

# THE ALKAN SOCIETY

Reg. Charity No. 276199

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## **BULLETIN NO. 58 - FEBRUARY 2002**

### **Our most important year since 1988 - or our last?**

This year marks the 25th year of the Alkan Society, as well as the 80th birthday of our President. Those two facts deserve to be celebrated at least. A few rumours have been heard abroad (meaning mainly in France) of our imminent demise, and the Secretary would like to deny them. Admittedly, I have not always been very efficient, and it has been difficult at times to delegate some of the work that I have taken on since becoming secretary, a situation not entirely of my own choice. My new career as a freelance musician has started to expand, and family illness at the turn of the year did not help with new year's resolutions to improve our operations. However, I have resolved to make a special effort this year, and the committee has pledged its support. Enquiries have all been answered promptly, and membership cards have been printed for the year. A sub-committee is working on a third Alkan Day, provisionally for October 19th, and that will be combined with a General Meeting at which the Officers and Committee Members will all be up for election. We hope that many members will wish to support that event. A new member of the Society is also hoping to arrange an evening event, and we could see what support there is for that revival of the kind of meeting we had in the early days.

I am very much hoping to produce three or four Bulletins this year. There is a great deal of news to fit in this one; therefore the translation of the Alkan chapter from Marmontel's *Pianistes célèbres* will begin in this issue, but its continuation must wait until Bulletin No. 58. I hope that enough appetites are whetted by that prospect, and by the plans for meetings, to encourage members to renew their subscriptions for the year. That brings me to the next section:

### **Subscriptions**

It has been difficult to justify a hard line on subscriptions at times, but this year we must insist that as many members do renew their subscriptions as possible. A membership form is enclosed with this Bulletin and I urge you to return it as soon as possible. We need a General Meeting in order to raise the subscription to a realistic level, and for the moment I would encourage you to add a donation if you feel moved to do so.

Overseas subscriptions continue to be a problem for two main reasons. We can only accept banker's drafts or British banknotes at present. Our bank now imposes a very high fee to bank Eurocheques (no connection with the new European currency) and I would ask you not to use those in future. This is a common problem with many international societies and we will need to investigate the

possibility of making use of credit cards - but for the moment, the above two methods are the only possible ones. The level of subscriptions outside Europe is also a problem because of rising costs of postage, and for the moment I am sending Bulletins by surface mail to Zones 1 (USA and Canada) and 2 (Japan and Australasia). Information sheets and short answers to inquiries are still being sent by airmail. The General Meeting may decide on two separate tariffs for airmail and surface mail if they are thought to be appropriate.

I would also ask any members, or former members, who may have remained on the mailing list against their wishes to return the form to show that they no longer wish to receive mailings from the Society. My computerised records are now kept quite well up to date, but inevitably some names slip through the system. Likewise, please let me know of any changes of address: a few Bulletins are invariably "returned to sender" and that is a great pity. I thank those members who sent subscriptions without being prompted last year. Most of those cheques have been banked; however, a few went out-of-date and I am returning those for your own records. Likewise, just a few inquiries over the last year have not received an answer: please accept my apologies for that, and I hope the enclosed information and Bulletin will encourage you to join the Society for this year.

### **Final editorial points:**

It is worth remembering a few of the positive things that have happened over the last few years: I do receive more favourable comments about the Bulletins than criticisms. I would like to encourage members to participate more, by offering articles or at least Letters to the Editor, so that we can have more of a dialogue. We can be particularly proud of the release of the chamber music CDs by APR (number APR 7032), the editing of which was sponsored by the Society, especially in view of the recent winding-up of Nimbus Records (see later section). The CD booklet, as well as the new one-volume edition of Ronald Smith's books about Alkan's life and music, several unofficial websites and Ronald's recent broadcast on Radio 3, have all produced enquiries about the Society and several new members. Unlike some other musical societies, our address is easily found in the 2002 edition of several standard directories of musical and other associations.

