



The Alkan Society

Registered Charity no. 276199

www.alkansociety.org

President: Leslie Howard

Vice-presidents: Anne Smith, Hugh Macdonald, Nicholas King, Richard Shaw

Honorary Officers: Mark Viner *Chairman*, Nick Hammond *Treasurer*, Coady Green *Secretary*

Bulletin 91: April 2015

Society concerts

Dinner recital

Our annual dinner-recital event, held in conjunction with the Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner Societies at Camden's Forge and Foundry Arts Venue, was organised this year by the Berlioz Society on 27 January. It proved a success as usual and is fast becoming something of a tradition.

Seventy members of the three Societies enjoyed an entertaining evening of music, food and wine, with enthusiastic performances of works by each of the four composers. Whilst it is relatively common to hear Alkan's music alongside that of Beethoven, Schubert or Chopin, the juxtaposition at this event would surely never occur with regular concert programming, and was all the more interesting for that reason. The programme comprised:

- *Berlioz*: Songs from *Les Nuits d'été* (op.7), *Trista* (op.18), *Irlande* (op.2b) and *Feuillets d'album* (op.19), performed by Keri Fuge (soprano) accompanied by Matthew Fletcher (piano).
- *Alkan*: *Trois Andantes Romantiques pour piano, no 2* (*Andante con moto*, op.13/2), preceded by *Introduction* (ms dated 12/5/1843), performed by Mark Viner (piano); *Saltarelle, finale de la Sonate de concert pour piano et violoncelle* (op.47), *arrangée pour piano à quatre mains*, performed by Coady Green and Christopher Wayne Smith.
- *Wagner*: "Abendlich strahlt der Sonne Auge" (Wotan's soliloquy from the end of *Das Rheingold*), "Die Frist ist Um" (the Dutchman's aria from *Der Fliegende Holländer*), performed by Paul Carey Jones (baritone) accompanied by Kelvin Lim (piano).
- *Liszt*: *Quatre Valses oubliées* (S215), performed by Leslie Howard (piano); *Tcherkessenmarsch aus Glinkas Oper Rußlan und Ludmilla for piano duet* (S629), performed by Coady Green and Leslie Howard.

The Alkan section was unique in including a first performance, at least since the 1840s, of the *Introduction* to the second of the *Andantes Romantiques*, which beautifully sets the scene for the "hidden melody" of the *Andante* (the background to the *Introduction* is described below). Mark Viner's subtle and sensitive performance was an ideal foil for the second Alkan contribution, the duet arrangement, by Alkan himself, of the *Saltarelle finale* from the *Sonate de Concert* for piano and cello. The bite and incisiveness of the piano duet version perhaps makes for an even more electrifying experience than the original. Certainly the barnstorming performance by Coady Green and Christopher Wayne Smith received the ovation of the evening.

An Alkan *Prémère*

The programme for the joint Society event, amongst other rarities, included (in all probability) an Alkan *prémère* – an increasingly rare occurrence these days. The current writer contributed, together with the second number of the *Trois Andantes Romantiques* op.13 (1837), *Andante con moto*, an *Introduction au no.5 des caprices* dated 12th May 1843 and still in MS. As many *cognoscenti* among our members will know, the second of this particular set of caprices is now generally accepted to be the piano part of what has been named the third *Concerto da Camera*, following a description which appeared in a periodical, *Le Pianiste*, in 1833:

‘A simple, gracious muted song for strings is accompanied by a series of chords which, passing from octave to octave, sustains the melody and produces an effect as original as it is ravishing’.

The piece from op.13 is the only work in Alkan’s catalogue to correspond to such a description, and the existence of the said *Introduction* only confirms this postulation in that its writing conforms, almost entirely, to the idiom of string quartet.

The reason Alkan penned this small introduction is entirely logical: it is an essential pendant to the caprice in that it introduces the melody before the actual piece commences, where lightly brushed chords ascend and descend the breadth of the keyboard, carrying the notes of the melody aloft across different octaves. On first hearing, the innocent ear often wonders what on earth is unfolding while only on the third page does the melody appear, albeit in a different key, within the confines of a single octave: the first half in the bass, the second in the treble.

Alkan's MS. itself is found in a curious volume, an *Album Amicorum*, once belonging to the Dutch composer Eduard de Hartog (1825-1909) and currently held among the *Rariora* of the department of Human Sciences in the library at the University of Utrecht. It is a precious and diverse document containing autographs, drawings and caricatures of musical personalities of the time. Aside from Alkan, other famous names include Theodore Döhler (1814-1856), Alexander Dreyschock (1818-1869), Charles Gounod (1818-1893), Henry Litolff (1818-1891) and Sigismond Thalberg (1812-1871).

It is bound in black leather, the front cover illustrated with a sun surrounded by a circle and the corners adorned with leaf tendrils, while the whole is framed by a fine gold border. Alkan's entry comprises the third page of the album and is accompanied, alongside the composer's signature, with the words *'Introduction au | no.5 des caprices. | inédit. | A Monsieur | E: de Hartog | Paris 12/5/43'*.

A detailed description of this *Album Amicorum* can be found in Franck Lioni's article, *Un ami hollandais d'Alkan*, published in Bulletin no.36 – March 1997 of the Société Alkan together with a *fac simile* of the MS. itself.

Mark Viner, London

Recital by Stephanie McCallum and Erin Helyard

Honorary member and distinguished Australian pianist Stephanie McCallum and Erin Helyard, of the Australian National University School of Music, performed Moscheles and Alkan piano duets at Deptford Town Hall Council Chamber (part of Goldsmiths University of London) on 24th February 2015.

Deptford Town Hall is a magnificent Grade II listed building, complete with its galleon weathervane poised on top of the clock tower, built in 1905 and commemorating the area’s maritime history. The Council Chamber proved to have an excellent acoustic (and a fine piano) and the ornate setting was an ideal venue for the event.



