



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered Charity number 276199)

<http://www.alkansociety.org>

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Leslie Howard



We are delighted and honoured that Leslie Howard AM has agreed to become President of the Alkan Society.

Born in Melbourne, Dr. Howard has lived in England since 1972. Renowned, amongst other achievements, for his recordings of the complete piano works of Franz Liszt, Dr. Howard has demonstrated his sympathy for the wider romantic piano repertoire, including the works of Alkan. He has been described by the Guardian newspaper as “a master of a tradition of pianism in serious danger of dying out” and as “a virtuoso in the true Romantic style, with emphasis on musicality as much as on bravura”.

Leslie Howard is an acclaimed artist worldwide, giving not only concerts (solo, chamber music and concerto performances) but masterclasses, and is a frequent juror in music competitions. He is also a composer and editor, notably of the works of Liszt. His awards include the Ferenc Liszt Medal of Honour (Hungary), the Order of Australia, and the American Liszt Society Medal of Honour.

Dr. Howard is also president of the British Liszt Society and it is therefore with great pleasure that your Society has arranged, with the Liszt Society, for him to give a recital featuring the music of both composers, on November 18th (*see p. 12 for details of ticket application*).

Concert Reviews

Thomas Wakefield recital, 25th March 2009

At Steinways, London

The formalities of the Society's Annual General Meeting having been discharged with unwonted (though not irreverent) despatch, more than thirty members and guests, including members of the Liszt Society, settled down for a substantial recital by our good friend Thomas Wakefield.

The entire programme comprised originals or transcriptions by Alkan and Liszt, starting with Liszt's transcription of Bach's *Fantasia and Fugue in G minor* for organ. The Fantasia is inevitably (perhaps necessarily) presented with unvarying grandeur and rhetoric by organists, so it was particularly instructive to hear a version which exposed unusual levels of mystery and tragedy as the complex chromaticisms unfolded. Total conviction on the part of the listener who is used to the organ score may have to wait for another day, and there will always be fierce academic discussion about some of the notational and harmonic ambiguities of Bach's manuscript, but it was certainly salutary to encounter the substantially-different conception as devised by Liszt and executed by Wakefield. The fugue weaved its merry way with dexterity; here it was much easier to recognise and accept the greater level of contrapuntal highlighting which is possible on the piano, despite occasional smudges of fingerwork here and there.

Alkan's arrangement of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto no. 3 in C minor* is one of those curiosities of which most members are aware, but few have heard. It was with a keen sense of anticipation that we prepared ourselves for this performance of the first movement, particularly its renowned cadenza, with which Busoni is said to have appalled his audience when he performed it for the first time. Wakefield gave us a deft performance, in which orchestral colourings (especially of woodwind) were conveyed with considerable success. The cadenza itself, with its teasing thematic cross-references to another well-known work of the composer (was Beethoven consciously aware of creating these, or was it simply subconscious on his part?) and extraordinary harmonic shifts, was of especial interest to the academics and performers in the audience.

Wakefield continued with two transcriptions by Liszt. The first, of Schubert's *Liebesbotschaft*, is in total stylistic contrast to the Beethoven, and presents its own challenges of technique, which were handled with secure under-statement. The first half concluded with the *Wedding March and Dance of the Elves* from Mendelssohn's music for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; an extraordinary meshing of the two movements, with the main theme of the second episode wrenched up a semi-tone from its original G major; not so much a transcription as an arrangement bordering on the fantastic. Surely no organist, hearing this version, can ever again submit to playing the original in its pure version for all those brides who know of no other choice for their big day?

After a pleasant interval with refreshments, during which we were able to view the Steinway showroom (but sadly not the Hall of Fame, though a picture of a youthful Yonty Solomon was identified through the glass windows), and during which several members played tentative notes on a considerable collection of stock which few will ever be able to afford, we re-grouped. The first half having consisted of re-workings, the second was of virgin material, commencing with three highly-contrasted pieces of Alkan from his earlier years. Not many members may have heard the *Bourrée d'Auvergne* before, with its Bartókian foretastes; this

was handled with suitable panache and whimsy in turn. Relaxation was afforded by a carefully-controlled performance of the *Andante Romantique* before a pulsating reading of *Le Chemin de fer*, in which redolences of the pre-Beeching days of mighty steam locomotives were tempered by the realisation that those of Alkan's era would have been much more primitive. But then Alkan always was ahead of his time.