I have printed a new version of the handout about the society which can be sent to inquirers promptly: an A5 version has been made for airmail mailings. I enclose a copy for interest, and possibly for wider dissemination. Your comments are welcome, and any proofreading which I may have missed. I would like to apologise to Kahn and Averill, the publishers of Ronald Smith's book, for the misspelling of the second name of their title: a Freudian slip caused by confusion with our treasurer and committee member Averil Kovacs. A few points of style and consistency have already been made by committee members (e.g. UK for U.K.), and the unnecessary reference to Korngold (prompted by the apparently elusive nature of the Korngold Society in those directories and on the Internet) can be removed in a second printing. But any other omissions and suggestions would be welcome. Please remember, however, that if I am to add much more text, it will have to be reduced in size in order to fit on a two-page handout unless a corresponding amount is removed first.

### **RONALD SMITH**

Our President celebrated his 80th birthday in January. At least, he marked it by a busier than ever programme of interviews, concerts and other engagements, while continuing his enthusiastic work as a teacher. Hardly a typical pensioner of 15 years standing! The occasion itself was marked by a live appearance on the Radio 3 teatime programme "In Tune" on January 10th, in which Ronald was interviewed by Sean Rafferty and played several pieces in the studio: Alkan's *Song of the Mad Woman* and two Chopin Etudes - the *Black Key* (Op. 10 No. 5) and *Ocean* (Op. 25 No. 12). We

also heard one of the first broadcasts of a movement from the APR issue of the chamber music: the last movement of the Piano Trio, which Mr Rafferty described as having "eloquent wildness", both from the composer and from the performers - Ronald Smith, James Clark and Moray Welsh. The programme opened with a recording from the archives of the Third Programme in 1958, in which Ronald was heard playing part of the Beethoven / Liszt Symphony No. 5. But the main 25-minute slot was occupied by the music and an extended interview, in which Ronald spoke about his debut with Sir Henry Wood, his work as a performer and teacher, and in particular about Alkan. Sean Rafferty was greatly impressed with everything he heard and I hope that a few members were lucky enough to catch the programme too. As usual, I have Averil Kovaes to thank for drawing my attention to it, just two days ahead of the event.

Ronald's concert programme is also quite full at the moment. Apart from events previously mentioned in Bulletin 57, they include the following:

March 22nd in St. George's, Bristol at 7.30: Bach / Busoni *Chaconne*, Chopin Etudes Op. 25, Beethoven Sonata in C minor Op. 111, Alkan *Chant* in E major Op. 38(i) no. 1 and *Song of the Mad Woman*. Ronald is staying in Bristol to do a new recording for APR in the same venue.

April 12th in Shirley Hall, King's School, Canterbury: a programme organised by four music clubs.

His birthday was also marked by a lunchtime concert at the Fairfield Halls, Croydon. A train strike prevented my attending, but the Croydon Advertiser of 11th January was enthusiastic: "Smith's a legend in his own lunchtime" ran the rather tired headline (I hope from his sub-editor) over Howard Thomas's review, reviewing a programme of Chopin Etudes (Op. 25 and the *Trois Nouvelles Etudes*) and Schubert's *Wanderer* Fantasy. "His age is irrelevant to his fine presentation of the repertoire he selects. There can be no doubt that words like energy, dedication, musicianship, stamina and the highest level of technique apply to him in whatever he tackles." The "surprise" for Alkanians came as promised, in the form of the exhausting (for most of us) final major-key Etude from Op. 35, the "Technique des octaves" in E major and 10-16 time - five minutes of virtuosity to which his Cambridge audience was also treated in November, and which must have prompted the comparison with Ligeti's Studies when he played it in a group of three in the Husum festival of Rarities back in 1995. "We read that an Appian CD of Chopin's Etudes is now available. His teaching and ours continue and we must look forward to his finding time to return to this series. Perhaps we might have the opportunity to rediscover some of his compositions, too?" The article concluded: "Concert pianists with Russian, Germanic and other such names rightly command respect, but Ronald Smith is a pianist of whom Britain may be rightly proud."

