

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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Dr John White (1906-1996)

Members will be very sorry to hear of the recent death of our founder and Vice-President John White on 21st January. I first heard of the idea of forming an Alkan Society in February 1977, when information was circulated at Ronald Smith's Op.39 lecture-recitals in Bristol. The attendance at the inaugural meeting in the Waterloo Room at the Festival Hall was small but there was enough interest for John to proceed with his plans, and his quiet, determined work built up the Society into a strong and successful organisation. Those who were on the committee in the early days still speak fondly of the meetings at John's house and the almost legendary hospitality shown by him and his wife Monica.

John organised many stimulating meetings, attracting an impressive number of distinguished pianists, composers and scholars. He made the members feel very welcome and encouraged them to take part: Alkan wrote many pieces which do not require the virtuosity of a concert pianist and there were several rewarding evenings during which members were able to share their enthusiasm. John was a kind and considerate man: he took the trouble to telephone when one meeting had to be postponed, and even when a change of speaker was necessary. Whenever I played some of the simpler pieces at a meeting, a letter of thanks always followed immediately, as well as a generous mention in the newsletter. He edited the Bulletin and did a huge amount of work as Secretary, as well as spreading the word with articles in musical journals. With Ronald Smith, he selected the works for "Alkan in Miniature", and at a time when much of the music was still out-of-print or very expensive, persuaded Billaudot to publish the volume at an attractive price. He also made substantial contributions to our collection in the Guildhall School music library.

Three of the succeeding Secretaries were able to attend his funeral at Holy Trinity Church, Prestwood, Bucks., on 30th January. Much of the following information came from the address given by his son, the Rev. Jonathan White. John had already taken his first degree in chemistry at an age when most students are still thinking about their A levels. A Master's degree and a doctorate followed. He modestly claimed that at the time of the great Depression there was little choice of career but to become a teacher, although he would clearly have made an excellent research scientist. Naturally he brought his immense ability and dedication to the task, and worked in some of the best schools in the country, including Portsmouth Grammar School, St Olave's, Christ's Hospital, Haberdasher's and finally Latymer Upper School. He also spent some time in teacher training, and wrote several text books which were widely used; they were certainly on the shelf in my own department. John worked particularly well with the most able students, helping them to achieve excellent results and move on to the best university courses.

Meanwhile his interest in music flourished. He gained his first position as a church organist in his early teens and throughout his life was an inspiration to church choirs and worshippers alike, always taking an interest whenever his son moved to a new parish. He was of course a keen pianist too and though already well past retirement age he gave some sensitive

performances at meetings of the Society; I particularly remember a moving rendering of "La voix de l'instrument" from the "Chants".

In his last few years, John suffered from a distressing form of deafness which made it almost impossible to listen to music because of the distortion in sound. He was also deeply affected by the illness and death of Monica. However, he was never known to complain. When he became too frail to stay in his own house, he moved to live with Jonathan and his wife Edwina in Prestwood, where he was looked after with great devotion for four years. He died peacefully at home and the atmosphere at his funeral was less one of sorrow than of hope and inspiration from his full life.

Ronald Smith has written the following tribute :

"The Alkan Society was founded in 1977. Its very existence is due in no small measure to the initiative of Dr John White, who first proposed the idea after a London recital at which I had featured some of the composer's works. Little did I then appreciate the depth and scope of John's quiet but insistent enthusiasm for his subject, or the tenacity with which he would bring his vision to fruition. The rest is history.

"Most recent members who have met John in his later years can have little inkling of his calibre. Like Borodin, a distinguished chemist by profession, as well as being a fine organist, he was just about the most unpretentious yet balanced character one could possibly imagine. Older members of the Society like myself will remember with relish John's, and his devoted wife Monica's, hospitality. Both were food and wine connoisseurs! My wife and I will never forget a wonderful evening as their guests at Glyndebourne. "L'incoronazione di Poppea" was prefaced by tea, punctuated by dinner and concluded by a large Pimm's. John never did things by halves!

"I last visited John shortly before he moved out of London and played to him. Despite the acute distortion of his hearing he immediately identified each piece by the movements of my hands. His fine Bechstein has now passed to one of my younger pupils, an Alkan enthusiast. I think John would be pleased."

A final comment: Our members have always been tremendously enthusiastic, of course. But the interest in Alkan is particularly strong at the moment, with several younger pianists undertaking major recordings and concert performances, and increasing numbers of works becoming available in print once again. At times we thought that Alkan would remain a specialised area, of curiosity value only, and the occasional inefficiency of the current Secretary has not helped. But it was always John's example which persuaded me to renew my efforts, and I'm sure he would have been delighted at the resurgence of interest today. It is perhaps fitting to quote the opening paragraph of the article John wrote for the Piano Journal of the European Piano Teachers' Journal of February 1982, in which he wrote of his discovery of the music of Alkan:

"One day in 1940, at Christ's Hospital, I went into Big School to play the organ. There I found a member of the Music Staff who was practising the pianoforte. The music interested me, but I could not guess its composer. When the pianist had finished I asked him: "Whose music was that?" He replied: "I don't suppose you've ever heard of him -Alkan. He's wonderful for the technique- he's got everything." I decided that when I could find the time I would see if there was any Alkan piece that I could play. At that time, I had the idea that Alkan composed very difficult music with which only virtuosi could cope. Reference to the third edition of "Grove" (1927) elicited a perfunctory half-column with Alkan's full name given wrongly. "Henri" was *not* one of his fore-names. (This mistake has been perpetuated until the recent (sixth) edition of "Grove".) The death-certificate gave (1888) "Charles-Valentin Morhange (dit Alkan)". The additional volume to "Grove" in 1940 (the so-called "fourth edition") added nothing further; but in 1954, when the fifth edition appeared, Humphrey Searle gave Alkan a much larger

coverage with a list of his known compositions. What had happened in the meantime? Certain musicians were realising that here was a *neglected genius*. Sorabji, in his book "Around Music" (1932) championed Alkan's cause; so did Bernard van Dieren in "Down among the Dead Men" (1935). Some well-known concert pianists

in the 20th century kept his name alive, notably Busoni, Isidore Philipp, Egon Petri and Joseph Bloch, who devoted his Master's Degree Thesis at Harvard to "ALKAN" and introduced his piano music in many recitals. During the last twenty years there have been important developments and interesting recordings have been made - particularly by Raymond Lewenthal and Michael Ponti in the U.S.A., in our own country by Ronald Smith, John Ogdon and Malcolm Binns, and .recently, in France, by Pierre Reach. In 1976 appeared what I believe to be the only book on Alkan, "Alkan (Voi. I) The Enigma" by Ronald Smith (Kahn & Averill). This excellent work is almost entirely biographical and all Alkan-lovers are looking forward, with keen anticipation, to Vol. II that will deal with his compositions. The recent (sixth) edition of "Grove" contains an authoritative summary of Alkan's life and work by Hugh MacDonald, listing all known works in correct chronological order. His closing paragraph reads: "Alkan's music has been seriously neglected. Pianists have been slow to explore the great range and variety of his music, not all of which is extravagantly difficult to play. But he was greatly valued by Liszt, Busoni and many others, and should eventually take his due place among the most important figures of his time. ""

[The article went on to discuss Alkan's life, some of his major works, and a list of pieces suitable for pianists of more modest ability, particularly from the "Esquisses" and the "Chants".]

