

THE ALKAN SOCIETY



President:

RONALD SMITH

Hon. Secretary

BRIAN DOYLE
146, Brocks Drive,
Cheam, Surrey
SM3 9UT

BULLETIN NO. 40 : MARCH 1990

EDITED BY DR. JOHN WHITE

MEETING AT St. Martin-in-the-fields at 7 pm on November 30th 1989.

This meeting was arranged so that Members could hear some of the very latest compact-disc recordings. Part 1 consisted of seven early works of Alkan played by OSAMU NAKAMURA: "Le chemin de fer" Op.27 (1844); "Gigue et Air de ballet" Op.24 (1844); "Rondo chromatique" Op.12 (1833); "Trois andantes romantiques" Op.13 (1837); "Les omnibus variations" Op.2 (1829); "Le preux, étude de concert" Op.17 (1844); "Allelulia" Op.25 (1844). (Vol. 1 Epic/Sony Records.)

It is gratifying that the Sony organisation is taking up Alkan in such a big way. His music is practically unknown in Japan and this selection is intended to be the beginning of a series. One wonders, however, whether it was wise to start with these early works. It might have been better, at the outset, to commence with some later compositions that are known to possess audience appeal. However, it was good to hear some rarely performed items. The pianist's interpretation of them was generally deemed to be rather mechanical and expressionless.

Then followed an interval, when refreshments could be sought in the restaurant.

Part 2 began with the whole of "Les Mois" Op.74 (late 1830s) played by DANIEL CAPELLETTI:- "Une nuit d'hiver: Carnaval: La retraite"; "Le Pâque"; "Sérénade"; "Promenade sur l'eau"; "Une nuit d'été"; "Les Moissonneurs"; "L'hallali"; "Gros temps"; "Le mourant"; "L'opéra". (Rene Gailly International Productions Vol.1) This set was very well played with plenty of contrast and change of mood.

The programme ended with KEITH BOWYER (organ) playing, very well, the "Impromptu sur le choral de Luther" Op.69 (c. 1869) (Nimbus Records). This is one of the great compositions for the pedaller - here translated to a church organ.

MEETING AT THE Kensington Town Hall (Committee Room 6), Hornton Street, W.8 on Monday, 29th January 1990 at 7 pm.

Alkan made two unsuccessful attempts to win the Prix se Rome with the two Cantatas that he wrote in the early 1830s. Ruth Jordan, the biographer of Chopin and George Sand, gave a very interesting talk, spiced with anecdotes and amusing stories, about the composers and artists who have won, or attempted, this coveted prize. After the talk Members and speaker chatted over a glass of wine.

The Prix de Rome was a prize given by the Academie des Beaux-Arts for painting, sculpture, engraving, architecture and music. The winners were required to reside for three years at the Villa Medici in Rome. Some distinguished musicians have won the prize including Berlioz, Gounod, Bizet, Massenet and Debussy. Many others, however, are now forgotten names. This was mainly due to the conservatism of the judges, which made it difficult for the more progressive composers to win. It took Berlioz five attempts and Ravel failed in his three attempts. The prize was last awarded in 1968.

NOTES AND NEWS

Dr. John Salmon writes:- ('Your Concert Choice') "I have managed to get another Alkan request on Radio 3. Perhaps we should try to encourage other Members of the Alkan Society

to try their luck." Alkan's Symphony for Piano Solo was broadcast on the programme on Sunday 28th January 1990.

Peter Hick tells us that the Alkan Concerto was played on the 8th February 1990 by Charles Hopkins in Manchester at the University Department of Music.

