



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered Charity number 276199)

<http://www.alkansociety.org>

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Editor's Notes

The eagle eyes of member Robert Warwick discovered on the internet a previously unsuspected recording of Alkan's 'Sonate de Concert' – and the remarkable background to that recording, by the Polish-born cellist Jascha Silberstein accompanied by John Ogdon – a live performance of 1975 – is reported in this Bulletin. Indeed the whole issue has something of a Polish flavour - we are pleased to report an apparent première of Alkan in Poland, and following the Polish theme, we give some extracts from Frederick Niecks, the biographer of Chopin and early Alkan sleuth.

The past quarter has been a quiet one for Alkan, as regards public performance, compared to the excitements of the previous quarter. Your Editor was delighted to attend the Assemblée générale of the Société Alkan in Paris in December chez Billaudot, and to meet with many of its members, including of course the indefatigable François Luguenot, the treasurer Sylvie Vaudier, the pianist Laurent Martin and Anny Kessous from Metz, who has prepared a really stupendous detailed examination of Alkan's '3 anciennes mélodies juives' which I hope she will soon publish. The warmth and hospitality of our French colleagues was outstanding and we all agreed to seek further ways of cooperation.

I can also claim to have borne the Society's mission (on radio waves at least) to Canada in December, when I was interviewed (for reasons too Byzantine to explain) by Canada's answer to John Peel, Bill Richardson. Alkan took up a goodly chunk of the conversation, and a number of e-mails I received from across the former Dominion proved that a few folk were listening.

Future events this year include **an address from our President at the AGM on March 29th** (please see separate papers) and a piano recital by Thomas Wakefield which we understand will include the recently discovered 'Alla barbara'. Members will be notified of this and other events as soon as we can fix details of date and venue.

In the meantime I remind members of Ronald Smith's recital at St. George's, Bristol on April 2nd which will include Alkan's 'Allegro Barbaro' from op. 35, and 'Les regrets de la nonette'.

Last but not least I should like to extend the thanks of the Committee to those members who kindly gave additional donations to the Society on top of their subscriptions – their welcome generosity enables the continuing development of the Society.

A Landmark Recording

Jascha Silberstein/John Ogdon – Jascha Silberstein Live Performances, vol. 2

The news broke in a letter from AS member Robert Warwick to our Secretary, Nicholas King:

Glad tidings from Bath! I was browsing on the internet the other day when I came across a new Alkan recording [...] by John Ogdon, live at the Concertgebouw, playing Alkan, R. Strauss and Vivaldi with the great Polish cellist Jascha Silberstein. The Alkan work is of course the Sonate de Concert. This recording [...] surprisingly isn't mentioned by either the John Ogdon Foundation discography, or in any listing of recorded works by Alkan.[...] this particular performance has been mentioned before in various music publications and could quite possibly be the first public performance since Alkan played it himself in one of his own Petits Concerts, Ogdon himself had planned to record it in the '80s but the project was sadly never realised [...]

Following Robert's trail, I looked up the recording and tracked it down at CD-Baby (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/silberstein2>), where it can be purchased on-line. It is volume 2 of four discs issued by Silberstein of his live performances. Born in 1934 in Poland, Mr. Silberstein is described in his blurb as a 'celebrated cellist, raconteur and gourmet' and your editor can certainly vouch for him in at least the first two of these roles. He moved to the States in 1962 and became principal cellist of the Boston Symphony and then the Metropolitan Opera Orchestras, the latter until he retired in 1996. His instrument, a 1720 cello by Gofriller, was formerly owned by Emanuel Feuerman.

Thanks to the kind offices of Mr. Harron Appleman, of Kurakichi Studios, I was able to contact Mr. Silberstein (by 'phone – 'I am old-fashioned' says Mr. Silberstein, 'I don't have internet – or a car either') and was able to discover something of the background of this remarkable performance, which took place in 1975.