Concert reviews

A small number of members were able to hear Bridget Marshall's organ recital in November, given in the church of Notre Dame de France by Leicester Square. There was an encouraging attendance overall, of over fifty, and the audience evidently enjoyed the Alkan works which occupied the entire second half of the evening.

The recital was devoted to "Organ Music: The Jewish Heritage" and was given as part of the B'nai B'rith Festival of Jewish culture, which on this occasion was a ten-day event which widened its scope to include both Jewish and Christian music in a series of concerts, church services, workshops, and talks "celebrating the diversity and kinship of the two traditions".

Bridget opened with Milhaud's Sonata in three movements, a tough work far removed from *La création du monde*, *Scaramouche* or the *Suite provençale*. With its use of bitonality, jagged rhythms and retrograde motion it was a hard piece to grasp in one hearing, but it was played with great conviction and excellent use of the timbres available on a splendid instrument. There followed two short Preludes written for synagogue use by Louis Lewandowski and Ernest Bloch, the former based on the well-known cantorial solo *Kol Nidrei*, used by Max Bruch and Schoenberg among others. Lastly before the interval came the expected Sonata by Mendelssohn, on this occasion a short three-movement work in A major.

Then came Alkan's Onze Grands Préludes, Op. 66, giving a substantial second half of some fifty minutes. Only a few of these pieces have been recorded and the score is hard to obtain, and so the impressions came thick and fast. We know that several, if not all, were conceived for the *pédalier* (pedal-piano) and might not be expected to work particularly well on the organ. However, Bridget had adapted them skilfully and many did make extremely fine pieces for the instrument, especially when played with such technical skill and creative use of registration.

It soon became clear that there was a careful sequence in Alkan's choice of keys, although some of the pieces were so highly chromatic that it took a while for one's prediction to be confirmed! The first four are in F major, D minor, B flat major and G minor, and the sequence continues as expected, with the eleventh eventually resolving into F sharp major. It made me wonder whether Alkan originally intended a full sequence of all twenty-four keys.

I am delighted to say that Bridget will be playing the pieces again at our second Alkan Day on 20th April, of which more later. Therefore I can be fairly brief with my impressions gained from this one hearing and what I can read of a few scribbled comments. The first Prelude is familiar from recordings by Nicholas King and John Wells, and its pedal passages are of course indebted to Bach's F major Toccata. The D minor makes use of some grotesque grace-notes and rushing upward scales; a radical piece like nothing else I know. The third makes use of a pedal melody and a fine cantabile over arpeggios, with a chorale-like episode and some remarkable modulations. The fourth is in martial style, with off-beat chords and some real virtuoso passages. Then comes the E flat piece with canonic passages, meandering through several keys before a fine melody first in the treble and later in the pedals; a fortissimo false ending is followed by a sensitive postlude. The sixth, in C minor, is in Siciliano style, but with some quite bizarre harmony and so many pivot chords leading to foreign keys that I was reminded of some of the pieces by Ervin Schulhoff in this century.

The A flat prelude shows lovely restraint in its opening unison, delaying the introduction of harmony in quite daring style. At times the bass line was reminiscent of the left-hand octaves in the middle section of Chopin's A flat Polonaise. More huge pedal effects follow in a quite extraordinary conclusion. The F minor piece returns to martial style, working towards the end in grandiose style, keeping one guessing whether it would end in the major or minor key.

The D flat major has some beautiful repeated chords which would work well on the piano. Possibly the dry acoustic worked against this piece. Again the ending was fascinating, with one "foreign" note reminiscent of the added seventh in Chopin's F major Prelude. Interesting too is the German tempo indication of "Langsam", a real rarity for Alkan. The melody of the B flat minor piece is perhaps a little "corny"; but Alkan's uneven quality at times is one of his many fascinations. The leaping pedal line and almost tone-cluster quality of some of the chords towards the end were striking here. Finally, a piece whose tonality was elusive for a long time but landed as expected in F sharp at the triumphant end.

Bridget wrote a long article for the "Organists' Review" about her preparations for the recital. It was not possible to publish it in the journal, and the article was very much shortened for the programme note, occasionally in misleading fashion. I am therefore delighted to be able to publish her article in less drastically edited form later in this Bulletin, and thank her for giving her consent.

While strictly outside the scope of our Bulletin, Marc-Andre Hamelin's all-Liszt recital on January 14th attracted several members and the Wigmore Hall was fully booked: an ironic contrast to his stimulating series the previous year which brought in substantial support but nowhere near a full house. Leslie Howard, who is already beyond Vol. 30 in his complete Liszt recordings, gave a pre-concert talk which was packed with information, as well as several corrections to the concert programme, and he could also have sold many more places than the Bechstein Room could accommodate.

A recent review by Adrian Jack of Malcolm Binns's 60th birthday recital (another pianist who has had some Alkan in his repertoire) remarked that the Wigmore was a difficult room in which to play really quietly. With the Hyperion microphones in evidence, and helped by a particularly fine piano, Hamelin did his best to disprove that view with some playing of great delicacy. In both Liszt's first published work, the first *Apparitions* (in the plural, as Howard pointed out) and a group of late pieces including the haunting *En reve*, the ears were certainly switched to full gain. The problem was less the hall itself than some patrons who have not yet

learned the art of coughing quietly or sitting still in creaking seats, and others who need to be reminded loudly by their watches every time the big hand is on 12. With luck, the recording, or the post-concert "patching" session, will have eliminated those, as well as what sounded like a loud snore, almost inexplicable given the riveting playing throughout.

In the overtly virtuoso pieces like the three Hungarian Rhapsodies, Hamelin played with great panache, though always with complete control, favouring clarity over the usual bombardment of sound. Leslie Howard had warned us that he was to play his own cadenza in the second Rhapsody, and it was a real Hamelin special: bitonality, general fireworks and even a brief quotation from Alkan's third Grande Etude (Op. 76 No.3) which happened to fit in with the remote key he had reached. The musical style was perhaps post-Lisztian by a long way, but the spirit would not have been lost on the composer. A few mistakes crept into the final *Don Juan* Fantasy, but as Andrew Clements said in the Guardian, "that they came as such a shock was a tribute to Hamelin's astounding facility".

It was surprising not to see more reviews of the recital. The Financial Times apparently carried one in a first edition which was later displaced by an article on the Booker Prize for fiction. The Scotsman newspaper also sent a freelance reporter, but again could not find the space for his article.

Forthcoming concerts

RONALD SMITH. Two of our President's forthcoming recitals will be including some Alkan. On Sunday 18th February at 7.30 p.m. he will be playing in St. Gregory's Church, Canterbury. If my interpretation of the street map is correct, St Gregory's is a couple of streets away from the Cathedral precinct in a north-easterly direction. I cannot find a phone number for St Gregory's, but would expect places to be available at the door.