Frank Lioni has sent more news from Holland. He enclosed an article of ten pages that appeared in the journal "Mens on Melodie" No.12 1988 with the title (here translated) "Book-case ends an enigmatic life. One hundred years after the death of Alkan." It gives an interesting summary of Alkan's work for piano and pedal-piano with several musical examples. The chamber works seem not to be mentioned. As we now know, there is much doubt cast on the book-case story. The writer of the article was Christo Lellie. He also tells us:- "January 15th there has been a concert in the Hague with French music, orchestral and instrumental, and the Dutch pianist Ronald Brautigam played some Alkan pieces, among others "Scherzo diabolica" and five "Esquisses" from Op.63.

From Britta Schilling comes an article published in the "Neue Zeitschrift für Musik" for January 1990 by Michael Struck. It is headed "Sensationell: Alkan's "Concerto" live. "Rarities of Keyboard Music" in Husum." Tribute is paid to the work of "Alkan-Spezialisten Ronald Smith" and his playing of the Concerto, Symphony, Allegro barbaro. John Ogdon is also mentioned. The "Sensation" is the performance of the Concerto by the young Canadian pianist Marc-André Hamelin.

There will be a performance of Alkan's three chamber works - the Piano Trio Op.30, Violin Duo Op.21 and Cello Sonata Op.47 - by Nona Liddell, Christopher Bunting and Ronald Smith at the Purcell School, Harrow-on-the-Hill, Middlesex on May 14th at 7.30 pm. If any Alkan Society Members would like to attend, could they first please contact Richard Shaw (Tel: 882 5333).

ARRANGEMENTS OF ALKAN'S MUSIC

Alkan's style of keyboard writing has occasionally tempted musicians to arrange some of his works for orchestra. Lesser-known ones have recently come to light.

Richard R. Austin arranged for orchestra some of the Op.31 Preludes in two suites (1967). Eric Chisholm, the Scottish composer/conductor, arranged the Symphony (from Op.39) for strings. He conducted the belated British premieres of Berlioz's "Trojans" and "Beatrice and Benedict". He died in 1965, so his interest in Alkan pre-dates the current revival of interest in the composer.

Another British composer who was an early champion of Alkan's music was Humphrey Searlee - born in 1915. Among his teachers was Webern and many of his compositions used the "Note-row" scheme. Amongst his compositions were 5 symphonies, 2 piano concertos, 3 ballets, 3 operas (including "Hamlet") and many chamber and vocal works. He translated and edited Berlioz's letters and his enthusiasm for Liszt resulted in his book "The Music of Liszt" (1954). He was a BBC producer and was awarded the CBE in 1968. He was also a Vice-President of our Society until his untimely death in 1982. He presented an early edition of the "Marche Funebre" Op.26 to the Alkan Library in the Guildhall School. He contributed the article on Alkan's life and works to the fifth edition of Grove's Dictionary (1954) and the following article by him was published in "Music and Letters" in 1937.

A PLEA FOR ALKAN

By Humphrey Searlee

If the name of Charles Valentin Morhange (dit Alkan) is almost completely unknown, this is hardly the fault of the British public, which has, after all, been given very few opportunities of hearing his music. Further, his career lacks even the sensational details which keep alive the names of Liszt and Paganini for those whose acquaintance with their works is merely superficial; it is, in fact, shrouded in complete obscurity, and the most patient researches have failed to bring to light anything more than a conventional record of honours and appointments, except for the interesting fact that the foremost musicians of his time, Liszt and Rubinstein included, made a point of visiting Alkan when in Paris. The public thus has no peg on which to hang such few pieces of his as it may hear at sundry recitals, and tends to dismiss their author as insignificant; but the presence of Busoni, Petri and Frieda Lindler among a handful of pianists who play Alkan might suggest that his pieces have more than a factitious interest.

Unfortunately musical critics have been little more forthcoming; there is an excellent article on Alkan in Mr. Sorabji's book 'Around Music', which is partially reproduced in an appendix to Mr. Sacheverell Sitwell's biography of Liszt; and the late Bernard van Dieren recently added the great weight of his knowledge and scholarship by some penetrating and

laudatory remarks on Alkan in 'Down among the Dead Men'. But otherwise his work seems to be generally ignored and even pointlessly castigated on its rare concert appearances, which is enough in itself to set professional pianists against it.