The story begins when Mr. Silberstein was contacted by (in his words) 'a kind of pianist, Raymond Lewenthal'. Lewenthal had a copy of the 'Sonate' and suggested they play it through. Silberstein knew something of Alkan's piano music but didn't much like it at the time – it sounded 'too weird'. But the news of this unknown cello sonata intrigued him. The play-through however was not a success. 'Lewenthal's apartment was an unbelievable mess - I hardly had anywhere to put my cello'. Lewenthal was sight-reading the accompaniment – and not very well; but Silberstein immediately recognised the high quality of the piece. He suggested they both practice the parts and then try again. Lewenthal agreed: Silberstein asked to borrow the score. 'Lewenthal was extremely reluctant to let me have it – he wanted me just to borrow the 'cello part. But of course I needed to study the thing as a whole. Eventually I said to him – "Where do you think I'm going to go with it – Red China?"' In the end

Lewenthal agreed to allow Silberstein to make a copy, which he did the next day, returning the original.

Silberstein eventually met again with Lewenthal in Indianapolis with a view to undertaking a concert performance. 'I really loved the piece, but (thank God I had a witness with me) I realised Lewenthal just couldn't play it'. So the performance never took place.

Silberstein shared a manager as John Ogdon and the two musicians met when they were both touring in the Netherlands and undertook solo recordings for the radio there one afternoon. They went on to dinner with the manager and immediately struck up a personal rapport. 'We got on so well, especially after killing a bottle or two. Ogdon was a very engaging guy – he was not a big talker, but after a couple of genevers he spoke fascinatingly of music and his favourites such as Busoni'. It was at this meal that they decided to give a joint recital, and even agreed the programme – two movements of a Vivaldi Concerto, and the sonatas of Alkan and Strauss (all of which are on the CD). Ogdon already knew of Alkan's piano music, and he was clearly sold by Silberstein's advocacy of the Alkan sonata, the copy score of which of course the latter still retained.

Ogdon and Silberstein played their programme in five concerts in the Netherlands in 1975, including the Concertgebouw performance on this disc. Clearly Silberstein loved the partnership. 'We played the Strauss as if we had played it all out lives'. But he insists that the Alkan sonata is in a class of its own – 'It is a concerto for piano and cello without orchestra' he says, citing Beethoven's comment on the manuscript of the 'Kreutzer Sonata', 'scritto in modo di concerto'. And he has never played it with any other partner – with disarming unselfconsciousness, he points out that 'the 'Sonate de concert' has to have two great soloists'. It certainly found them in this performance, and the enthusiasm of the Dutch audience at the end seems unlimited. 'You can hear the moment's silence just before the applause breaks out' recalls Silberstein: 'they were really stunned'.

Why the 30 year wait for the recording? Silberstein wasn't in fact aware that a recording existed. But Mr. Appleman tracked down in Japan a tape, made by a collector, of the Dutch broadcast. When Mr. Silberstein heard it for the first time a few years ago 'it was like listening to two guys, I didn't think of myself. And when they played that last movement, at such a terrific speed, I was thinking "how did those two guys do that?" I am really proud of it.'

Thanks to this important issue, a landmark in Alkan recordings, we can now wonder at this performance ourselves.

Alkan in Poland

We are delighted to print the following letter from the Society's first Polish member, the young pianist Piotr Owsiak, following his recital in Cracow on 18th January. Piotr, who is 23, studies at Katowice and became fascinated with Alkan after hearing a recording of Raymond Lewenthal. The recital included Alkan's 'Le Festin d'Esopé' and also Bach's Partita No. 5 in G major, BWV 829; Chopin's Polonaise in F sharp minor, Op. 44 and Study in C major, Op.10, No. 1; Rachmaninov's Etude-Tableau Op. 39, No. 9 in D major; and the Liszt-Paganini Study No. 5 in A minor.

We think this could have been the first performance of 'Le Festin' in Poland; according to Piotr, Ringeissen played the 'Sonatine' and op. 39 nos. 1-3 at the Chopin Festival in Duszniki Zdroj in 1995, and Leslie Howard played the 'Symphonie' in 1999. Ringeissen also played some Alkan in Gdansk in 2001, but Piotr doesn't have the details of his programme.

The Society congratulates Piotr on his success and his pioneering work, and we are sure he will continue to champion Alkan's music in the country of the composer's friend Chopin.

'As I promised I'm writing a few words about my concert and especially – Le Festin d'Esopo. With pleasure I have to say that the audience received it with enthusiasm.

