publish in the next Bulletin.

Members unable to attend meetings may not realise how fortunate we are in having some remarkably gifted musicians in the Society, who give unstintingly of their time and talents and without whom it would be impossible to function as a Society meeting several times a year. We thank them all again, most warmly for their devotion to the Society and for the delight they have given us.

If any members would like to contribute to our programmes with a talk or a performance, we should be most happy to hear from them.

PERSONALIA

Ronald Smith

On February 19th, 1984, Ronald Smith played a programme, including a number of pieces from Alkan in Miniature, the Bach-Busoni Chaconne and the Appassionata Sonata, at a one-day seminar held by the European Piano Teachers' Association at their Centre at Trent Park. The recital was video-taped for the EPTA library, and it is hoped that there will be an opportunity, at some stage, for members to see the tape.

He also gave a recital at Bromley Arts Centre on March 3rd, 1984. The programme consisted of Alkan's Petit Conte, Toccata op. 75, Barcarolle op. 65, March No. 1 op. 37, and four Esquisses - Les Soupirs, Les Cloches, Delire and Increpato, the Bach/Busoni Chaconne, Chopin's Etudes op. 10 and Liszt Feux Follets and Mazepa.

He is to record 2 Alkan recitals consisting of 'miniatures' and short pieces for the BBC in May, and is including a few of the 'miniatures' in his lunch-time recital at the Fairfield Hall, Croydon on April 24th, as well as the Appassionata Sonata and La Campanella.

Next month two of his recordings are being released on the Nimbus label. His performance of the Liszt transcription of Beethoven's 7th Symphony and the Liszt and Chopin B minor Sonatas.

As members will know from the last Bulletin, Ronald Smith is recording Alkan in Miniature for EMI (to be issued on compact disc as well as standard disc), shortly after his lecture-recital to the Society on May 29th. His hopes of recording the pédalier pieces, however, are being sadly thwarted at the moment for want of a suitable 'pédalier'. Efforts to track one down, at home and abroad, are proving unsuccessful. If, by a miracle, one of our members should know of the whereabouts of a 'pédalier' in good condition, do please let us know without delay.

Jack Gibbons

Members will be interested to hear that Jack Gibbons, our member in Oxford, who has on several occasions played for the Society and whose career we are following with great interest, is to give his debut recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on April 19th, 1984 at 7.45 p.m. His programme will include Bach's Goldberg Variations, Gaspard de la Nuit (Ravel) and a Chopin Sonata. He also tells us that he is playing in St. David's Hall, Cardiff on June 11th as part of the Llandaff Festival, and in Fishguard on July 27th as part of the Fishguard Festival.

The Society wishes Jack every success for this very important occasion.

Dave Smith

We heard from Gavin Bryers - too late, unfortunately to spread the word - that Leicester Polytechnic were giving 3 performances on successive evenings in March of the 2nd Concerto da Camera and the Funeral March on the Death of a Parrot. The pianist was John White (the composer) and the conductor was Dave Smith (see January Bulletin). The publishers, Billaudot, printed special parts for this occasion and the concert was to be recorded.

Committee

Two members of the Committee will be resigning this July, Patrick Lee, who has served on the Committee since 1978, and Jean Bartholomew, who is very regretfully resigning from the Secretaryship of the Society because she is moving out of London.

Membership of the Committee is not onerous. It involves attending three meetings a year, usually on a Sunday afternoon at the Secretary's home. If anyone feels that they could help - particularly with providing a London venue for the Committee, shortly to become 'homeless' - please let us know so that we can put names forward for the AGM in July. Nominations will be welcome, as usual - to reach the Secretary by the beginning of July, please.

List of Members

This has now been updated, and a copy is enclosed.

Subscriptions

Would any members who have sent their subscriptions but have not received a receipt, please notify the Treasurer, as there has been some difficulty in the delivery of mail in his area.

The Treasurer would also like to remind overseas members that their subscriptions should be sent in sterling as the banks now charge £3 commission for exchange.

Rates: £5 for London and Overseas members
 £3 for out-of-town members and students
 (in both cases this covers husband and wife membership).

Forthcoming Meetings:-

Tuesday, May 29th 1984 at 7.00 p.m. at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Barbican, when Ronald Smith will be giving a lecture-recital on Alkan in Miniature. This will be followed by a short (½ hour) open meeting to discuss plans for the Centenary Celebration in 1988. We hope that members will have many ideas: it would be a great help if suggestions could be sent to the Secretary to reach her by May 25th, 1984.

Wednesday, July 11th at 7.00 p.m. The Annual General Meeting will take place, as usual, at the Abbey Community Centre, 29 Marsham Street, London SW1. In view of the impending changes on the Committee, we hope that members will make every effort to attend.

SECRETARY

Mrs. Jean Bartholomew,
116 Princes Gardens,
West Acton,
London W3 0LJ.