The recital opened with *Hommage à Weber: Grand Duo sur des motifs d'Euryanthe et d'Oberon* (op.102), written by Moscheles in 1842. Whilst perhaps intended for domestic rather than concert performance

(the dedication is to *Mesdemoiselles Berta & Ina Jaques*), the piece (in three movements) is certainly not for the faint-hearted amateur, and it was immediately clear just what excellent duettists Stephanie and Erin are, with near-perfect emotional accord and synchrony.

The Moscheles was an ideal curtain-raiser for the Alkan that followed: the transcriptions for piano duet by José Vianna da Motta of nine of Alkan's *Grands Préludes for pédalier* (op.66). Immediately we were transported into a deeper and more sombre world: certainly no mere salon music here. As Stephanie wrote in her programme notes: "The choice of pieces and his [da Motta's] ordering seem to subtly redefine the nature of the original set. Placing the Adagio (originally *Langsam*) at the end, crowning the slower pieces, creates a greater focus on this other-worldly creation which is marked at one point *dolcissimo, etereo*. The texture and related key are strongly reminiscent of the distinctive Prelude No 13 *J'etais endormie, mais mon coeur veillait*, and aspire to trance-like elevation of spirit".

McCallum and Helyard again showed their uncanny unanimity in exploring the lyrical and ethereal depth of the *Préludes* with such sensitivity but without compromising the rhythmic vigour, and indeed the Alkanesque twists of humour, in some of the nine Preludes. The audience, many of whom were not familiar with the *Grands Préludes*, were hugely enthusiastic and appreciative of the sympathetic and persuasive performance.

Letter from Volos

Your Chairman was privileged enough to be invited to attend as a guest at the fourth Evmelia International Music Festival in Agria, Volos, held between the 26th March and the 2nd April under the auspices of the Nikolaos & Eleni Porphyrogenis Charitable Foundation, run by President, Katerina Porphyrogeni and Artistic Director, Dino Mastroiannis.

While there was no Alkan on the programme, the prospects look very promising, indeed. In a small but ideal venue, in the quiet village of Agria, I encountered a dedicated and attentive audience, and among the artists and organisers, a seriousness of purpose rarely encountered elsewhere. The pioneering programming of the organisers was perhaps the most striking attribute of the Festival. Radical, sometimes daring, choices of repertoire such as Britten's *Ceremony of Carols* op.28, Chausson's Concerto for Violin, Piano and String Quartet op.21, Martinů's Piano Quintet no.2 H.298 and Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* found themselves among standard repertoire and music by contemporary composers, Nimrod Borenstein, the Festival's Composer in Residence, and Marko Mihevc: an eclecticism which, even in Athens, would cause eyebrows to raise.

All in all, Evmelia Festival proves to be something of a small miracle. A packed week of lectures, chamber, choral and solo concerts, boasting international artists of thirteen different nationalities and a dynamic approach to programming is a rare thing to come by in general, let alone in a country facing a future of such ominous uncertainty. During the course of next year's Festival, anyone passing through mainland Greece in search of an idyllic setting and a music festival with something a little different to offer, should head north – to Volos!

Mark Viner, Athens

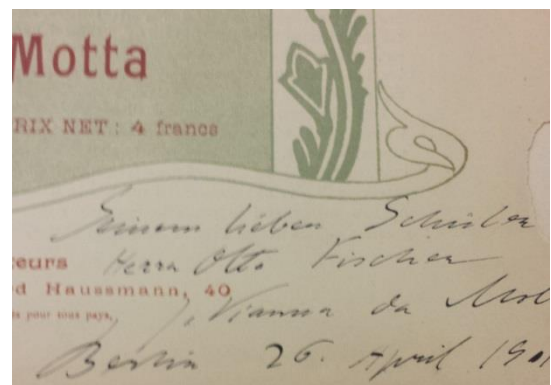
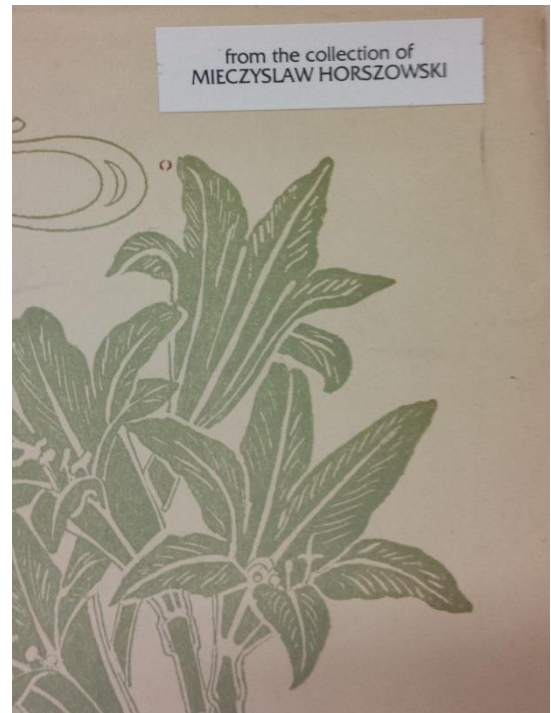
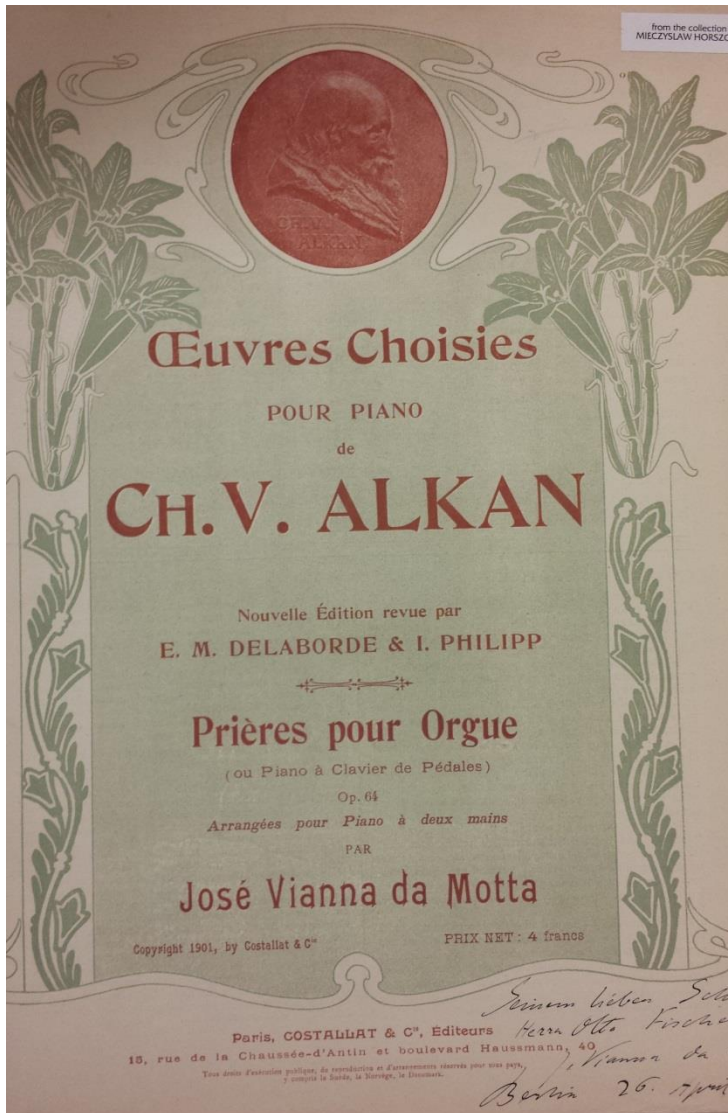
Alkan scores from the collection of Meiczysław Horszowski

