

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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REPORT OF THE MAY MEETING: A talk by Hugh Macdonald on "Composer's Deaths" at the City of London School on May 19th. 14 members and 3 guests were present.

Professor Macdonald began his talk with the various accounts of Alkan's death. Humphrey Searle's account in the 5th edition of Grove relates the story of Alkan being crushed by a falling bookcase whilst reaching for the Talmud. Alexandre de Bertha wrote, in 1909, that "Alkan was found stretched out lifeless in his kitchen in front of the stove which he was probably going to light to cook his evening meal having spent the day, as he usually did, at Erard's". There is no suggestion of an accident. José Vianna da Motta gave two versions. In 1903 he said "the concierge was surprised one day not to see Alkan leave his apartment as he usually did. He broke into the apartment and found him dead on his pedalier. Alkan had apparently been looking for something in his cupboard and it fell on him and crushed him". Two years earlier he gave a slightly different account. "The concierge broke into the apartment and found Alkan dead, stretched out underneath his pedalier having fetched an object from the cupboard and this object had fallen on him and he was unable to get up without assistance". Finally an important letter discovered by Jean Yves Bras. The letter from Marie-Antoinette Colas is dated 4th April, 1888, only a few days after Alkan's death. She writes "Yesterday, after my class, I went to the music shop, thinking that Mme. Bordes, the cashier there for many years, would be able to give me information on Alkan's death. These are the sad details, which are so painful to me. He died by accident, when alone. He had been in the habit of going down every morning, about 11.00 a.m. to the concierge to get his lunch. That day, probably Good Friday, the concierge was worried as he had not heard from him and went upstairs where he heard faint moans. He had fallen over, face downwards, in the kitchen. His very heavy umbrella stand had fallen on top of him and he could not get free. It is possible that he had had one of his fits of faintness, which he had experienced several times lately, and had grabbed at the object to raise himself. He was carried to his bed but he died at about 8.00 p.m. It was not possible to know how long he had laid under this object. I among many persons questioned Mme Bordes without learning anything further.

Poor great composer who had suffered so much and whose heroic courage was so little appreciated".

This letter is of the greatest importance and being written so soon after Alkan's death is probably the most accurate account.

Professor Macdonald divided the rest of his talk into five categories:-

- (1) those who died in war
- (2) Executed
- (3) Murdered
- (4) Accident
- (5) Suicide.

We heard many excerpts from the works of the composers mentioned.

In the first category, amongst those who died in the first war, were Granados (Ode to the Nightingale), George Butterworth and Albéric Magnard. The latter was killed during the invasion of France in 1914. He shot at troops from the upper window of his home, killing one of them. They set fire to his house and he perished along with many of his manuscripts. There is a growing interest in his music in this country (excerpts from his Quintet). The best known composer to meet his end in the second world war was Webern. He was shot by an American soldier in 1945 when he stepped out of his house to smoke a cigar during a curfew (excerpt from 6 Bagatelles op. 9).

Among the composers who were murdered was Leclair who was found stabbed to death on his doorstep in 1764.

Those that died by accident provided the most bizzare and unusual accounts. They included Lully, who contracted gangrene in 1864 after pushing a stick through his foot whilst beating time. Schobert died in 1767, along with his family, after eating poisonous toadstools in mistake for mushrooms. Koczwara was the composer of an immensely popular piece in its day called the "Battle of Prague". He must have had unusual tastes as he was accidentally hanged by a prostitute in a London brothel in 1791. Chausson was killed in a bicycling accident in 1899 (excerpt from his opera King Arthur).

Two composers whose music was highly praised by Hugh Macdonald were Karlowicz, a polish composer who was killed in a ski-ing accident in 1909 and Pierre Ferroud who died in a car accident in 1936 (excerpt from his March).

The fifth category was suicide and included Zimmerman 1970 (excerpt from his opera The Soldier), Weinberger composer of Schwanda the Bagpiper (in 1967), Peter Warlock (1930), Tchaikovsky (1893) and Jeremiah Clarke who shot himself in 1707. The evening was concluded with part of his Trumpet Voluntary.