Then on Tuesday 30th April, Ronald will give a lunchtime recital at the Fairfield Hall in Croydon. His programme will include music by Balakirev, Chopin and Liszt, as well as Alkan's *Le tambour bat aux champs*. The telephone number of the box office is 0181-6889291.

Several of Marc-Andre Hamelin's concerts were previewed in the last Bulletin. One correction: his programme at St George's, Brandon Hill in Bristol on February 18th will not contain Ives's "Concord" Sonata or two of the three Scriabin works mentioned. Instead, it will include Haydn's Sonata No.50 in D (Hob. XVI/37), Scriabin's 3rd Sonata in F sharp, Op. 23 and Medtner's *Danza festiva* (No.3 from "Forgotten Melodies"). The concert begins at 2.15 p.m. (doors open 1.30, cafe open 1 o'clock) and tickets are free. According to St George's, it will be broadcast live on the BBC World Service; according to another source, a recording will go out on a Tuesday. Whichever is true, for once our overseas listeners will have the advantage. Perhaps some British listeners have better reception than I do, or have access to the WS via cable.

You may also be intrigued to know that Hamelin is to play Alkan's Concerto for solo piano in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Monday 12th February, as well as Chopin's Barcarolle and Liszt's *Reminiscences de "Norma"*. He will also repeat his Liszt programme from the Wigmore Hall the following day. A scurrilous, and possibly racist, thought comes to mind, recalling some of the remarks about the "oriental" augmented seconds in the *Allegretto alla barbaresca* finale of the Concerto - one author quoted in the preface to Mark Starr's orchestral version refers to music for belly-dancers! Michael White of the "Independent" recently joined the BBC Philharmonic in a tour to Oman, in which they gave concerts and workshops for the students' orchestra. A few years ago, Western orchestral music was completely unknown there - apparently some students had never even heard a trumpet, let alone played one - and the Sultan has used his wealth to help the students make up a huge amount of ground in a short

time. By all accounts it was a very successful visit and the BBC players were greatly impressed by the standard already reached, as well as by the gold Rolex watch presented to their conductor, Yan Pascal Tortelier! I expect that Saudi Arabia has been more in touch with Western music, but it will be interesting to hear how Hamelin's recitals are received there. I hope the change of climate is not too drastic when he comes to Bristol: at least there should be air-conditioning out there.

Jack Gibbon's recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on 15th February, known in these parts as the "Alkanathon", has naturally created a great deal of interest. His official leaflet is very well produced, and it is enclosed more as a souvenir, since I expect most members intending to go will already have made use of his preliminary notice. I heard about the recital after printing the last Bulletin, and there was only time to ask Jack hastily to send some leaflets, which he kindly did by return, and to enclose them without comment. Therefore there was no time to organise a group booking for members through the Society, which I regret. However, I hope that perhaps a few of you have felt evangelical enough to organise your own group and take advantage of the reduced rates. (Do remember the recital begins at 7.00 p.m.)

Some members are certainly coming a long way for the recital: I know already that Mark Morrison from New York and David Armitage from New Zealand will be combining a visit to the UK with their attendance at the concert. I hope to arrive in good time and install myself at a table opposite the entrance to meet and greet Alkanians and their guests. It is particularly good to see that Classic FM is taking an active interest in sponsoring the recital too. It is already the fourth most popular radio station in the UK, and is beginning to widen its scope beyond the short "classical favourites" which attracted so many listeners (or produced sniffs among the Radio 3 snobs) in the early days.

The recital has been well covered in the music press, with the BBC Music Magazine for February, Classical Piano for Jan/Feb and Classic FM Magazine for February all containing previews. Jack will be the guest on Radio 3 in the "In Tune" programme this Thursday (8th February), at about 5.40 p.m., and there will be a feature on "Music Matters", again on Radio 3, on Saturday 10th at 5.45 p.m., repeated the following day at 12.15. There will also be previews on Classic PM in "Newsnight" at 6 p.m., either on the 12th or 13th February.

Jack will be having a party/gathering/record-signing in the foyer after the recital and that should be another opportunity to socialise for anyone who has the stamina beyond 10 p.m. We have been allowed to display leaflets about the Society somewhere near Farringdon's record stall and I hope that some good publicity will result.

It might be worth telling visitors from abroad that the Queen Elizabeth Hall - now known by the unattractive name RFH2 - is, like the Royal Festival Hall (RFH1), part of the South Bank Centre, which is easily reached from Waterloo Station. Waterloo is a major terminus, including the International station where Channel Tunnel trains arrive from Belgium and France, as well as a station on the London Underground, and the South Bank is clearly signposted from there.

Jack can be heard in lighter repertoire a few days before his Alkan marathon, when he plays Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* at the Barbican Centre on Saturday 10th February at 8.00 p.m., with the RPO conducted by Paul Wynne Griffiths. This is a Raymond Gubbay presentation of "Classic Greats" which also includes old favourites like *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, *Finlandia*, *Peer Gynt Suite No. 1*, *Swan Lake Suite*, *Pomp & Circumstance March No.1* and Ravel's *Bolero*.

Raymond Gubbay is the successful promoter of events like the "Teddy Bear" concerts (throw your teddy in the air if you like the music!) or the current self-styled "Centenary Production of *La Bohème*" (as if there were no others) at the Royal Albert Hall. The low prices will attract an audience never seen at Covent Garden, but the "Independent on Sunday" reviewer could

not recommend it either for its production ("utter tosh"), its acting ("coarse") or its amplification ("like the special effects at a ghost train"). Gubbay certainly sells plenty of tickets and gives work to musicians, and he has no hesitation in using modern techniques on audiences who miss their hi-fi volume controls when they go to live concerts, or apparently need spectacular lighting effects to stop their attention wandering - not forgetting military bands and cannons for the "1812" Overture. It just seems a pity that his choice of repertoire is so determined not to break new ground. While one must not be snobbish about these matters - after all, Classic FM began with similarly restricted aims - it was nevertheless good to read that Gubbay, in company with the children's TV presenter Floella Benjamin, lost his recent debate with Jeremy Isaacs at the Oxford Union, the "elitists" representing the subsidised arts winning by a substantial majority.

Finally, in a shameless piece of self-publicity, the Secretary reports that he is organising the February meeting of the Salisbury Chamber Music Club, in company with the local Albany Wind Quintet. It is one of only two such music clubs in the country (the other being in Southend) in which all the concerts are given by its own members, though it does occasionally sponsor a professional concert. That explains the laughably small subscription rate of £4 per year for eight concerts, or £1 per concert for visitors. The concert will be in Salisbury United Reformed Church in Fisherton Street (a short walk from the railway station) on Saturday 24th February at 7.30 p.m. The programme will include pieces for wind quintet: Poulenc's Trio for oboe, bassoon and piano, five Arabesken by Erwin Schulhoff and the Quintet for piano and wind by Anton Rubinstein.