Ethan James McCollum

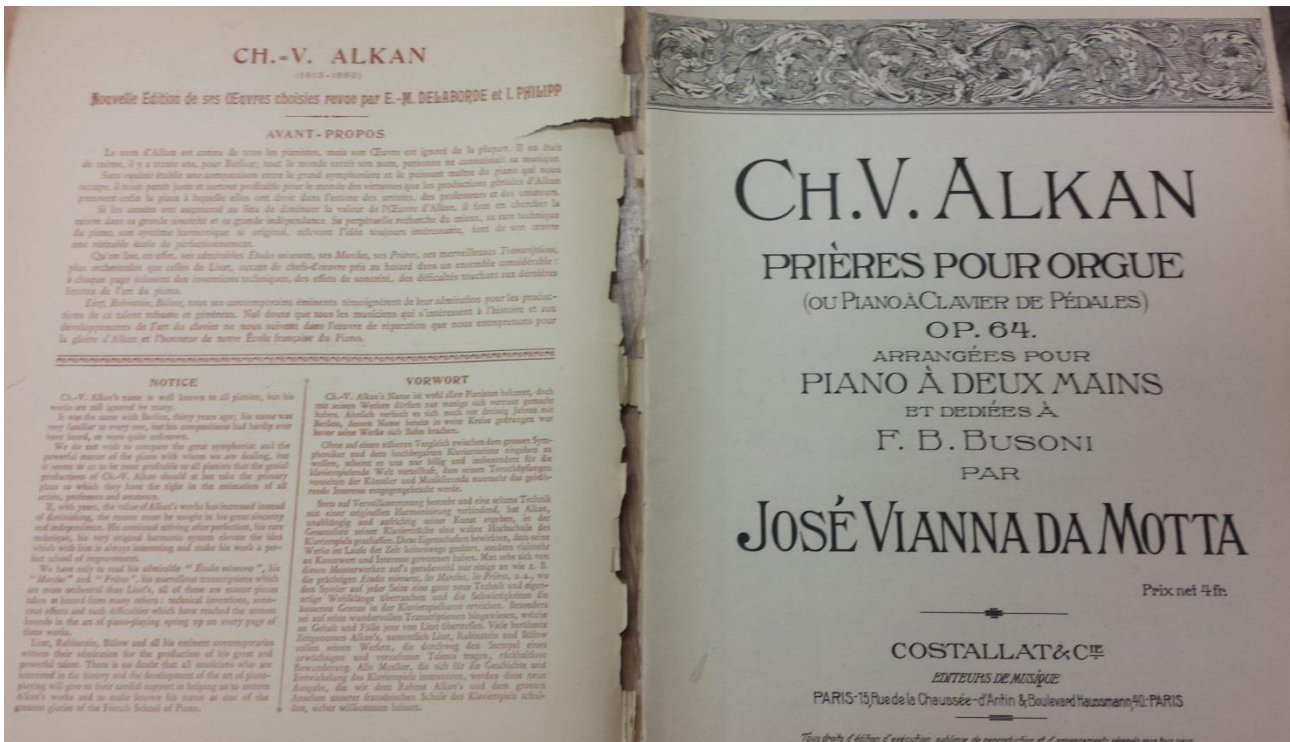
I have become friends with a (now retired) great American pianist, Lee Luvisi, who lives in Louisville, where I attend university. We became friends because he asked me to share many of his live performances onto YouTube, which you can hear if you search his name. He never really explored Alkan himself, but he had a couple scores, given to him by the great Horszowski (Luvisi studied with Rudolf Serkin and Horszowski while a student at Curtis in the late 1950s). Horszowski himself studied in Paris, and he purchased scores of many different composers, including some by Alkan. He passed some of them along to Lee Luvisi (Lee doesn't exactly remember when), and they even have some notes and comments by Horszowski.

The scores are signed by Isidor Philipp, which is amazing, because Philipp has a big connection to my university: Philipp was the teacher of a man named Dwight Anderson, a former dean of the University of Louisville school of music, and the founder of our music library (for more details, see <http://louisville.edu/library/music/dwight-anderson>). Anyway, Mr Luvisi was very grateful for my work for him, and he knew of my love for Alkan's music, so he gave the scores to me.

The panel below shows the cover page of the op.64 Prières pour Orgue transcribed for piano (two hands) by José Vianna da Motta, with two close-ups.