Professor Macdonald's light hearted approach to his subject turned what could have been a gloomy evening into a most entertaining and informative one. We are grateful for all the trouble he took.

REPORT OF THE MEETING ON JULY 10TH at the Abbey Community Centre. 11 members and 1 guest were present.

The evening started with the Annual General Meeting beginning with the Treasurer's Report:-

Our total income for 1985/6 was £550.00. This was made up of subscriptions (£414), donations (£104), tax recoverable on Deed of Covenants (£23) and deposit interest (£9). This shows an increase over the previous year which totalled £504. The excess of income over expenditure was £162. Subscriptions:- The Secretary has been informed of a considerable increase in the cost of hiring rooms for the coming year. Most of the schools and colleges are being forced to do this due to Government policy. Because of this and the increase in postage it was decided that subscriptions would be increased for the first time in three years. The new rates are as follows:-

London Members £6.00. Out of Town Members and Students £4.00. Overseas Membership £7.00.

Visit of Dr. W.T. Alkan (by Charles Hailstone)

The Society was delighted and honoured to welcome Dr. Alkan from Israel, at the Annual General Meeting. After the business Dr. Alkan spoke of his tenuous connection with Charles Valentin Alkan by way of family history. He then went on with "A Meeting with Charles Valentin Alkan" broadcast by the Voice of Music of Kol-Israel, by Radio Israel, Jerusalem, last January. Dr. Alkan who took a major part in contributing and providing research for the broadcast played a tape of it. It was an imaginary conversation between one Hippolyt, and a Journalist, Celeste (Alkan's eldest sister in her memoires), Liszt, Pauline Viadot, Marmontel and Alkan himself.

Celeste told how "our family, the Morhanges, adopted their name from a townlet in Alsace where both our parents' forebears had lived for many generations. Charles Valentin has never revealed what caused him to change his name to Alkan, his father's first name, the Greek translation of the biblical Elkanah (Josephus: Jewish Antiquities, V:342). He possibly meant to choose a Jewish name, because already as a young man he was conscious of Jewish values and excelled in his knowledge of the Holy Scriptures .. His four brothers quickly followed his example and also changed their names to Alkan. This induced Charles to call himself, from then on, Charles Valentin Alkan aine." There followed extracts from Alkan's correspondence.

On 23rd August 1848 he wrote to George Sand: "I did not wish to bother you again about myself, Madame, but I am so worried. I can wait no longer, My rivals, and Marmontel, the most unworthy of them all, are gaining ground all day. I see the Conservatoire threatened by the most unbelievable, the most disgraceful nomination in its history. Come to my help, Madame, by being willing to make your voice heard to M. Blanc, however distressing the circumstances may be. Otherwise M Auber who does not like me at all, will dishonour the institution, and in returning the friendship of M Marmontel will give in to him and ruin my candidature".

There was much more on the affair at the Conservatoire and how it helped to turn Alkan into misanthropy, together with scenarios of aspects of his musical and personal life, including the well known words of Alkan that if he could have his life all over again he would set the entire Bible to music.

It would of course be grand if the whole of the tape could be transcribed in a more permanent form. The script occupies nine quarto pages. At suitable breaks the broadcast was illustrated with Alkan's music: the Gigue, Allegro Barbaro, a Barcarolle, Un Heureux Ménage (from the Grand Sonate), finale from the Cello Sonata, La Chanson de la Folle au Bord de la Mer and the Funeral March from the Symphony for Solo Piano. The musicians concerned were Bernard Ringeissen, Raymond Lewenthal, Ronald Smith, Yehuda Chanani and Edward Auer. At the conclusion of the broadcast, the script writers expressed their appreciation and sincere thanks to Dr. Walter Jacob Alkan for his valuable assistance.