The man in the street, when (or if) he thinks of Liszt, will generally cite the extrovert and virtuoso qualities of much of the œuvre, so it was good to be reminded of the greater austerity, even bleakness, of some of the later compositions. *Nuages gris* is a remarkably introspective sketch in which the developing sonorities of the seven-octave piano are exploited, whilst *Csárdás macabre* combines lively Hungarian energy with grotesque harmonic twists and pungent colouring. Both works were delivered with convincing command.

The concert proper ended with two of Alkan's earlier pieces. *Palpitemento* is, regrettably, one of those items never yet in print (the Society ought to take on board an edition of some of these pieces for the bi-centenary, if a willing publisher can be found in these contra-speculative times); a piece of deep sentiment with tenor thumbing of the type which was to be developed by Brahms a couple of decades later as one of his trademark "inventions". *Marche Triomphale* formed a fitting and rousing conclusion to the advertised programme, in which Wakefield seemed to find fresh reserves of pianistic energy and facility when most performers would have been flagging. Generous and well-deserved applause was rewarded with two further miniatures of Alkan, both executed in masterful fashion, in which your reviewer was left with the uncanny impression that the best wine of Cana had been left until the end, so far as intrinsic pianistic challenge was concerned.

We must thank Thomas Wakefield not only for his playing, but also for the careful crafting of the programme and for the splendidly-informative programme notes provided for his audience. Here was an occasion worthy to follow in the footsteps of our late and revered first President; we all look forward to the next such occasion.

Unus ex omnibus

Mark Viner at Cheltenham, 17th July 2009

The Society was glad to support the recital of the young British pianist Mark Viner at this year's Cheltenham Festival. An internet review by Ann Dunn reads in part:

'Mark Viner is a virtuoso pianist without fuss or mannerisms. His forthright playing of three compositions left one gasping at his command of the keyboard in his choice of unusual repertoire. [...]

'It was an interesting treat to hear Alkan's *Symphonie* from *Douze Etudes Op39* where throughout the four movements one could superimpose orchestral sounds. The slow movement, a funeral march, developed into a lament played with a mixture of calm and tenderness; the Scherzo was appropriately in ternary form and included a tongue-in-cheek salon waltz with a fluid fast moving Trio. Most amazing was the pianistic skill displayed by Viner in the final movement with flourishes and bursts of extreme passion'.

Alkan (and others) in Kiev

When the pianist Jonathan Powell originally spoke to your Editor (who is presently based in the Ukraine) about performing in Kiev, it was Arnold Bax who was on his mind. In 1910 Bax, who was visiting Russia, met and fell in love with a Ukrainian girl, Natalia Karginska, and pursued her to Kiev. Although the infatuation ended unhappily for Bax, the affair inspired his first Piano Sonata, a passionate work which ends with the bells of Kiev ringing out. But this work had so far never been performed in the city which inspired it.....

With the assistance of the Kiev musical activist Yuriy Suldin, we were able to book the remarkable Actor's House, (a former Karaite synagogue designed by the eccentric architect Vladimir Gorodetsky), which houses a small Steinway grand in its auditorium. But then Jonathan suggested, that as he was coming so far, why not arrange two recitals, with one to include Alkan's *Symphony* from op. 39? With the support of the Alkan Society therefore we arranged to perform the Alkan in the Actor's House and secured the Kiev House of Scientists (which houses a full Yamaha grand) for the recital including Bax.

British pianists are rarely seen in Kiev concert halls, and certainly not with programmes such as those played by Jonathan. The House of Scientists recital began with Schubert's unfinished piano sonata in C, nicknamed *Reliquie*, given a sombre and impressive rendition as suits this music, which seems to presage what may have been a new stage in the composer's evolution. Yuriy noted that it was in effect a novelty for Kiev to hear Schubert played for musicality and not sentimentality. The remainder of the programme was divided between English and Slavonic composers. The Bax was received with great enthusiasm, and no less enthusiasm greeted two Sonatas by John White and a Sonata and a Barcarolle by Jonathan himself. Representing Russia in this monster programme was Rachmaninoff (the *Etudes Tableaux* op. 33). Concluding the programme was a great rarity – the *Sonata-Fantaisie* of Felix Blumenfeld. Blumenfeld was a pianist and composer who taught at the Kiev Conservatoire – his most famous pupil was Horowitz. This remarkable piece begins as a fairly 'run of the mill' virtuoso item but reaches notable and effective heights of inventiveness, both melodic and harmonic. The applause for the concert as a whole was thunderous.