It is difficult to see the reason for this continued hostility. Busoni himself, in his preface to the first volume of the collected edition of Liszt's pianoforte works, ranks Alkan with Liszt and Chopin as a master of the pianoforte étude, and even Edward Dannreuther in 'Grove' admits that Alkan's studies surpass those of Chopin and Liszt in "technical dexterity" - though one might challenge the implication that they are therefore inferior to them in musical interest. Alkan's works are of course unequal in merit, and some are very difficult to play, which naturally acts as a deterrent to pianists who fear that they may only get critical knocks as a reward for hard labour, but there seems to be no reason why some of the bad and hackneyed pieces continually to be heard on our concert platforms should not occasionally be replaced by music which never lacks consummate workmanship and often rises to heights of genius.

Alkan spent most of his life, which spanned much the same period as that of Liszt, in Paris, where he was a pianoforte teacher at the Conservatoire, and the continued inclusion of much of his output in the matériel d'étude of that institution has led those ignorant of his work to dismiss him as a second Czerny. Nothing could be farther from the truth; no-one can accuse Alkan of padding or pyrotechnics who has any knowledge of his work as a whole.

As perhaps the best introduction to it Mr. Van Dieren cited a short piece, 'Le Tambour bat aux champs', in which, by the simplest devices and the use of a very ordinary march rhythm, Alkan conveys a feeling of overwhelming tragedy. It is a good example, too, of the purity and classicality of his style, which, though often extremely daring in the treatment of passing notes and appoggiaturas, is harmonically far less complicated than that of Schumann. Alkan's best effects are due to economy of means, which not only increases the clarity and cogency of his longer works, but ensures that even his smallest pieces have a point and character of their own. This may be seen from the 48 'Esquisses, Op.63, a series of little motifs portraying a great variety of moods from 'Pseudo-Naïveté' and the Rameauesque classicism of 'Les Initiés' to the romantic passion of 'Les Soupirs' and the fury of 'Imprecatio' and 'Les Diablotins', the last-named a study in the simultaneous use of appoggiaturas and their resolutions. There are also a fair number of genre pieces, such as 'Le Vent' and 'Le Chemin de fer', admirably carried out without a vestige of the petty virtuosity which one might have expected in nineteenth-century pieces with these titles; the gulf, in fact, dividing these works from the average exhibition piece of the time is no less great than that between the operatic fantasies of Liszt and those of Mr. Sydney Smith. Other characteristic pieces are 'Les Mois', Op.74, depicting various scenes of the year, three Marches quasi da cavalleria and the Sonata, which has been described as what a piano sonata by Berlioz might have been like. The affinity between Alkan and Berlioz is certainly striking, as MM. Delaborde and Philipp point out in the introduction to their edition of Alkan, both composers possessing, in addition to Gallic clarity and economy, that element of terribilità and Mephistopheleanism which in Berlioz generally takes the form of wild devilment, in Alkan of icy restraint. This chill feeling, which pervades much of Alkan's work, often rises to noble heights of tragedy, as in 'Le Festin d'Esopo, the Symphony for piano and many other pieces.

A further side of Alkan's work is seen in the concert transcriptions for piano solo. These have been described as even richer in orchestral effect than those of Liszt, and include the Cavatina from Beethoven's B flat major Quartet, the chorus-barcarolle from 'Oberon', Mozart's piano Concerto in D minor and the first movement of the third Beethoven Concerto with a cadenza by Alkan which Busoni included in his famous series of Modern Musik concerts in Berlin.