After the concert many people told me that they enjoyed it and were fascinated with Alkan's sense of humour and variety of artistic means of expression. Some of them were very surprised when I revealed to them, that Alkan was a romantic composer and a friend of Chopin. The organizer - Mrs. Boguslawka Hubisz-Sielska - told me with regard to Alkan: 'You (pianists) have a huge and fantastic literature which is unknown to a wide audience and you should play it more often.'

With greetings

Piotr Owsiak'

Frederick Niecks on Chopin – and Alkan

Professor Frederick Niecks (1845-1924) is probably best known to Alkanians from his description of an attempted visit to the composer in 1880, remembered many years later in an article in the *Monthly Musical Record* and quoted in Ronald Smith's biography:

Having heard much of his strange ways and the difficulty of approaching him, I procured a letter of introduction from a friend of mine who, during a sojourn of several years in Paris, had wooed the shy artist with unusual success. But even thus armed I knew that I was undertaking an enterprise that called for much circumspection. After careful consideration of the possibilities of a safe plan of campaign, I decided to begin by calling at his house. My question whether M. Alkan was at home was answered by the concierge with a decisive 'No'. To my further enquiry when he could be found at home, the reply was an equally decisive 'Never'. And in spite of all the expenditure of diplomacy and eloquence I lavished on the powerful functionary, this was all the knowledge I could obtain. My next move was to write a respectful and propitiatory letter to the great man, asking for an interview, and enclosing our common friend's letter of introduction. The result of this petition materialized into a missive such as was perhaps never before received by mortal man. A brief scrawl of a note, written on an odd scrap of paper, stuck into a cheap envelope. The handwriting so shaky that it could be described only by the epithet vermicular, and the style so curt and awkward that it was impossible to say with certainty whether the writer was rude or clumsy in expression. But the predominant effect of the letter on the receiver was that of a hard repulse. The next time I saw Mme. Dubois, she asked me how I had fared with Alkan. I told her my doleful tale; but instead of condoling with me, she laughed and thought my story good fun.

Niecks eventually caught up with Alkan at one of his recitals at Erard - 'after a few formal words the venerable, white-haired, white-bearded, stooping (almost hunch-backed) man began to talk freely and with the greatest amiability about Chopin and other matters.'

It was indeed because of Alkan's acquaintance with Chopin that Niecks was so anxious to meet with him. Niecks, who was born in Düsseldorf, settled in Scotland in 1868 and became, according to Grove, a viola player in an Edinburgh quartet and an organist at Dumfries. He began writing for the MMR and other musical journals in 1875 and from 1891 was Professor of Music at Edinburgh University. But his first major publication was a biography of Chopin, 'Frederick Chopin as Man and Musician', published in 1888 and twice revised and updated in his lifetime. The writing of this book was motivated by the absence of any serious attempt to evaluate the composer – the sole serious contender being the book by Liszt, which Niecks criticizes as follows:

The first work of some length having Chopin for its subject was Liszt's "Frederic Chopin," which, after appearing in 1851 in the Paris journal "La France musicale," came out in book-form, still in French, in 1852 [...] George Sand describes it as "un peu exuberant de style, mais rempli de bonnes choses et de très belles pages." These words, however, do in no way justice to the book: for, on the one hand, the style is excessively, and not merely a little, exuberant; and, on the other hand, the "good things" and "beautiful pages" amount to a psychological study of Chopin, and an aesthetical study of his works, which it is impossible to over-estimate. Still, the book is no biography. It records few dates and events, and these few are for the most part incorrect. When, in 1878, the second edition of F. Chopin was passing through the press, Liszt remarked to me:

"I have been told that there are wrong dates and other mistakes in my book, and that the dates and facts are correctly given in Karasowski's biography of Chopin [...]. But, though I often thought of reading it, I have not yet done so. I got my information from Paris friends on whom I believed I might depend. The Princess Wittgenstein [...] wished me to make some alterations in the new edition. I tried to please her, but, when she was still dissatisfied, I told her to add and alter whatever she liked."

From this statement it is clear that Liszt had not the stuff of a biographer in him.