Many of those at the House of Scientists also came to the Actors' House two days later for an even bolder programme, challenging for the audience as well as the soloist. This comprised the *Concord* Sonata of Charles Ives; the *Concerto for Solo Piano no. 4* of Michael Finnissy; music by the Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov (who was in the audience); and the Alkan *Symphony*. All of these pieces, save for the Silvestrov, were, we believe, Kiev premieres. The audience listened with rapt attention to the Ives, and stood up valiantly to the violent assault of the Finnissy. (Your Editor, who acted as page turner for this formidable piece, found this one of the most terrifying experiences of his life).

Almost at the opposite end of the expressive scale was the music of Silvestrov for which Jonathan was joined by the violinist Yulia Suldina. Suldina played two delicate Serenades for solo violin, music on the edge of dreams and silence. With Jonathan she played the elegiac piece *25.9.1993 - in memory of P. I. Tch.* written to commemorate the centenary of Tchaikovsky's death – similarly evoking the ghosts of Tchaikovsky's melodies.

Jonathan gave a masterly performance of the Alkan *Symphonie* which was greeted by the audience with intense attention and rapturous applause. Silvestrov in a long conversation with Powell after the concert expressed his delight at having been able to hear this (for Kiev) legendary piece. Audience members were profuse in their admiration both for Alkan's music and for Jonathan's virtuoso technique; several people told me that it was years since Kiev had experienced such bravura and panache in the concert hall.

In the wake of this successful Alkanian debut, the Polish pianist Tomasz Kamieniak (another laureate of Levoca) will play the Alkan *Concerto*, together with music of Chopin and Jozef Wieniawski, in Kiev on December 9th (with the support of the Polish Institute in Kiev).

‘Indian Summer in Levoca’ Festival, 2nd -10th October 2009

This year’s ‘Indian Summer in Levoca’ Festival in Eastern Slovakia lived up well to its name, with excellent weather from its opening on Friday 2nd October up through to the penultimate day – alas the final day, 10th October, was accompanied by drenching rain, which fortunately did not deter our audiences. The town of Levoca – granted in June of this year UNESCO World Heritage status – was as beautiful as ever and its people as always friendly and very supportive. Once again the Festival benefited from sponsorship of, amongst others, the Alkan Society, but it also for the first time attracted generous grants from the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Government, the Central European Fund and the International Visegrad Fund, as well as support from the embassies and cultural forums of Austria, Hungary and Spain. This enabled us to bring to our public (both local and foreign visitors) a bevy of first class musicians, not only from across Europe but also from Israel and South Africa.

The Festival also got valuable publicity from its media supporters including the principal Slovak music magazine *Hudobný život* for which your Editor wrote an article on Alkan, possibly the first published on the composer in Slovak.

Readers will be particularly interested in the Festival’s Alkaniana, but the events as a whole celebrated the bicentenaries of two of Alkan’s heroes – the death of Haydn, and the birth of Felix Mendelssohn, in the year 1809. For the latter we know that Alkan had a deep affection, frequently playing his works and basing his Chants on the Songs without Words. For the former we can deduce an affinity from Alkan’s Haydn transcriptions and a shared love of unexpected events and modulations. Many of the Festival concerts have excerpts available to view on YouTube (at www.youtube.com/smerus), and pieces which are all or part represented there are marked with an asterisk thus (*). (YouTube limits videos to 10 minutes, so alas this format is not suitable for all the works played at the Festival, although they were all recorded for posterity). Links in the pdf version of this Bulletin should take you direct to the videos. Other details of the events are on the Festival’s website, www.lblfestival.eu.