But perhaps Alkan's best work is to be found in his études, Busoni's opinion of which has already been recorded. Technically the most important of these are the 'Trois grandes Etudes pour les deux mains separees ou reunies', Op.76, consisting of a fantasia for the left hand alone, an introduction, variations and finale for the right hand, and a third study uniting the hands again in mouvement semblable et perpétuel: for this colossal étude Alkan wrote a separate 'Perpetuum mobile' as a preparatory exercise. The 'Douze Etudes dans les tons majeurs', Op.35, dedicated to Fétis, contain at least two masterpieces, 'L'Incendie au village voisin', in which, as Mr. van Dieren said, one would expect all the ineptitudes of a Victorian drawing-room fantasia and finds instead a magnificent piece of tonepainting comparable to 'Harold in Italy'; and 'L'Amour et la Mort', in which Mors, froid et sec, cuts short with chilling effect the passionate outpourings of Amor. This set of études is unfortunately not published by Costallat et Cie. in their modern edition of the 'Oeuvres choisies' and is consequently rather hard to obtain; they are on the whole more Chopinesque and less characteristic than the 'Etudes mineures', but are more properly studies, that is, pieces

aiming at perfecting some technical point; and No. 12 deserves a mention for its (in those days) unusual time of 10/16.

The 'Minor Etudes', Op.39 are perhaps Alkan's greatest achievement and contain some of the most striking piano music ever written. As in the 'Major Etudes', the key of each piece is a fourth above that of the preceding - Alkan makes use of similar key sequences in the 'Esquisses' and elsewhere - thus the Symphony for piano, comprising No. 4-7 of the 'Etudes mineures', begins in C minor and ends in E flat minor. No. 1 is a bravura piece 'Comme le vent', written prestissimo in 2/16; No. 2, 'En rythme molossique', is an admirable example of the variety that can be achieved in an unchanging rhythmic framework, and its decline and fall over an insistent tonic pedal to its mournful end is extraordinarily tragic. No. 3, 'Scherzo diabolico', is certainly Mephistophelean in feeling, especially in the mysterious repetition of the scherzo and the sudden crashing conclusion. The Symphony for piano is one of Alkan's most remarkable achievements, a work completely pianistic in style, but so symphonic in effect that one can mentally hear the orchestration, and graduating from the strife and fury of the allegro and the tragic repose of the 'Marche funebre' to the diabolical scherzo and restless energy of the finale. The Concerto for piano (No. 8-10) is even more remarkable, in that one can mentally distinguish the solos and tutti; yet there is never any question of un pianistic writing. The first movement is stupendous, running to seventy-three pages of piano score, but, while the work contains many fine passages, notably the insistent drum rhythm in the adagio and the (for once) genuinely barbarous theme of the allegro alla barbaresca, it suffers as a whole from lack of conciseness (a rare fault in Alkan). No.11 is an 'Overture', episodic and also containing some fine passages of quasi-orchestral effect, but quite overshadowed by No.12, the variations on 'Le Festin d'Esopé', perhaps the finest thing Alkan ever wrote, and certainly one of the most characteristic examples of his work. It shows the infinite variety of significance he could convey within the narrowest limits, which for him were often in fact aids to fuller expression and enabled him to surpass many who have worked on a larger scale. As a past-master of piano-writing, Alkan deserves consideration and respect, and it is to be hoped that enterprising pianists will not miss an opportunity of exploring what is unfortunately still virgin soil.

ALKAN and YOUTH by J.H. White

A short while after I had the pleasure of meeting Ronald Smith I attended a lunchtime Recital that he gave to the students of the Royal Academy of Music. The meeting was well-supported and there was much enthusiasm after Ronald had given an all-Alkan programme. Before he started to play, Ronald asked the students how many knew anything about Alkan. Only about six hands were raised. One wonders now, if the same circumstances could be repeated after thirteen years of the Alkan Society and a successful Centenary, what would be the response to the same question! My own belief is that we have, so far, made little impression on the music student body as a whole. We have held meetings at three of the London Colleges of Music but the students have paid little attention. They seem to think of us as well-meaning oddities.