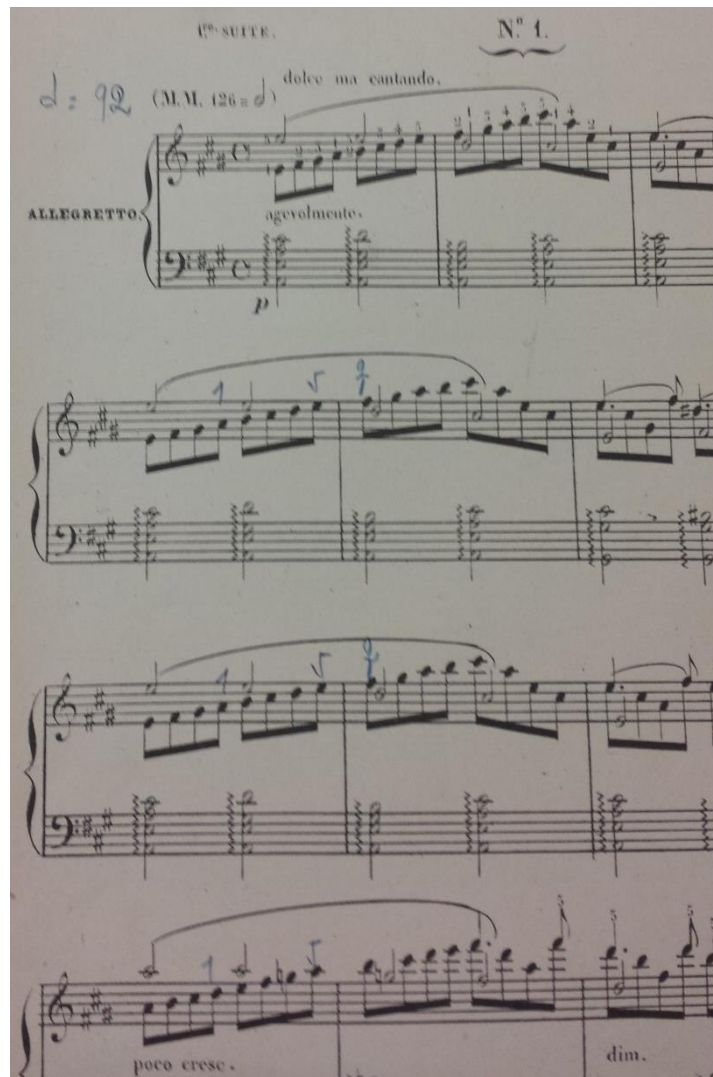
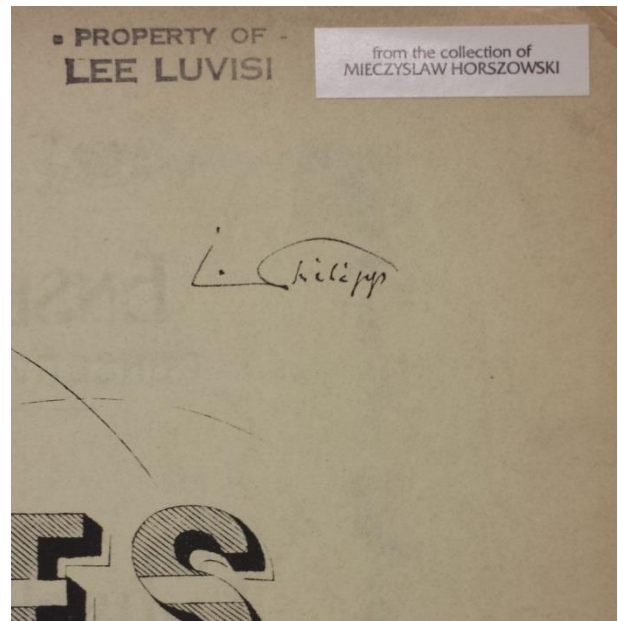
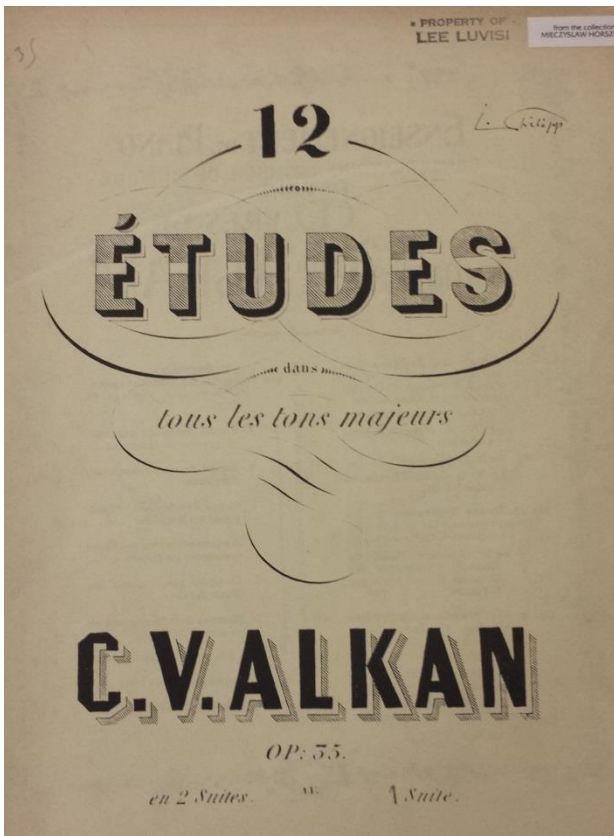
The image on the next page show the title page (note these are the two-hand transcriptions, not the four-hand version).



Finally, the panel on the next page shows the cover page of the op 35 Études, with a close-up of Philipp's signature, and, below, the first page of the first study with changed metronome tempo and fingerings (by Horszowski).

Two other pages, not reproduced here, show metronome adjustments for Study 2 (from Alkan's ♩. = 144 to ♩. = 100), and for Study 3 (from Alkan's minim = 63 to ♩. = 100).

All these images can be seen on the Society's website (www.alkansociety.org).