Niecks therefore sought to undertake direct research himself; and as Chopin had died 30 years previously, every surviving acquaintance of the composer was of great value and worth seeking out, and he expresses his gratitude in the preface to his biography to

conversations I held with, and letters I received from, Chopin's pupils, friends, and acquaintances. Of his pupils, my warmest thanks are due to Madame Dubois (nee Camille O'Meara), Madame Rubio (nee Vera de Kologrivof), Mdlle. Gavard, Madame Streicher (nee Friederike Muller), Adolph Gutmann, M. Georges Mathias, Brinley Richards, and Lindsay Sloper; of friends and acquaintances, to Liszt, Ferdinand Hiller, Franchomme, Charles Valentin Alkan, Stephen Heller, Edouard Wolff, Mr. Charles Halle, Mr. G. A. Osborne, T. Kwiatkowski, Prof. A. Chodzko, M. Leonard Niedzwiecki (gallice, Nedvetsky), Madame Jenny Lind-Goldschmidt, Mr. A. J. Hipkins, and Dr. and Mrs. Lyschinski.

Not a few of these names, of course also figure in Alkan's life – amongst them Gutmann, who was one of the quartet of pianists with Chopin and Alkan playing the latter's arrangement of

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, and Alkan's friend and correspondent Hiller. (Incidentally, Niecks suggests in the biography – I do not know on what basis - that the arrangement of the A major symphony was not complete, consisting only of two or three movements). The other unavoidable personality associated with both Chopin and Alkan was of course George Sand, whom Niecks does not treat entirely sympathetically.

Niecks's own evaluation of the relationship between Chopin and Alkan is as follows:

Among the few musicians with whom Chopin had in later years friendly relations stands out prominently, both by his genius and the preference shown him, the pianist and composer Alkan aîné (Charles Henri Valentine [*sic!!*]), who, however, was not so intimate with the Polish composer as Franchomme, nor on such easy terms of companionship as Hiller and Liszt had been. The originality of the man and artist, his high aims and unselfish striving, may well have attracted Chopin; but as an important point in Alkan's favour must be reckoned the fact that he was also a friend of George Sand's.

Alkan is listed in the biography as amongst Sand's intimates before she met with Chopin, and he also evidently served for some gossip about their later relationship:

For reading, on the other hand, he [*Chopin*] did not much care. Alkan related to me that Chopin did not even read George Sand's works--which is difficult to believe.

Undoubtedly other elements from Niecks's conversations with Alkan are present in the book without such direct attribution. Still, any glimpses of Alkan during his last years are so scarce that we must be grateful that Niecks tracked him down so assiduously.

By the way, my source for extracts has been the complete text of Niecks's biography of Chopin which can be freely downloaded from the excellent Gutenberg project site at:

<http://www.gutenberg.net/browse/BIBREC/BR4973.HTM>

Website News

Although a Google search for 'Alkan' will only produce the Society's website as no. 3 after Stephen Smythe's veteran site and the Alaskan airline of the same name, we may probably now boldly claim that www.alkansociety.org is the leading internet site for regularly updated information on the composer. Events involving Alkan are regularly posted on the site, and the discography is updated, whenever (and from wherever) relevant information is received. We typically receive about 15 hits per day, implying a very respectable current annual rate of about 5,000.

At the suggestion of some members, the Forum for comments and correspondence on Alkan has been moved out of the Member's Section and into the public area and this does indeed seem to have stimulated new interest, although as anyone looking up the Forum will see, topics tend to stray into uncharted territories, such as little-known 19th-century Scottish wunderkinder. A recent posting from 'Philippa' clearly justifies taking the Forum out into the wide world:

I stumbled across this place by accident. At the grand old age of 41, I have just started learning to play the piano, and whilst clumsily fumbling my way through 'Au Clair de la Lune', I remembered a piano recital given at my school, probably in 1979 or thereabouts, by a bespectacled gentleman who wore a patterned jacket and talked about a sadly neglected composer (whose name I had forgotten after all these years). The pianist then played for us a piece entitled 'La Chanson de la Folle au Bord de la Mer'. I never forgot the haunting little melody that wove through this, nor its title (perhaps because I was a keen student of French). Through the years, it occasionally popped into my head, but having forgotten the name of the composer, I assumed I would never find it again. How silly of me not to think of the Internet! I searched for 'La Chanson...' and found all of this information about Alkan. I am now looking forward to hearing more, and maybe one day even being able to play some myself...though I think that day may yet be far away.

All guesses as to the identity of the 'bespectacled gentleman' to be forwarded on a postcard, please.