The thanks and appreciation of the Society to Dr. Alkan for his very interesting contribution to the evening were given by Charles Hailstone.

RONALD SMITH

Our President's Alkan recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on July 9th was a great success. A very enthusiastic audience gave him a standing ovation. The Jewish Chronicle reported "Ronald Smith's enthusiasm for this enigmatic genius

is infectious and it captivated the audience. In the absence of a printed programme, Smith provided his own 'live notes' turning what was already a musical treat into an informal and highly amusing Cooks tour of unquestionably one of the last century's greatest musical talents. The inventive programming effectively illustrated Alkan's pioneering originality for the keyboard".

Ronald played the Concerto for Solo Piano to a capacity audience at the European Piano Teachers Conference at the Guildhall School of Music on the 20th July. He is featured in an extensive interview in the latest EPTA magazine - The Piano Journal. On October 2nd he included the London premiere of the Trois Etudes de Bravoure (Scherzi) op. 16 in his recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall (it certainly whetted the appetite for his forthcoming recording of these works). Early this month on Radio 3's Music Weekly programme, he and Denis Matthews spoke of their experience performing and recording Bach's Triple Concerto with Edwin Fisher in 1950.

Future plans include a tour of Canada and the USA next March. He will give the North American premiere of the Trois Grandes Etudes Op. 76 on March 18th for the Schubert Society in Minneapolis. He will also take part in a 90 minute radio broadcast. Volume II on Alkan's music will be published early next year. More details in the January Bulletin.

PREMIERE OF THE PAS REDOUBLE - The New Wind Orchestra will be giving the British premiere of Alkan's only work for wind - the Pas Redouble on Thursday 18th December at 7.45 p.m. at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Their programme also includes works by Mendelsshon, Vaughan Williams, Hindemith, Horowitz and Grainger.

ALKAN MANUSCRIPT FOR SALE - On May 28th an Alkan manuscript was sold at Sotheby's. It was a previously unknown work consisting of one page of 24 bars in G major in the form of a canon, signed and dated 5th November, 1863. The estimated price was £250-£350 but in the event it fetched £700. The Society was hoping to bid but the price went beyond our resources. We are hoping to obtain a photocopy.

MARK STARR - The American conductor and composer Mark Starr has orchestrated three of Alkan's larger works, the Symphony, Overture and Le Festin d'Esopo from Op. 39. He has been working on the orchestration for several years and hopes that they will form a significant addition to the symphonic repertoire. He says "While orchestrating these three works, my goals were (1) to remain faithful to the text (2) to follow the orchestral practices of the 19th century French composers (3) to realise the colour and power that is inherent in this music and (4) to make these pieces practical for performance by symphony orchestras". The orchestrations have been published by Carl Fisher Inc., 62 Cooper Square, New York, NY 10003. Mr. Starr is now working on an orchestration of the Concerto for Solo Piano. We are pleased to welcome him as a member of the Society.

JOHN WELLS RECITAL - Roderick Munday reports on the organ recital given by John Wells in Cambridge on June 30th.

"Although I am not much given to organ recitals, this was a real treat. The theme of the programme - there included music by Mendelsshon, Bloch, Milhaud, Berlinski and Alkan - was composers with Jewish connections. This was perhaps more a pretext than a theme, since it would have required some imagination to discern a Jewish flavour in the pieces played. Possibly they were Jewish in the

sense that one could not conceive them having been composed by a stern Presbyterian or by a Mohammedan (was there a hint of Jewish folk music, however, in Alkan's Scherzando op.66?). Seven Alkan works were included, four pieces from the Treize Prières Op. 64 and three from the Onze Grandes Preludes op. 66. They each illustrated different facets of Alkan's pedalier compositions - the haunting trio op. 64 no. 9, the stately first Grand Prelude, the thoroughly unsettling ninth Prelude and the eleventh Priere that put me in mind of the jollier hymns of boyhood. John Wells played beautifully and was warmly applauded by those 50 or so souls who had the good sense to attend!"