Once again the Festival opened with a concert from the Stamic Quartet of Prague, commencing with [Haydn’s Rider Quartet](#)* and ending with Mendelssohn’s last masterpiece, the [op. 80 Quartet in F minor](#). In between we heard a rarity, the invigorating and original 1921 quartet of Hans Krása, who was to be murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. Its extraordinary [central movement](#)*, ‘Mahler on acid’ as one auditor described it, remains imprinted in the memory.

On the next day a concert was held in the baroque music room of the sumptuous Dardanelles summerhouse of the nearby Chateau at Markušovce (now the Slovak Keyboard Museum), when the Haydn Baryton Trio of Budapest played a selection featuring the baryton, the favourite instrument of Haydn’s patron, Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy. This unusual hybrid between the viol and lute families prompted 126 trios by Haydn, and works by many others including [Burgksteiner](#).* For the [sacred songs of Prince Pal Esterhazy](#)*, the Trio was joined by the English soprano Claudia Conway, whom some readers may remember from the memorial concert held for Ronald Smith, when she sung Alkan’s versions of songs of the synagogue.

That evening the Stamic Quartet was joined in the historic theatre of Levoča by the Zemlinsky Quartet, also of Prague. The concert proceeded in a quasi-exponential fashion, beginning with

some lively [violin duos by Bartok](#)*, and moving by way of Brahms's second Sextet to a glorious performance, involving all hands, of [Mendelssohn's Octet](#).* The next afternoon brought a revealing recital by the Zemlinsky Quartet themselves, including Mendelssohn's op. 44 no 3 quartet and [the First Quartet, in A minor](#), by the players' eponym.* It also included the wonderful op. 76/5 quartet of Haydn, whose [last movement commences by definitively ending](#).*

Sunday evening saw the first of two recitals by the incomparable Vienna Piano Trio, which included both the Mendelssohn Trios, the Trios no. 29* and 31* of Haydn, the second Trio of Schumann, and the remarkable [second Trio, in G minor, of Alkan's admirer Anton Rubinstein](#).* (Rubinstein dedicated his 5th Piano Concerto to Alkan). This was in fact the Vienna Piano Trio's first public performance of this work, which was received by the Festival audience with fervent enthusiasm. Both of these concerts matched impeccable musicianship with insight and passion.

Jonathan Powell's solo recital (on the Monday) did not include any Alkan this year, but did have sterling performances of [Rachmaninoff's Etudes-Tableaux op. 33](#), the Bax sonata which he performed earlier this year in Kiev (see above) and the elegiac [Little Suite with Passacaglia](#) of the Slovak composer Eugen Suchoň.* He ended his recital with a rollicking performance of [Godowsky's Fledermaus paraphrase](#)*, which roused an already very satisfied audience to a prolonged ovation.

Tuesday brought a concert by the Slovak Sinfonietta of Žilina under the lively baton of the Czech conductor, Leoš Švarovsky, beginning with Mendelssohn's overture *Die schöne Melusine*, (with its uncanny anticipations of a later work, also set along the Rhine, by a certain R. Wagner). The concert closed with a perfect performance of Haydn's *Clock* Symphony, for which the Levoča Congress Hall proved ideally suited for size and acoustic; [the 'clock' movement itself](#)* was delightful. In between we had Ivan Hrušovský's [Noble Dances of Levoča](#)*, based on melodies from the 17th century Levoča codex – a sort of Slovak *Capriol Suite*. We also had a sparkling rendition of [Haydn's D major piano concerto](#)*, with the Slovak Ivan Gajan as soloist.

Thereby hangs a tale; readers may recall that last year's Festival had been expecting the South African pianist Petronel Malan, who we prevented from arriving when her passport was lost in the post by a European embassy which shall remain nameless. This year she was determined to appear to play the Haydn concerto and a solo recital. Once again an embassy was unconscionably dilatory in handling her application, with the result that she could not arrive until the day after the concerto was performed. She did however give a wonderful solo recital, displaying a commanding virtuosity, on the Friday, which included Suchoň's engaging [Sonatina](#)*, Rachmaninoff, Haydn, and two fascinating rarities. The first was Stephen Heller's *33 Variations on a theme of Beethoven*, using the C minor theme for which Beethoven himself limited himself to 32 variations, and including references to a number of other well-known works by the Master in the same key. The other was the exotic sonata of the American composer Charles T. Griffes (1884-1920), a highly original work which tips its hat to both Debussy and Scriabin. Petronel's impression on the audience may be judged by this spontaneous tribute given by a Levoča citizen after the concert (it sounds better in Slovak) 'Your father was a devil, your mother an angel, and you are an enchanting witch.'