As webmaster I also receive a number of e-mails directly, from all over the world, with a range of enquiries including the breed of Alkan's parrot, the meaning of some of the titles of the 'Esquisses' and the availability of sheet-music. I am pleased to report that some of these enquiries have blossomed into memberships.

The archives in the Member's Section have grown rather slowly over recent months, although I hope during the current year to upload all the missing UK and French society bulletins. One recent addition has been François Luguenot's update of the Index to the bulletins of the Société Alkan.

I am pleased with the 'Links' page on the site, which offers about 45 hyperlinks to other pages more or less related to Alkan. These have to be checked regularly as from time to time sites disappear into cyber-limbo - I was very sad to have lost touch with the Alkan Mountaineering Society of Slovakia (listed under 'Not Quite Alkan') before I had been able to establish why they had adopted their name.

Lastly may I give members two reminders:

- please do all your Amazon.co.uk shopping via the links on the site – it costs you as customer no more, but a small commission gradually accrues to the benefit of the Society, for which every little bit helps.
- let us know if you wish to receive this Bulletin in future by e-mail; again it saves the Society's costs, and you get it that much more quickly!



NB: The passwords for the Members' section of the website will be changed at the end of March: please ensure that you have paid your current year's subscription (and have given us your e-mail address) to be informed of the new passwords.

A New Alkan Web-site

A remarkable web-site devoted to Alkan has appeared at <http://piano.francais.free.fr/>, the work of Sylvain Chosson. The site has a perfunctory biography and discography of the composer and gives a list the composer's works loosely based on the relevant appendix of Ronald Smith's 'Alkan: The Music'. What makes the site worthy of comment is the extensive number of scores which M. Chosson makes freely available 'on-line'; an enterprise which has clearly involved him and his colleagues in considerable effort, but which raises some complex questions, as well as the undoubted delight of many Alkanists in accessing a number of previously elusive scores.

M. Chosson classifies each of Alkan's works under one of five categories. A number of scores are stated to be free of copyright, and can be downloaded and printed. These are largely copies of 19th century publications and include both rarities such as the op. 32 collections of Impromptus as well as the op. 31 Préludes (from the original Schlesinger edition). Sticking in the op.30s, by the way, there is also op. 34, the Scherzo-Focoso, clearly photo-copied from the Alkan Society collection at the Guildhall School Library – without alas any credit to the Society or library.

At the other end of the scale, some scores are classed as 'missing' – M. Chosson indicates that he would be grateful to receive copies of these in order to post them for public availability. Within this category are the 'Don Juan' Fantasia and a number of the very early pieces. Next come some scores marked 'coming soon' – presumably M. Chosson has located the scores for these items, which include amongst others most of the chamber works. A few items – with permission and fully acknowledged - are from the collection of the Conservatoire at Geneva – the first two of the '3 mélodies juives', and the first pages of 'Palpitemento', of the setting of two verses from Psalm 42 and of the manuscript of the 'Hymne' from op. 38/2. For a number of items, including the 'Grande Sonate' and the 'Marcia Funebre sulla morte d'un Papagallo', M. Chosson indicates that he possesses the scores, but because they are marked 'all rights reserved' or 'photocopying prohibited', he does not intend to make them available online.

But the most controversial category, which includes most of the piano solo pieces, is described by M. Chosson (and I quote him verbatim) as follows:

Most of these published scores are available in public musical library. But here **you won't be able to print them**. The files are protected. Our aim is not to compete with the regular publishers or with the illicit street vendors, but to let you discover Alkan's works, and perhaps yield you to buy the scores or recordings. Don't ask me the password needed to print the scores, I will not give it.

The web-user can download these files in Acrobat Acrobat pdf format, and indeed store them on his or her computer. I am not an expert on copyright law and cannot comment on the propriety of this. But the statement that it is not possible to print from these is – shall we say – disingenuous, since the cracking of Acrobat key protection can be very simply undertaken. The copyright status of these postings, which include publications in print of Billaudot, Masters Music and Musica Obscura, must therefore be at least debatable. It would be interesting to have a detailed opinion on these matters; but in the meantime, while the site is on air, those interested in Alkan's music will undoubtedly wish to investigate it. Members' comments are welcome.

DC