Rachmaninoff and Alkan

Rachmaninoff's Performance Diary records his repertoire at various concerts during 1919 and 1920 as including Alkan's *Marche funèbre* (op.26) and *Comme le vent* (no 1 from 12 Études op.39); indeed, Rachmaninoff is said to have used the latter piece as an exercise. The Performance Diary, compiled by Scott Davies, is available at <http://gmlile.com/rachdiary/index.aspx>.

An announcement for a Rachmaninoff recital, on 28 October 1919 in Elmira, New York State, was recently brought to the attention of the Society and is reproduced on the right. This is from the *Elmira Morning Telegram* of 19 October, and the programme included the *Marche funèbre*. A further announcement, again in the *Elmira Morning Telegram*, on 26 October, just



SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Tuesday Evening, Oct. 28
At 8 O'clock

Lyceum Theatre
Elmira

Regular seat sale at the box office opens Friday, October 24.
Lower floor and balcony\$2.50 and \$2.00
Note: Only seats left after the subscribers' sale, which occurs the previous days of the week, available in these sections: mail orders (Box 81) and phone (1781), will be filled in order received.

Balcony Circle\$1.25
(This section is not available until Friday, October 24.)
Gallery\$1.00
Prices Subject to War Tax.

Note: One hundred seats on the stage surrounding the "Master" on sale at M. Doyle Marks Co., Friday, October 24; subscribers wishing to get in close touch with this "Great Russian," must send their cards with 83 cents to Mr. George Carter, P. O. Box 81, before Friday, October 24.

RACHMANINOFF'S PROGRAM

1. Sonata op. 31 Beethoven
(a) Allegro Mendelssohn
(b) Adagio Mendelssohn
(c) Allegretto Mendelssohn
(d) Rondo Capriccioso Mendelssohn

2. (a) Polonaise op. 26 Chopin
(b) Ballade F minor Chopin
(c) Impromptu op. 29 Chopin
(d) Valse Chopin
(e) Scherzo op. 31 Chopin

3. Marche Funèbre Ch. V. Alkan

4. (a) Prelude C-sharp minor Rachmaninoff
(b) Valse, op. 10 Rachmaninoff
(c) Etude Tableau Liszt-Gounod

5. Valse-Faust Liszt-Gounod

Steinway Piano Used.

FROM THE PITTSBURGH PRESS

Walter Damrosch is always a great favorite here but the man of the hour was Sergei Rachmaninoff; he it was who compelled the crowds to stand in line, and listen to the familiar chant, "The house is sold out." Rachmaninoff lived up to his advance notices, in fact he left them a mile behind. That he was a sensation is putting it mildly; whether it was the extraordinary appearance of the man, his unusual technique, or the unmistakable musicianship of his Concerto in C Minor, or all three together, is difficult to say. He played as he looked, in a highly individual way, and his Concerto was of tremendous scope. He was brittle, he was crisp, and sometimes he was adamant, but never suave, and never had he the professional pianist's saccharine tone. All Pittsburgh rejoices that he is to return here in recital.

Regular Seat Sale Now Open at Lyceum Box Office

PRICES---\$2.00, \$1.50 and \$1.00; A Few Seats Only Left In Each Group. Gallery \$1.00

From New York Telegraph of October 20, 1919. RACHMANINOFF IN ANOTHER TRIUMPH

Rachmaninoff's recital at Carnegie Hall yesterday afternoon was another striking manifestation of the strong hold which this great Russian composer-pianist has gained upon the New York public, for the great hall was crowded with an eager audience that hung upon the slightest nuance of his compelling playing and at many intervals broke into such demonstrations of applause as are seldom witnessed at a piano recital. He played his Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Chopin with the same mythical simplicity, the same spacious and primeval generosity of tone and dynamic power, the same feminine gentleness in the tender passages, the same wistful, playful humor in the lighter moods of the Beethoven allegretto, the Chopin impromptu and the Mendelssohn rondo, and always with the graciously gigantic personality of the man himself over-shadowing and vitalizing his playing.

The "Marche Funèbre," by Alkan, a

wonderfully and toweringly somber work, disclosed the artist in a familiar mood of exalted gloom, from which he slipped with antic resilience into a fantastic valse frolic and an etude tableau of his own happiest composition. That was the moment for the audience to break out into a temper of applause, and cries of "Prelude!" and again "Prelude!" came from all parts of the house. The tall, ungainly figure bowed repeatedly, and the strong, saturnine face grinned sheepishly as though pleased but disinclined to play the famous Prelude. But he yielded to the continuous and increasing demand, and the excited enthusiasts at its conclusion began to crowd down the aisles to get the usual close-up which seems to be part of the closing demonstration of all these Rachmaninoff appearances. He ended the gloriously played list with the "Faust" waltz of Liszt-Gounod and then solemnly endured about fifteen minutes of hand shaking and complimentary speeches from his idolators.

two days before the recital, includes a review from the *New York Telegraph* of Rachmaninoff's performance (of apparently the same programme) in Carnegie Hall, New York just a few days earlier. This is reproduced on the left.

The Society thanks Donald Wagner for drawing the recital announcement to our attention.

CD reviews

Alkan: solo piano music

Costantino Mastroprimiano

Brilliant Classics 94341BR, released 20 October 2014, length 66 minutes

Instrument: Pleyel piano, made in Paris in 1865

Recorded in 2014, Palermo, Sicily

Track 1	Capriccio alla soldatesca, op 50	6'55
Track 2	Le Tambour bat aux champs, esquisse pour piano, op 50 bis	4'46
3 Menuets pour piano, op 51		
Track 3	1 Tempo giusto	4'27
Track 4	2 Tempo debole	5'01
Track 5	3 Tempo nobile	7'56
Track 6	Une fusée, introduction et impromptu, op 55	8'08
2e et 3e Nocturnes pour piano, op 57		
Track 7	Andantino	6'58
Track 8	Très vite	3'33
Sonatine, op 61		
Track 9	Allegro vivace	5'17
Track 10	Allegramente	3'55
Track 11	Scherzo-Minuetto	3'44
Track 12	Tempo giusto	5'56



Reviewed by Richard Murphy

After Alkan's massive publishing event in 1857 of Op.37-47, came another in 1859 with Op.50-60. The first eight pieces on this disc are from this batch, the Capriccio and Esquisse being the best known.