Going back a couple of days, Jonathan Powell took the stage once more to accompany a recital by the cellist Rohan de Saram, of which the climax was Alkan's [Sonate de concert](#).* In the first half we heard [Mendelssohn's Second Cello sonata](#)*, and, appropriately, [Martinů's Variations on a Slovak Song](#)*. The Alkan performance had an ideal balance of athleticism and lyricism. The two middle movements, perhaps the most original in spirit, were thoroughly

convincing, the first movement was delivered with a Mendelssohnian eloquence, and [the last left the audience as breathless as the performers](#). (The performers had given the Mendelssohn and Alkan works in London on 1st October at a recital at the Forge, where they were also very well received, we understand).

On the Thursday, the Polish pianist and composer Tomasz Kamieniak, who last year brought Alkan's *Concerto* to the Festival, came with two colleagues, the Polish violinist Emilia Bolibrzuch and the Israeli viola player Avishai Chameides. Their concert included two works by Tomasz. The *Four Serious Pieces* op. 26 for trio are meditations on the Iraq war – [the last piece is based on the notes B-A-G-D-A-D*](#). The *Two pieces for Viola* op. 42, which are dedicated to the founders of the Festival, were given [their world première](#) (another first for the Festival!)*. Tomasz's intense, short, pieces, somewhat in the style of the Polish composer Gorecki, make a marked contrast to the transcriptions of film-music and TV themes which he played at a free concert in last year's Festival. Tomasz and Emilia gave warm rendition of the [Violin Sonata of César Franck](#) (another Alkanian), whilst in the second half we had what I can only call a 'quarter-staged' performance of the rarely heard transcription by Liszt, for viola and piano, of Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*. Tomasz set off on the first movement alone, whilst [presently Avishai wandered in as Harold, looking every bit the part of a moody Byronic traveller*](#), and struck up his big theme. In the [final movement*](#), where Berlioz rather seems to forget about poor Harold, Avishai sulked dramatically on a high stool away from the piano before making his final statement and then slouching out of the door whilst Tomasz continued to thunder through the brigands' orgy. Another great hit with the audience.

Tomasz kept Alkan for his second recital, on the afternoon of Saturday 10th at Markušovce. This was planned as a journey through love, life and death, prefaced by a Haydn sonata, and with Alkan's op. 39 no. 12 *Ouverture* as a (very substantial) postscript. In between we had a number of Liszt transcriptions – including a Paganini study, and his versions of [Wagner's Liebestod*](#), seven of [Mendelssohn's lieder*](#), and two of Schubert's; interspersed with Alkan's [Le tambour bat aux champs op. 50 no 2*](#) and *Morte*, op. 15 no 3, and a Chopin etude for good measure. Tomasz coaxed wonderful playing from a less than ideal instrument – and indeed it was remarked that perhaps the Markušovce piano gave a better idea of what this music sounded like to the composers than the modern 8 foot Bösendorfer used in the Levoča recitals. *Morte* proved to be far more than the 'black on black' of which Schumann complained, whilst *Le tambour* was as gripping as a tale of Dumas. The *Ouverture* continues to be a problematic piece – one audience member complained 'It seemed to end about five times' – but one could not have wished for a more dedicated presentation.

That leaves our final concert, on the evening of October 10th, when Jose Guerrero (tenor) gave a recital of Spanish song to a packed audience in the historic Levoča theatre accompanied on the guitar by John Knight. As that evening also marked the World Cup contest between Slovakia and Slovenia, the ladies of Levoča had a good excuse to leave their husbands in front of the television at home, and to focus their attention on Jose. He is a great performer and interpreter as can be seen by his renditions of Garcia Lorca's machismo [El café de chinitas*](#) and the exuberant [Mexico*](#). The ovation for Jose and John echoed to the rafters.