Much good work has been done in the last thirty years. We now have a splendid book on the composer in the English language, another in the German language and perhaps soon we shall see a study of the composer and his work in his native tongue. Many articles have been contributed to various journals and there are now many more excellent recordings. Articles, however, are ephemeral and so are recordings to a lesser extent. One has therefore to keep

on trying. It would be pleasing to think that the next anniversary in twenty-three years time, the bicentenary of Alkan's birth, will be as enthusiastic and successful as the one in 1988, or even more so. The arrangements will necessarily be in the hands of a younger generation and many of our elderly Members will not live to see it. It is important therefore that the younger generation is equipped to meet the challenge. We have much talent amongst our Members. Anyone who can should offer to give an illustrative talk on Alkan and his music to, say, a local school music class, a local music club, or local college for teacher training. It is to be hoped that there will be many more occasions when Alkan's name occurs on Concert or Recital programmes, and that the music syllabus at university, college, or Associated Board level will recognise his merit.

I am not aware that Alkan ever wrote a piece of music expressly to interest children as one or two of his contemporaries did. Even his simpler pieces demand fairly large hands. Nevertheless, there are many of his shorter pieces that would make good examination material

If the popularity of Alkan's music is to increase still more, I feel that we must do more to attract the younger generation. Can there arise, in the twenty-first century, as doughty a champion as Ronald Smith has been, and is being, in the twentieth?

OBITUARY Charles Keauffling, our member in Zimbabwe, died early this year. His brother, Julien, writes:- "Charles Keauffling was born in 1904. His love of music came from his French father. He began piano lessons at the age of sixteen, becoming a very gifted amateur player. He knew of Alkan but it was not until 1938 that he first heard a series of recitals on BBC Radio. He emigrated to Zimbabwe in 1951 taking his beloved Bluthner grand with him. In 1961 he sold the piano and came back to England with the intention of staying, but three months of the English climate and he went back to live in Mutare where, amongst other things he played for a ballet school. When he retired he had the use of the piano in the Queens Hall, Mutare and was associated with the Colman Music Club. Over the years I sent a considerable amount of music and records to him as they became impossible to get out there. It was obvious to me that the last five years, of his life he concentrated on Alkan. Only last year I sent out the music for the Sonatine Op.61 and the Saltarelle Op.23. He was instrumental in conveying his enthusiasm for Alkan to me and our other brother (sadly dead) and I seem to have passed it on to one of my sons."

We have also received news of the death of Prof. Steven Schwarzschild of St. Louis, U.S.A..

NEW MEMBERS

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Robert COMMAGERE, Los Angeles, U.S.A. | Jean HOUSTON, Florence, KY, U.S.A. |
| John FRITZELL, Malmo, Sweden | Chris JENNINGS, Terrance, B.C., Canada |
| Tim GILL, London, N.4 | Akihiro MASUKO, Japan |
| Richard HAWKINS, Edinburgh | Mark MORRISON, New York, U.S.A. |

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

Wednesday, 28th March at 7pm at the Hinde Street Methodist Church, Hinde Street, W.1 (off Manchester Square). The nearest underground station in BOND STREET. The evening is devoted to performances of Alkan's Esquisses Op.63 played by four Members of the Society - Margaret Pitts, Peter Grove, John Lewis and Brian Inglis. Refreshments will be available.

Tuesday 8th May at 6.30 pm. A joint meeting with the Liszt Society at the Steinway Hall, Marylebone Road. A Liszt/Alkan programme played by the Presidents of both Societies - LESLIE HOWARD and RONALD SMITH. Tickets £5 Members; £8 non-Members, inclusive of wine and food.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

- £6 for London members
- £4 for members out of London and students
- £7 for Overseas members (Payable in sterling)
- All rates cover husband and wife membership.

Subscriptions to be sent to the Treasurer:

Elizabeth Upchurch,
Wayside,
Chequers Lane,
Preston,
Hitchin,
Herts, SG4 7TY