NEW ALKAN RECORDING - Maurice Glover informs us of a new recording of Le Festin d'Esopé. It is part of a recording of a public performance in Sweden by the pianist Carl-Axel Dominique of works by Satie, Ives and Dominique. It is on the Dag Visa label (Dag 02-1002). Maurice has also sent a copy of an article on Alkan and the pedalier from the Piano Quarterly (no. 134 Summer 1986). It is by Karrin E. Ford and is part of her doctoral dissertation entitled "The Pedalklavier. Its use in the Keyboard Works of Schumann and Other Nineteenth Century Composers".

NEWS FROM FRANCE - There was a performance of Alkan's Cello Sonata on June 8th at the Chopin Festival in Bagatelle. The performers were Gilbert Zanlonghi (cello) and Daniel Blumenthal (piano). There will be a broadcast of the Cello Sonata on France Musique on the 25th November at 10.30 p.m. The cellist will be Yvan Chiffolleau with the pianist Pierre Réach.

Jean Yves Bras has discovered that Ravel had a copy of Alkan's Grand Etude for the left hand amongst his collection of scores which proves that he must have known the work.

BRITTA SCHILLING - We were pleased to see Britta at the Society's meeting on July 10th. She was in England to attend Ronald Smith's recital the previous day. Her thesis on Alkan (over 400 pages) has now been published in Germany. It is available from:

Gustave Bosse Verlag, Postfach 417, Von-der-Tann-Strabe 38, 8400 Regensburg 1, West Germany.

Britta has very kindly given a copy for our collection in the Guildhall library.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY JOHN - Dr. John White, our former Secretary and founder member, celebrates his 80th birthday on November 30th (same day as Alkan). We all wish him 'Many Happy Returns'. John takes a great interest in the activities of the Society and attends as many meetings as possible.

SORABJI - the distinguished composer and vice-president of our Society, was recently in hospital. The Secretary sent him a card on behalf of all members of the Society and we trust he has now recovered and is back home.

THE GODOWSKY SOCIETY - Harry Winstanley, one of our members in Scotland, is Secretary of the Godowsky Society. The subscription is £5 per year. The address is Heathery Hall, West Linton, Peebleshire, Scotland EH46 7DS.

MARTIN JONES included Le Festin d'Esopé in his Radio 3 recital of French Piano Music on the 15th October.

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS - Eliot Levin, our Membership Secretary, runs his own record

company in his spare time. We are enclosing with this Bulletin the latest catalogue plus a review by Ronald Smith of a recording of Beethoven's "Emperor Concerto" with Eugen D'Albert as soloist (Symposium No. 1000).

PETER GROVE our Salisbury member, will be the soloist in Beethoven's Emperor Concerto on Saturday 22nd November at 7.30 p.m. at the City Hall, Salisbury.

NEW MEMBERS

Claire Enders, London W.10
Constance Himelfarb, Paris
Mark Starr, Los Altos, California

Raoul Gunning, Bradford
Owen Toller, London W6

SUBSCRIPTIONS

£6.00 for London Members. £4.00 for Members out of London
£7.00 for overseas members payable in sterling

Members in the U.S.A. should either send a cheque in sterling drawn on a British Bank or send cash in sterling.
(All these rates cover husband and wife membership).

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS - We are pleased to welcome back Harold Truscott who has kindly agreed to give a talk at our next meeting. His previous talk proved most enlightening and was considered by those present to be one of our most successful meetings. The title of Mr. Truscott's talk is "Why Alkan's Music is so Pianistic". The meeting will be on Monday, December 8th at 7.00 p.m. - Coffee at 6.45 p.m. at the Thomas Coram Foundation 40 Brunswick Square London WC1 (nearest underground station is Russell Square. Turn right when leaving station, take the second left into Brunswick Square, cross over and turn right).

Other meetings for next year will include recitals by Ronald Smith and Thomas Wakefield. Further details in the January Bulletin.