So now we look forward to the 2010 Indian Summer in Levoča Festival which will feature, as this year, both artists of world fame and rising stars. As 1810 was the birth year (as Brian Doyle points out below) of both Chopin and Schumann, that gives some steer to possible programming, but we certainly intend to continue to include the unexpected.....

DC

Broadcast

Alkan BBC Radio3 Feature – ‘Chopin’s Neighbour’- 25th April 2009

The title of this BBC Radio 3 programme said it all. Headline the name of a well-known composer, but who was his mysterious neighbour? The programme’s brief was to try and find out why Alkan, a friend of Chopin and praised by Liszt and Busoni, became forgotten by the end of his life. It was familiar territory for those of us who can remember the pioneering programmes and articles by Ronald Smith and others, back in the 1970s and 80s. Piers Lane was the narrator with contributions and comments throughout by the composer/pianist John White, Jack Gibbons and our own David Conway.

Piers Lane began with his own account of how he became familiar with Alkan’s music. Growing up in Australia he recalled hearing his father struggling to master Alkan’s Symphony for Solo Piano. He wondered why pianists and audiences alike still largely ignore such compelling music.

The main narrative of the programme dealt with Alkan’s life, and inevitably, his death. Beginning with his entry as a student to the Paris Conservatoire at the age of 6 years, his promising career as a concert pianist and the sad story of his attempts to succeed Zimmerman as the Head of Piano at the Conservatoire. This period of his life was illustrated with excerpts from his letters to George Sand and others, asking for their help in obtaining the post he so desired. His bitterness at losing the post to Marmontel and the death of Chopin, led him to withdraw from public life for a quarter of a century until the start of the series of concerts he gave at Erard’s. The myth of Alkan being crushed to death by a falling bookcase in 1888 was dispelled, forever we hope, by Jack Gibbons and David Conway. They quoted the letter from one of Alkan’s pupils, Marie-Antoinette Colas, describing how Alkan was found underneath a fallen umbrella stand, which he had probably grasped to stop his fall after suffering a heart attack or stroke. He remained there for some time before being found. Had he not lived alone, who knows, he might have survived.

A brief mention was made of Alkan’s son, Delaborde, whose mother remains unknown despite much research. David’s assertion that Delaborde’s mother might be George Sand, (her mother’s maiden name was Delaborde), is intriguing and deserves further investigation.

The programme was punctuated throughout with comments on the music. The perceived technical difficulties of Alkan’s music have often deterred pianists, but Jack Gibbons refuted this - “some of it is, but some of the miniatures are capable of being played by amateurs”. He also mentioned that Ravel and Debussy knew Alkan’s music well and were influenced by him. He illustrated the point with recorded excerpts from Ravel’s *Le Gibet* and Alkan’s *Morte* from Op.15.

John White, with a composer’s insight, had some interesting things to say about the music. He rather mischievously remarked that - “Alkan sets up interesting situations in which style is investigated in a rather minute way, sometimes with tongue in cheek and sometimes there is rather a feeling that this is the kind of thing that Mendelssohn might have done, had he known what I know”.

As to why Alkan’s music is relatively unknown, Jack Gibbons commented, “People are sceptical. Why, if his music is so wonderful, is it not more familiar? We are discovering the music all at once without any sort of legacy. We are listening to everything with equal weight and if a composer is uneven, and Alkan’s music is uneven, then it is unfair to do so because

you are judging the weakest works alongside the strongest works. If you did that with any other composer you would have a very distorted view”.

Piers Lane has been performing the *Quasi Faust* movement from the Grande Sonate Op.33, in many of his recitals around the world. “Whenever I have performed the *Quasi Faust*, with its demonic battle between good and evil, and its enormous pianistic demands, the audiences have been polarised. Some have dismissed the language as trite, others have thought it the most exciting and involving piece they have heard in years”.

Perhaps John White was right when he concluded that - “I have my fears that his music will never become a main part of the repertoire because of his feeling of slight reserve. His music emerges as being a shade too intense. No one will invite him to the party as he does not know how to let his hair down and have a good time”.

Piers Lane summed up by saying - “Alkan’s music will always divide opinion, but nobody can deny the truth behind the music. It speaks with a unique voice. That is something to be prized in any period of history and it is what makes Alkan’s music still relevant in the 21st century”.