Schulhoff was a particularly interesting Czech composer and pianist in the first half of this century, whose music is undergoing something of a revival thanks to the Decca series of recordings of "Entartete Musik" - so-called "degenerate music" banned by the Third Reich. His opera "Flammen" and a disc of "Concertos *alla Jazz*" have already appeared. As a Jewish Communist who played and wrote jazz-influenced music, Schulhoff met the fate of too many of his contemporaries and died in a concentration camp in 1942. His Arabesken are a kind of tribute to the Viennese waltz - the fashionable term today might be "deconstruction" - with reminiscences of the Strauss family as well as the Richard Strauss of "Der Rosenkavalier" and Ravel's "Valses nobles et sentimentales", though with a thoroughly zany approach to harmony and tonality.

Anton Rubinstein (1829-94) was a tremendously important musician in his day - a pianist who gave recitals of epic proportions, and the founder of the St Petersburg Conservatoire. However, his music is little-known today, apart from the Melody in F, and he is too often confused with Artur Schnabel, the Polish pianist who came much later and was unrelated: even my library catalogue makes the blunder, and a recent Radio 3 broadcaster seemed to be unconcerned with the difference. A pianist at Husum last year told me about the Quintet: the score seems to be unobtainable in British shops and he had to post me his ancient copy from Canada; so this may well be quite a rare performance. It is a substantial work, for the same instrumental combination as the well-known Rimsky-Korsakov quintet, using flute rather than the oboe found in Mozart and Beethoven. Its influences are more German than Russian, and as might be expected, the piano writing is particularly elaborate, using some large stretches and some quite Alkanian textures. Since Rubinstein dedicated his fifth and longest piano concerto to Alkan, the connection is probably no coincidence.

Record reviews

After the impressive crop of new recordings in the last Bulletin, the pickings are a little slimmer this time. The good reviews of Hamelin's recording of the *Grande Sonate* (Hyperion CDA 66794) and Jack Gibbons's Opus 39 (ASV CD DCS 227) have continued. Wadham Sutton reviewed both in the November BBC Music Magazine: "The music compels attention,

the virtuosity is mind-boggling, the sound is clear - and the booklet notes are full and informative... If I had to choose one of these for my desert island, I'd have to take them both." Classic FM magazine included Jack's Op. 39 in its "Critics' Choice", as well as giving high praise for his three-disc Gershwin series, also on ASV.

Michael Stewart's review of Hamelin's disc in the December "Gramophone" was as enthusiastic as expected, praising the "precision and crispness of his finger-work in the dazzling first movement" and the "sometimes superhuman feats of pianism demanded in the Faust-inspired second movement". The third movement "(Alkan's imagined picture of domestic bliss) is beautifully poised and charmingly rendered" and the "tragic Promethean finale is most effectively and powerfully projected, though it should be noted that here Hamelin is no less than 2'46" faster than Ronald Smith, whose tempo is perhaps closer to Alkan's written tempo indication of *Extremement lent*." He also commends Hamelin's "direct, finely articulated no-nonsense reading" of the Sonatine which brings out the "clarity and economy of the writing", his "serene and hypnotic" account of the *Barcarolle* and his "stunning display of pianistic gymnastics" in *Le festin d'Esopé*. François Luguenot's "informative booklet-note" also receives its due acknowledgement.

We obviously have an ally at the "Gramophone" in Michael Stewart, whose end-of-year round-up gives pride of place to Alkan, as well as his third successive inclusion of Marc-Andre Hamelin in such a list. "It has been such a good year for superlative recordings of Alkan's piano music I could easily have chosen at least four discs for inclusion in this column." He places Hamelin's "Live at Wigmore Hall", which includes Alkan's Op. 76 Etudes and his Beethoven transcription and cadenza, in first place, follows it with Jack Gibbons's Op. 39, and even includes a vicarious mention of Alkan in his third choice, the fifth Rubinstein concerto played by Joseph Banowetz on Marco Polo Records, dedicated, as mentioned already, to Alkan.

There are two new releases to include: Nuos, the "budget" department of Marco Polo, has brought out a well-filled Alkan disc, number 8.553434, containing over 78 minutes of music. Entitled "The Railway and other Piano Works", it is in fact a selection of reissues taken from the Marco Polo discs of Laurent Martin and Bernard Ringeissen. It was due for release in January. As far as I can tell from a rather blurred fax, the selection is as follows: four Preludes from Op. 31, two Impromptus (Op. 32, Nos. 1 & 3), the "title track", *Le chemin 1 de fer*, Op. 27, three major-key Etudes, (Op. 35, Nos. 6,8 & 12), the *Marche funebre* from the *Symphonie* (Op. 39, No.5) fifteen *Esquisses* (Op. 63) and the *Scherzo diabolico* (Op. 39, No.3).

I find the selection quite an interesting one, avoiding as it does some of the more obvious choices like the *Barcarolle* from Op. 65, *Chanson de la folle*, or *Le festin d'Esopé*. The success of Naxos began with fairly safe repertoire sold at a bargain price, but always in new digital recordings. They kept the costs low by using spare studio time or less well-known artists, often from Eastern Europe, and by never duplicating repertoire. But the production values are equal to many discs at full price, and several have been the first choice of critics on "Record Review". Now some admirably rare repertoire is beginning to appear on the Naxos label -even the three Boulez sonatas. While long-time members will undoubtedly have the Martin and Ringeissen recordings already, I find this a most welcome development which should bring Alkan's music to a much wider public, encouraged by the budget price of under £5 to give it a try. I would be interested to hear comments on the programme notes, not having seen the disc yet myself.

A keen-eyed member in Norway, Bård Dahle, noticed an American disc in a catalogue which was released in 1994 but has so far received no attention. Entitled "The Transcendental Piano", it is a recital by Marc Saloman on the Titanic label, number Ti-220. The programme is an intriguing one, presumably chosen for the way each work takes piano technique and the resources of the instrument of the period to their limits: Alkan's *Symphonie*, Op. 39 (4-7),

Beethoven's late Sonata in A flat, Op. 110, Liszt's concert arrangement of the Sarabande and Chaconne from Handel's *Almira*, and Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz No.2*.

Salman is without doubt a pianist to be taken seriously. He has included Alkan's *Sonatine* in his recital series at the Seattle Art Museum, called "The Unexpected Piano", when he also played the Liszt arrangement of Beethoven's 7th Symphony, a Clementi Sonata and a Study by Charles Ives. Evidently he has a real taste for works outside the usual "core repertoire". In the Beethoven and Liszt works he displays an impressive technique and musical sensitivity. The Liszt pieces are not often heard -the first Mephisto Waltz is a favourite war-horse, but the other two are relative rarities. His performance of the Alkan is impressive, avoiding many of the pitfalls. I do find that his tempo tends to vary too much in the first three movements, interfering with the symphonic sweep of the music: he builds up an admirable momentum but then throws it away with a sudden burst of speed that is hard to justify. There are rather too many "Luftpausen" in the first movement, when his expressive "commas" between phrases interrupt the flow -as well as a few extra notes where he has not noticed that they are tied. All praise to him for observing the exposition repeat, but less for making too little of the counterpoint in the development. The Funeral March, again, is very expressive but could use the steadier pace of the real thing. Some of the "witches' minuet" is rather slow and lumpy; but he plays the leaps at the end very securely and at speed, which makes the choice of general pace surprising: he seems quite capable of playing the whole movement at Alkan's marked tempo. However, the finale is very exciting, with some brilliant playing and a real sense of the diabolical "ride in hell" described by Lewenthal. There is some real pianissimo playing too, not at all easy to do at speed and too often neglected in virtuoso music. And the extraordinary chord ("unclassifiable yet utterly logical", in Ronald Smith's words - can some musical theoretician suggest an analysis?), bowdlerised in Ringeissen's recording into a diminished 7th, is played exactly as written. It is only a pity that Salman decided to speed up the sequence of root-position chords on the final page. It is one of the most remarkable sequences I know, and it needs time to make its point. He is forced into a sudden downward gear-change for the burst of quavers just before the end, in any case.