I don't think I'd recommend this disc for anything outstanding. CM doesn't always fulfil the music's promise or atmosphere. The piano timbre is very effective in the 'battlefield' scenes of Le Tambour at 2'00 – the contrary motion spread chords – and at 2'45 – the flying right-hand with the hammering left, and in 50/1, the Pleyel's 'percussion' department comes into its own with the crisp juddering of chords, octaves and low trilled basses, but I have to question CM's ability to control this piano. The last page of Le Tambour has at least eight non-sounding incidents. Notes are missing, and this happens a number of times throughout the disc. 50/1 sounds under-characterised, too matter-of-fact despite specific directions for colour and attack. In the 'cantabile' section of 50/2, the end of every four-bar section is slowed down – his unique interpretation of 'tenuto'.

The strict time asked for in 51/1 is sometimes reminiscent of the Symphonie Menuet. The 'unstrict' (debole) tempo for 51/2 is not much in evidence – so what could Alkan mean by this? It's a piece of alternating registral colours. In 51/3, the melodic top line is often obscured by the heavier and louder lower lines most noticeably in the Trio section. I suspect that there's humour in these pieces, but C.M. doesn't convince me that there is. They just sound like pieces in 3/4, not Minuets particularly.

Une fusée is apparently the fast moving spindle of a [weaving] loom – as described in the Impromptu of Op.55 in its Mendelssohnianly-busy right hand. The introduction is a pleasant barcarolle with lots of wavelets, and lasts three minutes. Knowing how exciting Alkan can be in fast tempo music – the last movement of the Symphonie for example – the Impromptu is a disappointment. CM uses questionable hesitations in mid-flow of this one-time moto perpetuo. At 6'52, the Coda gives us the head-down dash-for-the-line at a genuine Presto. The light-touch action really helps with achieving speed at this point. Stephanie McCallum's performance on the Toccata label is more colourful, and she makes more detailed musical points.

My notes tell me that I'd be persuaded about the quality of this first piece if I heard it on a modern piano. Having just listened to McCallum, I'm not sure about that. Parts of 57/2 sound like a piece for one hand, so thin are its textures. No richly upholstered long-span melody here; more like a piece by Brahms with its interest in intervallic motifs – a drooping 4th answered by three falling 6ths, a falling minor 9th answered by three rising 3rds – you know the sort of thing. There's a definite taste of late

Brahms at 1'01-1'07; and there's an austerity that recalls aspects of the 31/17 prelude. The 'cantabile' contrasting section has a strange left-hand of broken 10ths that, given its mid-range register, completely distracts from the right-hand melody – in both versions! The penultimate bar has a flattened 7th – a lovely little quirk that you can find in late Alkan, as in the Pedal Studies.

Op 57/3 is a breathless pursuit with LH rippling triplets sometimes under, sometimes over, an ecstatic surging RH melody in crotchets swooping high and low. To contrast is a chordal tune starting in reverse-sicilienne two-bar phrases, which is neither dolce nor sostenuto with CM. The ending is calm. A nocturne indeed!? A 'flying-dream' perhaps.

As of today (15 March 2015), the following are the most popular Alkan pieces for performers to record: Le Festin op 39/12 (21); Symphonie op 39/4-7 (18); Barcarolle op 65/6 (17); Cantique des cantiques op 31/13 (15); Concerto op 39/8-10 (13); Grande Sonate op 33 (12); Les Soupirs op 63/11 (12); Les Cloches op 63/4 (11); Cello Sonate op 47 (11); Sonatine op 61(11); Le Tambour bat aux champs op 50 bis (10). So, to the Sonatine. I can't warm to or concentrate on the helter-skelter presentation of the music. It sounds untidy. Beats-rest are interpolated as though to catch breath. I hear little rhythmic clarity in fast figurations. Structural strength is reduced to piecemeal blocks. Not all left-hand chords actually sound, and on page one, these repeated left-hand chords are louder than the melody. To give CM. his due he does keep to the fast metronome mark thus generating some real excitement.

To the 2nd movement. Once again, there's a slightly untidy feel to this, surely, very poised music, and I feel there are balance problems. There really isn't enough dynamic variety either.

A good tempo is struck in the Scherzo and rhythm is pretty strict. The top line of the Trio is lost but sounds clearer in the second part. In the transition from the Trio, CM makes an effort to make the most of the 12 accented 'A's – but why rush the 12 chords before the final dolce e sost?

In the opening of the last movement, CM holds the right pedal all the way through the first 18 bars, which doesn't sound too disturbing on the Pleyel. A surprise comes with a drastic and unasked-for tempo slowdown from his opening 'minim = 80' to 'minim = 53' at the lyrical Cantabile section 1'48-2'07. Later, during the development of the material, there's too much variety of pulse and the piece loses momentum and becomes unreasonably sectional. The faster percussive pages have an enjoyable roughness, especially towards the end.

The pianist is also a researcher in music. He says he was led to Alkan via Chopin's bequest to Alkan of his teaching Méthode, and finds that Alkan "makes use of his (Chopin's) diction and gestures, but not his concepts". My ignorance of the Méthode means that I don't know what to listen for, but I can't hear any noticeable difference in approach.