Throughout the programme there were extracts from a wide range of Alkan’s music. The pieces were well chosen from the larger works, the miniatures, chamber works, organ works and even excerpts from the ‘Funeral March on the Death of a Parrot’ to lighten the mood and to show that Alkan did have a sense of humour. The titles of much of the music were not mentioned, which might prove frustrating for some listeners unfamiliar with Alkan. The music was also continuous, first in the foreground and then faded whenever someone spoke. This format of trying to compress too much information into a short time span proved to be a source of much criticism from listeners as I found out when I looked at the BBC Radio 3 Message Board on the Internet. Peter Katin found the programme - “quite a muddle, comments being random throughout from one speaker to another, very little of Piers Lane and non-stop muzak which did much to confuse”. Most agreed, but one person was more sympathetic – ‘It is a pity that those with more knowledge of Alkan felt foiled. It was such a short programme that it would have been impossible to play whole works. I don’t think that the speech over the music ruined anything. It was a taster. An introduction to a fascinating life’. Peter Katin was probably right when he said - “It was all thrown together and then made to fit into a time slot”. The original programme was supposed to have a duration of 2 hours but for some reason it was only given a 45-minute slot. The programme was skilfully edited but the result proved a disappointment for many. I noted that the programme was not a Radio 3 production but was made for them by a company called ‘Above The Title Productions’. This now seems to be common practice for programmes on Radio 3 and 4. Alkan does not often feature on Radio 3 so perhaps we should be grateful. Let us hope that it will have inspired some listeners to explore further.

Brian Doyle

Comment

Composers’ Anniversaries

2009 is a special anniversary year for four of our best-known composers, Purcell, Handel, Haydn and Mendelssohn. Only Purcell was English but the others either lived, or had great success in England. It is no surprise that BBC Radio 3 is commemorating their anniversaries with many performances of their works and even whole days of music and discussions. Any other composer who has an anniversary this year may well get overlooked. Albéniz (d. 1909), Martinu (d. 1959) and Villa-Lobos (d. 1959) come to mind, but there may be others.

2013 will be the 200th anniversary of Alkan's birth and we hope there will be many broadcasts of his music and maybe he will be 'Composer of the Week'. The last time he had this honour was in 1988. It is possible that Verdi and Wagner, who were also born in 1813, may overshadow him. It should help that these two composers mostly wrote for a different medium. Luckily Alkan was not born in 1810 or 1811, as Chopin, Schumann and Liszt would certainly have taken centre stage with perhaps only a bit-part for Alkan.

Alkan will share an anniversary with another composer who, since his death, has fared even less well than Alkan¹. The pianist/composer Stephen Heller was an exact contemporary of Alkan. He was born in Hungary in 1813 to Jewish parents who became Catholics when he was a child. He studied with Czerny in Vienna. He arrived in Paris in 1838 and lived there until his death in 1888. Most of his works are for piano and were much praised by Schumann. A trip to England was very successful and he became a friend of Charles Hallé. This stood him in good stead later as the latter years of his life were lived in poverty, exacerbated by failing eyesight. Hallé came to his rescue by helping to raise funds for an annuity.

It would seem likely that Alkan and Heller would have known each other. Alkan was certainly familiar with his compositions as he performed some of them in his 'Petits Concerts'. In 1847 Alkan, Chopin and Liszt contributed to an album tribute to Heller. The Alkan work, *Vaghezza* was later published as the first of the Impromptus Op. 32.

Heller's name is well known to piano students as his works are often in the Associated Board exam syllabus. Most of his music is now out of print and, in this country, it is rarely if ever performed or broadcast. He will probably suffer the same fate as Georges Onslow. The 150th anniversary of *his* death in 2003 was completely overlooked in the UK.

Brian Doyle

Future Events

Friday 13 November 2009 *Wigmore Hall, London at 19.30* Piano recital by **Marc-André Hamelin** to include Haydn, Mozart, Liszt, Fauré, **Alkan Symphonie for Solo Piano op. 39, 4-7**. To be preceded at 18.00 by a talk by Annette Moreau on the Alkan Symphonie.