The recorded sound is vivid, with rather closely-placed microphones, I think, which give plenty of Steinway sound but perhaps too little of the acoustic of Holy Trinity Church in New York. In conclusion, there are reservations, but this is a certainly a pianist whom I would like to hear in more Alkan. According to the "Gramophone", Titanic Records are distributed in the U.K. by Trade Link Music Distributors, Eastwoods House, Church End, Potterspurty, Northants., NN12 7PX; tel. 01908-543005, fax 01908-543056; also by Tremula Records, 63 Sandringham Road, Maidenhead, Berks., SL6 7PL; tel.01628-29142. Their address in the USA is Titanic Records, P.O; Box 204, Somerville, Massachusetts 01244-0204, tel. (617)864-5530; \$20 per disc post paid. Resisting temptation to make any sick nautical jokes, I must say that the small Titanic catalogue contains some very interesting items and is well worth investigating.

Future releases: For years we have seen reviewers comparing new releases of Opus 39 with Ronald Smith's EMI recording of 1977, and lamenting the unavailability of the whole set. At last a company has been brave enough to undertake its reissue, and the complete set of Op. 39, together with the *Trois Petities Fantaisises*, Op.41, the *Allegro Barbaro* and the *Song of the Mad Woman* IS to be released by APR (Appian Publications and Recordings). The reference to APR in the British Music Yearbook describes the company as specialising in "historic piano releases", and the word "historic" is without doubt appropriate here. EMI had always argued that there was insufficient demand for such a reissue, and that the cost of remastering - a pitiful £1000 - did not justify it. Let us hope that Appian's confidence is justified in selling the discs to many new customers as well as Alkanians who wore their LPs out long ago. The discs should be ready for release this summer.

Meanwhile, back at Nimbus... Bård Dahle also saw a reference to their recording in his catalogue, but it was wishful thinking, alas. A little editing is still needed on the chamber music and other pieces recorded over a period beginning in 1990. We are hopeful that the discs will finally make an appearance later this year. One day the full "Kafkaesque" story of this recording will be told, and we hope to hear it from Ronald Smith at a future meeting. When the 1996 New Year's Concert from Vienna is already in the shops, there is surely some record of a different kind to be acknowledged here!

Broadcasts

There has been the usual sprinkling of broadcasts, some of which were previewed in "Radio Times" .At the end of October Ronald Smith's recording of the *Scherzo diabolico* was played on "Midweek Choice" .The theme of the programme was "Hallowe'en" and obviously one listener thought it would be an appropriate piece. Around the same time, Jeremy Nicholas included the first Nocturne in his series of Nocturnes on the early evening programme "In Tune" .I was fully expecting the new Jack Gibbons recording, or even Ronald Smith's, but Nicholas surprised us all by taking it from the much rarer Alan Weiss recording, another excellent performance all the same.

Inspired by the above, I requested "Serenade" from *Les Mois* a few weeks later, when the theme was indeed Serenades, as well as being the day before Alkan's birthday; and then "Une nuit d'hiver" when the presenter wanted pieces for midwinter. Neither was played. Admittedly, they are not on widely available recordings - one Belgian, one French - but I did give an alternative piece from Ronald Smith's collection of short pieces, again to no avail. Perhaps Susan Sharpe has instructions to ignore anyone who sounds like the representative of a pressure group! I have decided to save on the phone bill in future, but other members may have more success.

Hamelin's recording of the first *Concerto da camera* has been heard again in an early-morning broadcast introduced by Andrew McGregor. He has played Alkan pieces in "On Air" before, and always with an enthusiastic comment about the music and the players. He told the listeners about Alkan's keeping two flats in order to avoid visitors, although he did not mention that one was above the other.

As usual, I know of no forthcoming broadcasts. Keep scanning "Radio Times" , and listen out for Jack Gibbons's interviews in the next few days (assuming that I can finish this and mail it in time. ..)

Alkan in the News

It is rare enough to find Alkan's name in the arts section, so when he cropped up on November 15th in the general news pages of The Guardian, and the article was cited in the daily round-up of arts news on Radio 3, it seemed almost too good to be true. Unfortunately it was. The report concerned a special concert at the National Railway Museum in York, organised by the University Music Department and containing works connected with railways: *Pacific 231*, *Coronation Scot*, Prokofiev's *Steaming Away*, Villa-Lobos's *Little Train of the Caipera*, Mosolov's *Iron Foundry* and so on. I'm sure you can think of others - Deshevov's fast and brief *The Rails* appears as a Hamelin encore on the 1992 Husum disc, for example. And what of Alkan? The article begins: "The composer Alkan's opus 27 was a piano study titled *The Railway*, writes David Ward. It is reported to be so bad that generations of musicians and train-spotters have been grateful that his bookcase fell on him before he got round to writing another piece about railways." Letting the discredited story of Alkan's death

pass by - for it is a splendid story even if it is untrue - it was no wonder that our former ally Andrew McGregor quoted the article with such glee.

A little investigation brought forth a letter from James Murphy, one of the music students at York who was involved in the concert, entitled "Doing the Locomotion". He assured me that it was only the lack of time which prevented the inclusion: the piece was regarded neither as inferior, nor too difficult for several fine pianists in the University who could "competently wrap their fingers around this tricky piece". James was planning to write a special study of the piece and of Alkan in general. Naturally neither the editor of the Guardian nor the producer of "On Air" seemed particularly interested in the dull matter of a correction. However, they say that any publicity is good.

Classic FM Magazine made use of a story provided by Averil Kovacs, quaintly described as "a member of the Alkan fan club". "Question: What do the composer Alkan and heavy-metal band Black Sabbath have in common? Answer: Cats." She has been trying to track down a painting by Jacques Nam, Alkan's great-nephew, entitled "Mother Cat and Kittens". It is currently owned by Ozzy Osbourne, the notorious singer with said "beat combo". According to Averil, Mr Osbourne and his children have been extremely charming, although he has no wish to sell the painting, and she is hoping to visit his house to see it one of these days. The anecdote was incorporated into a preview of Jack Gibbons's Alkan recital and included Averil's copy of a photograph of Alkan which she obtained from the Bibliotheque Nationale and had lent to Jack, supposedly for his own publicity material. The photo is particularly interesting in showing Alkan's hands, crossed in his lap, much more clearly than the reproduction on page 92 of Ronald Smith's biography.