Alkan: A collection of eccentric piano works

Vincenzo Maltempo

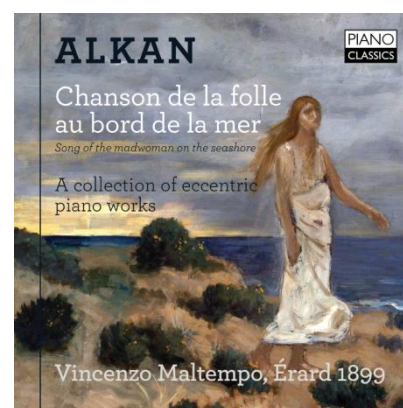
Piano Classics PCL0083, released January 2015, length 66 minutes

Instrument: Érard piano of 1899

Recorded in 2-3 September 2014, Chiavari, Italy

Trois petites fantaisies, op 41

Track 1	Assez gravement	4'50
Track 2	Andantino	5'13
Track 3	Presto	5'58
Track 4	Minuetto alla tedesca, op 46	4'59
Track 5	Marche funèbre	11'19
Track 6	3 Marche triomphale	4'58
Track 7	Petits préludes sur les 8 gammes du plain-chant pour orgue (2e Suite, no 2)	1'18
Track 8	Capriccio alla soldatesca, op 50	7'04
Track 9	Le Tambour bat aux champs, esquisse pour piano, op 50 bis	4'55
Track 10	Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer, 25 Préludes, op 31 no 8	3'25
Track 11	Laus Deo, Esquisses, op 63 no 49	4'09



Reviewed by Richard Murphy

Forty-four years after their first recording by Ronald Smith (1970), VM has become only the second person to record *Marches Funèbre and Triomphale*, and *Minuetto alla tedesca*. Bravo. It's a pity that this atmospherically vivid and characterful music has escaped notice. Mind you, the same fate befell Berlioz's music with similar titles. VM is likewise only the second player to extract *Laus Deo* from its rôle as postlude to the extraordinary *Esquisses Op 63*. Indubitably this is some of the strangest music on the disc. We also have a 'first' in the organ prelude being recorded on piano. More well-known are the 'Chanson' *Op31/8* and *Op50s*, all with recordings in double figures now.

Tracks 1-3. The Three *Fantaisies* which start the disc show Alkan's obsession with repeated rhythms, in ways that resemble the *étude* genre. In all three pieces, Alkan finds different ways of treating the main beats in a bar by either exaggerating or blurring their basic function. No 1 uses the military sounding side-drum flam; No 2 presents a hiccup before each beat; No 3 brutally smudges the main beats. If the flam is conventional for his time, Alkan's relentless use of it is not. If No 2's LH hiccup seems a little strange, ungainly, or funny at first, Alkan's development of the device to the whole keyboard, and changing hands, becomes dramatic beyond expectation. If No 3's beat-smearing over hammering repeated notes seems eccentric, then wait for the pulverising coda.

Though there must have been technical developments to Erard's instruments in the 40-50 years since these pieces were written, this 1899 piano was an effective choice in many ways. The only drawback I hear is a projection weakness in the treble clef area when asked for quiet RH music. I perceive an imbalance with the LH. Otherwise, the piano's 'tin-tacks-on-the-hammers' at 2'12 - 2'20 in 41/1 is wonderfully harpsichordy. Alkan's imaginative unpredictability is shown at 3'34 when all staccato and flams cease, and the 'dolce' melody is played in quiet high 7-note chords, each of which is echoed immediately by low 7-note chords. It's a stunning effect - equally telling in this version as in Smith's, though I have a slight preference for the latter's stricter tempo. Not eccentric - just breathtaking. Fantasy indeed.

Op 41/1 and 3 are played a smidgeon faster than Smith, and 41/2 at 30 points faster, so the narrative is tauter and less comfortable. Running semiquavers are more turbulent. The piano stands up well to the menace and aggression of 41/3, and at 2'55 - 3'30 the rapid running sequences literally buzz. It's a fantastic sound. The Coda at 4'50, with the repeated B flat in mid keyboard, challenges a similar passage in *Scherzo Focoso* for extreme security in keyboard geography - with arms flying. The older man, Ronald Smith, takes huge risks by keeping to the basic tempo and consequently hits wrong notes, whereas VM applies emergency rubato and gets the notes. Different folks, different strokes.

Track 4. How good to hear my long-time favourite 'Minuetto alla tedesca' in a new guise. The sound is a lot leaner than on Smith's piano but concomitantly the RH melody from 1'39 sounds timbrally thin and fragile. VM's LH octaves are athletic and light and fast, but I miss Smith's rubbery bounce and his consistent internal metronome. However, an excellent performance.

Track 5. In *Marche Funèbre*, the LH 'side-drum' figures are played with exemplary clarity and consistency. VM's slight yielding of tempo at the chordal passage at 2'39 combined with his forcefulness, and the slightly strangulated tone of the top-line, produces an utterance of tragic vehemence and desperation. The slowing down between 3'45-4'05 is a convincing expressive decision - taking the music in a dramatic descent to lower and darker realms.

The *Carillon* at 5'12 comes slightly faster than the preceding music. The big tenor bell producing the pedal basis is played hard, as is all this section. It's slightly ugly, noisy music, no concessions made, pedal full down all the time - in vivid contrast to the main march. This piece works, not only as an evocation of the ordinary outdoor world of sound, but also as an evocation of deep loss. What I'd give to hear Rachmaninov play this - which he did in the USA a few months after he arrived there in 1919. VM's performance doesn't seem a minute too long. Wonderful.

Track 6. And more goodies. Really looking forward to the swagger of this *Marche Triomphale*. Imagine my chagrin on hearing 12 points - from 0'00-1'02 - when the brakes were used. From the start, VM sits heavily on the first 2 notes, then allows the rest of the phrase its natural speed. This happens 12 times on the first page! At 2'52 when the opening returns, the hoped-for 'a tempo' rendition didn't happen,

and furthermore, the brakes were applied on the last page too. No swagger then. More a 'vary-speed' quick-march. A contradiction in terms?

Track 7. In the context of the disc, this tiny prelude seems positively etiolated. The left hand keeps the rocking figure whilst the right hand plays the opening melody – first above, then below the left. It's 75 seconds of delicacy.

Track 8. Soldatesca is given good touch, articulation, and tempo. A bit too loud though at the start. Perhaps, at 1'37, VM felt that the music was going too fast to articulate the correct RH rhythms. The Erard sounds a lot more balanced in this piece than the Pleyel on another disc. I thought this was excellent all the way through. I hear premonitions of Bartok's Burlesques.