Wednesday 18 November 2009 *Steinway and Son, 44 Marylebone Lane London at 18.45*. Piano recital by **Leslie Howard** : Liszt: *Années de pèlerinage* III, S. 163 nos 1-4, and **Alkan Symphony Op.39 4 - 7**. Presented jointly by the Liszt Society and the Alkan Society. Priority booking for members of the Liszt Society and the Alkan Society. **See page 11**.

Sunday 22nd November 2009. *Holywell Music Room, Oxford at 19.30*. Recital by **Jack Gibbons** to include music of Schubert, Gibbons, Debussy and **Alkan**.

Wednesday 9 December 2009 *House of Actors, Yaroslaviv Val, Kiev, Ukraine at 19.00* Piano recital by Tomasz Kamieniak to include Chopin, Wieniawski and **Alkan: Concerto for Solo Piano op. 39, 8-10**.

Tuesday 9 February 2010 *Queen Elizabeth Hall, London at 19.30* Piano recital by **Huseyin Sermet** to include Chopin, Liszt and **Alkan Trois petites fantaisies op. 41**.

Monday 1 March, 2010. Hong Kong Arts Festival. Concert Hall, Hong Kong City Hall. **Mark Latimer** plays Chopin *Allegro de Concert* and **Alkan : Concerto for Solo Piano op. 39, 8-10** to mark Chopin's 200th birthday.

¹ But see the article above, on the 'Indian Summer in Levoča' Festival – Ed.

LPs on Offer

An opportunity for members to fill in gaps in their collection.

The following LPs are offered from the collection of a late Member of the Society.

Condition of discs appears to be very good; covers good/ used.

Please bid via e-mail to symposium@boltblue.com

Please head correspondence “ALKAN OFFER”

Please state your bid for each item, using reference numbers. Bids for the entire group would be welcomed.

Records could conveniently be collected at the concert on November 18, otherwise post & packing extra.

Works of Alkan:

- 11 Ronald Smith: Études Op.39 + shorter works: 3LP Boxed set
- 12 Ronald Smith: Sonatine + 6 shorter works
- 13 Ronald Smith: Sonata Op.33
- 14 Ronald Smith: Recital at Colt Clavier Collection
- 15 Lewenthal: Sonatine + shorter works + Funeral march of a parrot
- 16 Lewenthal: Symphonie + shorter works
- 17 Ponti: Études Op.39 Nos. 1 to 7 & 12
- 18 Ringeissen: Sonatine + 7 shorter works
- 19 Ogdon: Concerto for solo piano

Recitals including a work or works by Alkan:

- 21 Ronald Smith: Symphony + Pictures at an Exhibition
- 22 Binns: Alkan + Rubinstein
- 23 Ponti: Concerto da Camera
- 24 Haas: Toccata

THE ALKAN SOCIETY
&
THE LISZT SOCIETY

A Concert at Steinway & Son, 44, Marylebone Lane, London
inaugurating a series of events to mark the bicentenaries of the births of
Charles-Valentin Alkan in 1813 & Franz Liszt in 1811

on **Wednesday, November 18th 2009** starting at a **quarter to seven**

LESLIE HOWARD

Programme

Liszt: Années de pèlerinage III, S163, nos. 1-4:

Angelus! Prière aux anges gardiens

Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este – Thrénodie I

Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este – Thrénodie II

Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este

Interval with Refreshments

Alkan: Douze Études dans les tons mineurs, opus 39, nos. 4-7

- Symphonie pour piano seul : I. Allegro
II. Marche funèbre : Andantino
III. Menuet
IV. Finale : Presto

PLEASE NOTE: To accord with Local Regulations tickets may not be sold for this event nor may money change hands at the event. However, donations may be made *IN ADVANCE* to the Alkan Society (to be shared jointly). Your Committees feel that a donation of £12 would be appropriate. Thus, to avoid embarrassment please send your donation to arrive *BEFORE NOVEMBER 10th* to The Secretary, The Alkan Society, 42, St. Alban's Hill, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP3 9NG.

Please indicate if you prefer red or white wine or soft drinks.

Until November 1st equal numbers of seats will be held for each Society.

Priority booking for Members and their guests until November 10th.

Please note that until November 10th guests are limited to one per Member.