The February edition of the BBC Music Magazine published an article by Gavin Thomas about composers' societies, for which we provided information. Curiously headed "Society for the prevention of neglected composers", the article mentions British groups devoted to the works of Robert Simpson, William Crotch, Alan Rawsthorne and Sigfrid Karg-Elert, but says there are none for Mozart, Beethoven or Bach; to which one could say that perhaps they do not need any help. In the more mainstream area, the article does mention societies for Schubert, Wagner and Brahms and their affiliations to groups in Austria, Germany and the USA respectively; and we have worked with the Chopin and Liszt Societies in the past. Elgar and Delius also have considerable support in Britain. But in Thomas's words, "particularly favoured [in Britain] are those Messianic but marginalised composers who have not fitted comfortably into mainstream life: the unfashionably individualistic (Robert Simpson, Ronald Stevenson), the mildly eccentric (Percy Grainger, Havergal Brian) and the downright potty (Valentin Alkan, Peter Warlock)." Perhaps It was unwise to tell a journalist about Alkan and the dead parrot... To be fair, we are given quite a good account later, mentioning our work with our French colleagues and the Thalberg Society in America, and the new generation of virtuoso pianists who are taking "the music of this cult figure to ever-expanding audiences". The article is unable to give addresses of all the societies mentioned, but does give details of the British Music year Book and Musical America, which both carry our details (as do the directory of British organisations and the Encyclopaedia of Organisations published in Detroit, Michigan).

At least all the above articles had Alkan's correct name. I am still finding the old mistakes perpetuated in some surprising places. The 1995 Music Diary published by Boosey & Hawkes (which also appears in a different cover as the Classic FM diary) has him as "C-H Alkan" in the alphabetical index and "Charles-Henri Alkan" in the entry for 30th November. A letter to B & H was never acknowledged, but I am pleased to see that he has the right name in this year's edition.

Nicolas Slonimsky, the editor of Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Composers and Musicians, recently died at the age of 101. He had an enviable reputation for the thoroughness of his research,

revealing such nuggets of information as Stokowski's Irish mother and Herbert von Karajan's Nazi Party membership numbers in both Austria and Germany. (There is a fine story in Harold Schonberg's "The Great Conductors" of Stokowski's 1955 radio interview, when he argued so vehemently with the interviewer about his birthdate and his mother's nationality that the broadcast had to be hastily abandoned.) When Slonimsky was writing entries for *Grove* under Eric Blom's editorship, he even insisted on including Sorabji's birthplace of Chingford as well as his original names of Leon Dudley, in spite of Blom's warning that Sorabji would take the first plane to America and personally assassinate him if such details were published. But even he included "Henri" in his entry for Alkan.

Other sightings of the phantom name have been in Alkan's entry in the *Grolier* CD-ROM encyclopaedia, which includes a few pieces of music, though none by Alkan, and, incredibly, in the catalogue of the British Library. When Raymond Lewenthal stated the facts so clearly in his Schirmer edition of over thirty years ago, which are backed up by Alkan's birth and death certificates, it is amazing that the mistake continues to this day.

A final word about a publication which will certainly contain no such errors: I believe that there is a possibility of a new single-volume edition from Kahn & Averill of Ronald Smith's biography of Alkan and his authoritative account of the music, with some additional material in the light of recent discoveries.

For members who can read French, the last Bulletin of the Société Alkan reported that their long-delayed collection of articles, *Piano et romantisme*, had gone to press. Their AGM in December had to be postponed because of the strikes and will probably take place in April. The next French Bulletin will include several documents from the archives which are to be published for the first time, and work continues on the collection of Alkan's letters, including several items from our members. For details of any of the above, please contact François Luguenot, Secrétaire de la Société Alkan, at 145, rue de Saussure, 75017 Paris.

Mention of our French colleagues reminds me of a discovery I made while in Paris for their last AGM. I took a guided tour of *le Marais* quarter, beginning at the Hotel de Ville. Our first stop was in the square in front of the handsome church of St-Gervais-St-Protais, where there is an *elm* tree. According to our guide, tradition has it that the tree was a meeting-place in medieval times for judgements, allocations of work, for rendezvous in general: hence the expression "Attendez-moi sous l'orme". The story is confirmed in the French edition of the Michelin Green Guide. Our guide had not heard of Alkan, let alone his *Esquisse* No.40. Alkan's home in the Square d'Orléans was not too far from le Marais, and I was rather pleased to make this chance discovery of the probable source of his title. Apologies to members familiar with Paris who knew all this long ago.

Here at last is Bridget Marshall's article, written for the Organists' Review before the B'nai B'rith Festival, and published here for the first time with her permission. I have abridged the article slightly, mainly taking out the lengthier sections on other composers, and apologise for any errors which creep in.

ORGAN MUSIC: A JEWISH HERITAGE

Bridget Marshall Organist, Belsize Square Synagogue

"There must be some Jewish organ music," exploded my friend Marshall Stone. He's from the States and his transatlantic intonation sharpened with exasperation. "Do you mean to sit there and tell me there's none?" I play the organ at Belsize Square Synagogue. Marshall is a freelance cantor who deputises there occasionally. We argue from time to time on matters musical; this was one of those times. "Will Mendelssohn do?" I said faintly. Oh yes, that was

fine, Mendelssohn was excellent. "But," he continued, "there must be some others." I could sense the matter would not be allowed to rest. But where to start in such a matter? Synagogue music is predominantly vocal, dominated by the cantor who is both a Minister in holy orders and a musician. He sings the Service. In certain denominations, choirs are grafted on. The German Liberal tradition which gained ground in the latter part of the last century introduced through-composed services, particularly the music of Louis Lewandowski, and extensive organ accompaniment.

The celebration of the centenary of Lewandowski's death in 1994 focused attention on his liturgical music including devotional organ and harmonium music. I involved myself in correspondence first with the Berlin Staatsarchive, and later with the publishers Bote and Bock. Then I visited major London publishers. "No," they assured me at the first showroom, "we have no organ music by Jewish composers". In fact this firm does publish some; they're just not aware of the fact. Another well known music publisher suggested Naji Hakim, presumably because the name was suitably exotic.

Gradually inquiries, reading, guesswork started to yield up some items of interest. The Geneva-born composer Ernest Bloch (1880-1968) wrote six organ preludes and some wedding marches which are Hebraic in colour, beautifully laid out and highly original. The registration instructions are quite amusing: obviously Bloch (not an organist himself) had been given a somewhat over-enthusiastic introduction to the instrument, with catastrophic results. He insists that there be no attempt to use "picturesque colour", requires a traditional organ sound at all times, and "no Vox Humana whatsoever," he fumes.

However diverting all this may be, it underlies one basic reason why Jewish composers should be drawn to write for the solo organ, when the liturgical use of organ voluntaries or improvisations has traditionally not been part of Synagogue services to any great extent.