Track 9. Le tambour bat aux champs – Soldatesca's companion piece – has less variety of mood. So what happens when Alkan gives a metronome mark of 88 beats per minute (bpm) and VM starts at 66, and by 0'58, he's reached 92, and he plays loudly instead of quietly? Atmosphere and momentum are lost from the outset. The scurrying runs are very cleanly articulated. When the cantabile starts, VM has an attack of rubato, making the music a little tipsy, and which undermines any hope of tragedy. I've always wondered what has happened to the drums in Alkan's narrative when we reach B major (3'41) – and all the flams have been silenced (senz' arpeg). What's happening? I feel that, from the start, VM has so underplayed the separation and anticipatory timing of notes that are the essence of the flam/drag onto the beat, that Alkan's direction to stop spreading the chords all but goes for naught. The change of effect is largely lost. Parts of this piece sound very good, but the whole feels compromised by the removal of unrelenting pulse and the application of rubato.

Track 10. I've not heard "Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer" sound so short. Is the melody based on an actual French Chanson? It is unlike any other 'song without words' that I know. This is another example of Alkan writing ugly sounding music. It's an ugly situation. The whole middle expanse of keyboard is untouched. There's absolutely no attempt to swerve into a happy ending. We are where we are and we're staying there. This is odd behaviour indeed. Eccentric even. I've yet to hear this on the organ.

Track 11. Laus Deo (Praise be to God). What to make of this arch-shaped [a.b.c.b.a] piece? R. Smith describes it from the central section: " – a sober chorale (c), framed in a mystery (b), announced and dismissed by an arresting peal of bells (a). What could be simpler, stranger ... or more unique?" There's no mention of it in the CD notes.

There is a religious/contemplative air between the bell sections. I've heard tell of 'Dresden Amens' and 'Parisian antiphons' in this music. The parallel 4ths of vocal organum are clear in the bells, though tweaked up-to-date by including tritones. Bells – imitating voices – on a piano?! (Do I detect a touch of pre-Joycean 'layers of reference'?). The opening peal of bells is effective, but VM is using the Billaudot score, and so misplaces the third low C in the LH, one quaver too early. It's a misprint.

Very unusually for Alkan, in two pages he asks for 17 tempo changes, mostly in section c. where there are 6 phrases of 'chorale' – each of 15 beats. In the last 3 beats of each phrase, Alkan very specifically asks for a slowing of tempo, after which there is a resumption of 'a tempo', until the next slowing. I feel that the Chorale is distended by VM's early slow-down, especially in the 4th and 6th phrases. And why can't the quintuplet crotchets of b. remain of even length? I feel that this piece is not best served by additional Romantic elasticity. Better to keep to the even pace of a ritual, against which, Alkan's directions have a more natural effect.

I wish I had the code to decrypt Section b. starting at 0'21 and 2'57. The slowly drifting chords ascending are given to the left hand. The unwinding line of descent is given to the right hand. The arms are extremely crossed. It's an inaudible effect, directed mainly towards the player. Is this 'conceptuality' an eccentricity? What is the model for the music in this section? Ideas would be welcome.

So, are these eccentric? Not really, if you see them as an outgrowth of the obsessive sides of Beethoven, Schumann, Mendelssohn – especially in rhythmic matters. Did not Alkan's other contemporaries – Méreaux, Gottschalk, and Mussorgsky – also write eccentric piano works? In comparison to the sheen of Chopin's music, Alkan's styles can sound like rough cuts. His theatricality is not that of Liszt – Marche Triomphale excepted. Six pieces in this collection are absolutely stuffed with grace notes. Sometimes, Alkan seems almost incapable of writing unornamented notes. He prefers them bothered, buffeted,

tortured, squeezed, and splattered – in every way – coloured. That's a large part of his colour and rhythm palette. He's *sui generis* in that sense. The physical movement that is 'the march' is strongly evident in many of his works - even in triple-time.

Then there's the unpredictability of extreme contrast. And "Is there any beautiful music on this disc? Anything relaxing?" Who is this music written for – apart from dedicatees? 'Chanson' and 'Laus Deo' are odd, even for Alkan.

An unexpected pleasure I got from this recital was the realisation that, at times, the piano timbre and the music sounded as though it were written by Conlon Nancarrow. Eccentric? I should cocoa!

The Society Website



Top section of the Home Page of the Society website: www.alkansociety.com

As many members will know, the Society launched its new website in September 2014, following a short survey of members' views on how the old site might be revised. The new site, based on but extending much of the information from the previous version, incorporates many of the suggestions made by members. In brief, the site has information on:

- The Society, and how to become a member
- Forthcoming recitals (both those sponsored by the Society and others), and an archive of previous concerts
- Information and resources about the life of Alkan
- Definitive information on Alkan's music, including a complete catalogue of his works and their publication, links to sheet music, and a comprehensive discography of current and historical recordings
- Publications about Alkan and his work, including the Bulletins of the Society and of the French Society (*la Société Alkan*), and other scholarly publications
- Relevant up-to-date news, as well as Members' news, announcements, promotions and Youtube links, and an "old news" archive.

The site includes a search facility (on the home page) which supports textual search in nearly all of our Bulletins and those of *la Société Alkan*, as well as in the web pages themselves.

A new feature, and one to allow for future developments, is a separate panel for each of Alkan's works (go to "Alkan's works" then "Full catalogue" then click on "Details" beside any of the works). The panel displays details about the particular work together with a link to sheet music (if available). We intend that additional information (such as performance duration) can be added at a later date.

The site is a dynamic one, with new information added most weeks. However the accuracy and completeness of the information relies on you, the members, to provide information to the webmaster (Nick Hammond) at webmaster@alkansociety.org. Please, therefore, send me corrections, suggestions or additional information (especially upcoming recitals, new or old recordings, or publications) so that our site can become the definitive source of information on all things Alkanian.

A number of members have been stalwart in providing a veritable cornucopia of new information as well as suggestions for improving the site: I particularly thank (in alphabetical order) Seth Blacklock, Paul Goold and Richard Murphy for their invaluable input.