The association of the organ with church music has become a part of general Western musical culture, to the extent that the sound of the diapason chorus itself has come to signify high human aspirations and ideals. Bloch's preludes were intended for liturgical use, but the musical symbolism of the type of sound he had in mind was obviously paramount. A similar motivation may have led to the composition of the subtle and highly-charged organ music of the Parisian-born composer Elsa Barraine (b. 1910), which is too large-scale ever to have been projected as liturgical music. Obviously, in spite of its profound overtly devotional character, this is designed for concert performance. Barraine is understanding of and sympathetic to a wide range of organ colour, but the importance of the medium itself cannot be underestimated in the composition of such profoundly meditative music.

The opportunity came about for a recital of organ music, solely by Jewish composers, as part of the 1995 B'nai B'rith Festival, and I found myself in the delightful situation of having too much quality material rather than too little. The programme eventually firmed up as follows: Darius Milhaud Sonata; Louis Lewandowski Festival Prelude, Op. 37 no.2; Felix Mendelssohn Sonata in A, Op. 65 no.3; Charles Valentin Alkan Onze Grands Préludes, Op. 66. With the exception of the Mendelssohn which is well known and loved and which needs no words from me, I have described these items below.

Milhaud and Mirror Images.

Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) was one of the sharpest musical minds of the

century. A prolific and original composer, pianist and conductor, he was known as an intellectual in the heady Parisian world of Cocteau and his circle of intimates. During Milhaud's composition studies at the Paris Conservatoire he was taught by Dukas and Widor, from whom, one assumes, he picked up his brilliant mastery of the organ. The Sonata is a one-off, written in 1931 and judged by its wicked inventiveness composed just for the hell of it by a composer luxuriating in his sheer technical prowess.

The outer movements are contrapuntal, looking like late Baroque organ music except for a prolixity of accidentals, and feature the bitonality, polytonality, barbed rhythms and acerbic melodies for which Milhaud is famous... The middle movement is a fine cantabile Reverie. Less contrapuntally busy than the outer movements, it forms a succinct contrast to them. [Bridget also gives a detailed description of the outer movements and their use of retrograde motion, the reversals even including appropriate changes of registration.]

Lewandowski's Festival Preludes

Opus 37 of L. Lewandowski (1821-1894) is a set of five organ preludes, each designed almost as a small overture to certain of the religious Festivals which punctuate the Synagogue year. The German Liberal tradition which is perpetuated in such congregations as Belsize Square Synagogue has a rich repertoire of melodies specific to certain festivals or type of festival.

The "Pilgrim" Festivals, Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (the giving of the 10 Commandments) and Succoth (Tabernacles) all celebrate certain seasons of the year and have melodies in common, and some of these are used in the Festival Preludes, each of which is usually built around one particular theme. The second Prelude is, however, entirely specific, being based on the famous cantoral solo "Kol Nidrei", which is sung on the eve of the Day of Atonement.

Lewandowski was choir director of the New Synagogue in Berlin from 1866 and this had a substantial choir and large organ. The interior was wrecked in 1938 and the shell of the building was subsequently bombed during World War II. Unfortunately no specification of the instrument appears to have survived. The use of such preludes does not appear to have caught on, for while Lewandowski went on to write a quantity of smaller works for harmonium, he never again attempted anything on a similar scale for solo organ. The accompaniments to certain elements of his services do indicate considerable facility as an organist. Apart from the traditional synagogue melodies, Lewandowski's dominant musical influence was undoubtedly Mendelssohn.

Alkan: The Mysterious Virtuoso

Charles Valentin Morhange, known as Alkan (1813-1888), lived all his life in Paris. He was a powerful pianist, who due to a mixture of ill-fortune and a pathologically introspective personality, never had the performing career that his astonishing gifts merited. He gained a first prize in piano at the Paris Conservatoire in 1824, at the age of 11. Presumably to keep himself busy he later gained further first prizes in harmony (1827) and organ (1834).

When, much later, his miraculous abilities had been buried in a mundane and lonely existence as piano teacher, and largely-ignored composer, Alkan seems to have resurrected his organ-playing skills and turned them to the Pédalier - a piano with attached pedal-board. He composed a number of works, listed variously as organ or pédalier, and came out of his largely self-imposed seclusion, to start playing them in 1873, along with other works.

Alkan seems to have been fairly relaxed about repertoire being juggled between organ and pédalier. He featured organ music in his pédalier/piano recitals, most notably the Bach F major Toccata. Being somewhat of an obsessive character, he timed his individual items and published the timings on his programmes. The Toccata was disposed of in 8 minutes -most organists would regard 11-12 minutes as fairly fleet-footed. Leaving aside considerations of acoustics and interpretation, this is a technical bombshell! Franck arranged certain of the Alkan Prières, Op. 64, and two of the shorter Grands Preludes for organ, which were published in 1889, the year after Alkan's death.

The Preludes are listed below:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Allegro (F major) | 7. Andante (A flat major) |
| 2. Allegro moderato (D minor) | 8. Tempo giusto (F minor) |
| 3. Andantino (B flat major) | 9. Langsam (D flat major) |
| 4. Moderatamente (G minor) | 10. Scherzando (B flat minor) |
| 5. Quasi adagio (E flat major) | 11. Lento (F sharp major) |
| 6. Andantino (C minor) | |

As will be seen, they encompass a variety of tempi and mood. What of the music itself? Well, it was composed by a grand virtuoso of the high Romantic era, with an attitude problem! Therefore it is by turns dramatic, fantastical, occasionally grotesque or macabre, self-indulgent -what one could expect of such a man at such a time. Alkan was an eccentric and so is his music, but it can be stunningly beautiful, arrestingly haunting. What in a more lightweight personality would be whimsy, in Alkan becomes whiplash changes of mood, a dark disturbed vision illuminated intermittently by shafts of white light.

Certain of the Preludes undeniably have their roots in Alkan's knowledge of organ repertoire. The first is a jocular study made up of "nasty bits" from the pedal part of the Bach F major Toccata, while the gorgeous sixth Prelude, with its rolling Siciliano rhythm applied to "wodgy" chords, recalls parts of Couperin's *Offertoire sur les Grands Jeux* from *Messe pour les Paroisses*; by turns it meditates on, plays with, lampoons and finally beatifies its subject.

The really furious Preludes (2,4, 8 and 10) actually suit the organ well, and apart from transposing some of the shriller passages down an octave while keeping the tension of higher registers by employing a registration with plenty of upperwork, there remains little to be done. This is just as well, as I was anxious to avoid knowledgeable purists shouting "funk" at my leaving out too many notes. In fact the concentration of musical action in such a procedure can give rise, particularly in the second Prelude, to all effect of violent intensity almost beyond the original writing.

The main problems occur in the quieter movements and cantabile passages, where I think it is not improbable that the sustaining pedal was originally used while the left foot played the pedal notes. This is not so improbable when one considers that organists regularly perform similar contortions with the swell pedal. This would allow for a degree of legato in R.H. octave passages which is otherwise not really practicable, so in order to allow phrase and line to be maintained some of the octaves have had to be abandoned.

The problems are far from insurmountable, however, and in order to have such a monumental addition to the repertoire, the effort to overcome them is in my view well worthwhile.

The programme of course is not the complete corpus of organ music by Jewish composers: it is barely representative. All the music that I have explored has it in common that it is original, frequently composed by musicians greatly superior to some of the more regular suppliers of organ repertoire, and excepting Mendelssohn, it does not get played often enough.

The main impetus for development of the organ as a liturgical instrument in synagogues has passed to the big Reformed and Conservative congregations of the U.S.A., where much fine new music is now making its appearance...But that is another story.

(My thanks to Henry Kuttner of Belsize Square Synagogue for his help with these notes.)

Some miscellaneous items of news

John Lenehan, the winner of our Alkan Centenary piano competition, continues his impressive career as accompanist and chamber musician. He was also involved in the B.nai B.rith Festival. giving a programme entitled "From Jewish Life" with the cellist Paul Marleyn at the Wigmore Hall on November 27th. The programme contained a Mendelssohn sonata and three pieces by Ernest Bloch. including "From Jewish Life". There was also Max Bruch's *Kol Nidrei* and shorter pieces by Leonard Bernstein, Anton Rubinstein, David Popper, George Gershwin (arr. Marleyn) and Rodion Shchedrin.

Roger Smalley, one of our Vice-Presidents, is based in Perth, Australia. though he still manages to visit his brother in Salisbury and was seen at Hamelin's third Wigmore recital which included the Alkan Opus 76 Etudes. He has had several of his compositions released on disc, including his early works *Pulses* and *Accord*, and his more recent Symphony and Piano Concerto, in a vivid Australian recording conducted by Diego Masson, with the composer taking the brilliantly effective solo part. On 19th January his witty Variations on a Theme of Chopin were heard in a Radio 3 recital given by the Canadian pianist Douglas Finch, who preceded the piece with the Chopin Mazurka on which it is based (op. 24. No.4 in B flat minor). It is one of the most original Mazurkas, opening with a chromatic sequence which almost anticipates the tone-rows used by extreme serialists like Luigi Nono, and ending with a single melodic line, concluding a section which the performer described as "one of the saddest and most heroic moments in Romantic music". Ample material for variations, then, with some inventive textures reminiscent of parts of the Piano Concerto.

Another Vice-President, Professor Wilfrid Mellers, continues to work with an intensity which is an example to all retired people. His most recent books include volumes on Grainger and Poulenc. His book, "Music in a New Found Land", remains one of the standard texts on American music, and Prof. Mellers took part in a discussion chaired by Michael Oliver in the recent Charles Ives weekend at the Barbican Centre, the latest of the BBC's admirable "total immersion" events on a 20th century composer. Naturally his contribution was humorous, provocative and well-informed, with his own experience as a composer giving a special perspective.

There is no special anniversary for Ives this year - the previous such weekend was the more obvious choice in Hindemith's centenary year. though concentrating on his early, radical compositions. American visitors seemed particularly impressed by the scope of the three-day festival, with its seven concerts, two films, discussions and foyer music from Guildhall students and others. Even the USA had nothing comparable in the centenary year of 1974, when a conference was organised and a "wall-to-wall" sequence of smaller Ives works was played, but not the large orchestral works which were heard at the Barbican in some very fine and idiomatic performances by the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

There were smaller-scale events too: a wonderful sequence of songs from Thomas Hampson and Dawn Upshaw, and in St Giles Cripplegate, some highly experimental church music, sung in masterly fashion by the BBC Singers, and the two long piano sonatas played by Philip Mead. Why the digression on Ives? Alkan rated no fewer than three mentions in Calum MacDonald's programme-book: two in connection with the "Concord" Sonata. Remembering Lewenthal's description of Alkan's *Grande Sonate* as the longest and most difficult since Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* and the strangest before those of Ives, the comparison is quite apt. Ives's use of two contrasting pianistic styles in the opening "Emerson" movement is compared with Alkan's use of "solo" and "tutti" in the Concerto for Solo Piano. Then in the "Hawthorne" scherzo which is the second movement, he describes Ives as embarking on "a wild train-ride (the European parallel, again, is perhaps Alkan: *Le Chemin de fer*." Finally, in connection with the outrageous organ *Variations on "America"* ("My country 'tis of thee" , a.k.a. "God save our gracious Queen"), he remarks on the "mocking, Alkan-like grace-notes"

in the fifth variation, an allusion not so contrived when one remembers the second Grand prelude in Bridget Marshall's recital. The variations were given such a witty performance by Christopher Hughes that many of the audience were laughing out loud long before the end.

THE SECOND ALKAN DAY: SATURDAY 20th APRIL, 9.30-4.30

I am pleased to announce that another "Alkan Day" has at last been arranged for the Saturday two weeks after Easter. The venue is again the Barbican, but we have been unable to find a suitable day when we can use the Guildhall School recital room. However, a good alternative has been found in a very convenient location. The talks and piano music will be given in the city of London School for Girls, which is in St Giles Churchyard, a few paces from St Giles Cripplegate, once again the excellent venue for an organ recital.

A full programme will be published for the day, and I hope reasonably clear instructions how to get there, remembering the notoriety of the Barbican for losing even people who thought they had a sense of direction. Depending on which entrance you use, the nearest Underground stations are Barbican (obviously?), Moorgate and St Paul's. Following signs to the Barbican Centre, the postern, St. Giles Church or the City of London School for Girls should help you to get somewhere near. Visitors thinking of coming for the weekend may like to be reminded that Marc-Andre Hamelin and his wife are giving their cabaret evening in Croydon the following day. The programme should be as follows:

09.30 A short business meeting at which questions may be put to the committee and suggestions made... ..

10.00 The influence of traditional Jewish elements upon selected works by Alkan: an illustrated talk by Alexander Knapp. Mr Knapp is the first Joe Loss Research Fellow in Jewish Music at City University, London, a position probably unique in the world outside Israel. He chaired seminars at the recent B'nai B'rith festival and is writing a book on Ernest Bloch. This is the talk he was unable to give at the last Alkan Day because of illness.

11.30 "Jules Verne's *La thilorienne* and Alkan's *Le chemin de fer: A jeu d'esprit*, accompanied by lantern slides and by musical illustrations played by Mr Thomas Wakefield." The speaker will be Dr Roderick Munday, Senior Tutor at Peterhouse, Cambridge. This will, in all possibility, be the first time that Alkan's three pieces depicting mechanical devices -*Le chemin de fer*, *Les omnibus* and *Une fusée* have been gathered together in a single programme.

2.00 Organ recital by Bridget Marshall, including Alkan's *Onze Grands Préludes* and some pieces by Couperin which put Alkan's organ music in context.

3.30 piano recital by Thomas Wakefield. It is hoped to include the transcription of Mozart's D minor Concerto with Alkan's cadenzas and some other rarely heard transcriptions.

Coffee/tea breaks can easily be taken in the Barbican Centre. We have arranged lunch in the Waterside Restaurant as before. please note that because of the new venue, we shall have to limit numbers on this occasion. Therefore please apply for places in good time on the enclosed form: places will be allocated in strict order of receipt.

Best wishes to you all for 1996.

PETER GROVE