### Concert reviews

Ronald Smith's recital in Cambridge for the Fitzwilliam College Alkan Society Scholarship on November 2nd was a tremendous success. The Chapel was well filled with an audience mainly from Cambridge, but a few members of the Alkan Society too, and they heard Ronald on top form in his programme of Bach / Busoni, Chopin, and a generous second half of contrasting Alkan pieces: *Chant* No. 1, *La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer* (Op. 31 No. 8), *Les regrets de la nonnette*, *Le tambour bat aux champs* (Op. 50 No. 2) and *Le festin d'Esope* (Op. 39 No. 12). Each piece was introduced by a characteristically witty mini-lecture, and as mentioned above, a sadistic member of the audience had requested the Octave study (Op. 35 No. 12) as an encore and was duly pleased to hear it with the same virtuosity that had marked the rest of the programme. Humphrey Burton CBE, a former member of the College, introduced Ronald in the fluent, urbane style familiar from his appearances on TV. The concert was given an extensive and highly enthusiastic, if rather "purple", review by Burton's daughter, Clemency Burton-Hill, in *The Cambridge Student* of 8 November 2001, and her article can be read in full on the Internet under <http://www.fitz.cam.ac.uk/music/alkanreview.html> - I found it in a search for "Alkan Society", which also brought up an article about

the Scholarship, both the 2001 inaugural one and the plans for this year's. For the record, there were just two entries for the first scholarship, but Fitzwilliam is a small college and must have a limited number of pianists, whether reading Music (like the 2nd prizewinner) or another subject (the 1st prizewinner is a mathematician). Suffice it to say that the College is keen to have Ronald back for another recital, and that plans are already under way for another representative of the Alkan Society to be an adjudicator for the next Scholarship competition.

Marc-André Hamelin was heard in a recorded Sunday morning recital from Symphony Hall in Birmingham on Radio 3 on 8th February. His programme was Beethoven's last Sonata, Op. 111 in C minor, and Alkan's Symphony for solo piano. It is very fashionable to scorn this artist's attempts to play standard repertoire, but I thought the Beethoven was beautifully played; after all, at over 40 I think Hamelin may be permitted a little world-weariness. He is not afraid to use the full sonority of a modern Steinway, but then Beethoven himself was characterised as "string-snapper, hands on high" in Schönberg's "The Great Pianists". And if the opening leaps sounded too fast and sure to have been taken by a single hand - well, even the great Schnabel used two hands for the still more dangerous opening leaps of the "Hammerklavier", and proceeded to mess up the rest of the movement by trying to observe Beethoven's insane metronome mark! The slow variations were technically secure and the tricky timing was well observed. Coming to the Alkan, he gave an interpretation largely familiar from the Hyperion recording: he uses a little more rubato in the opening movement than in Ronald Smith's classic "orchestral" interpretation, but the technical polish in the Minuet and Finale is still astonishing. He is still in the habit of playing the tied notes at the start of bars 24, 26, 28 and 30 (which he corrected for the recording), as he did at Husum, which is a pity - perhaps he will play the syncopations (as marked clearly in the Lewenthal edition that he uses) by the time he plays it to a crowd of Alkanoraks in London.

Sadly the announcer (Chris de Souza) perpetuated the myth of the death-by-bookcase in his opening remarks - "a strange ending for a man who always had a fascination for the macabre" - and worse still, got Alkan's name wrong - "Charles Henri Valentin Morhange, generally known as Alkan". Where do these lazy researchers get their information? He redeemed himself by introducing the Alkan work as "what some have described as one of the finest of all 19th century piano works". But he also misquoted Lewenthal's introduction to his Schirmer edition in describing the finale as "a ride to hell": actually Lewenthal wrote that it could be *compared* with the "Ride to Hell" in Berlioz's "Damnation of Faust", but that it was more like a ride *in* hell: a subtle but significant difference. Still, as always, we must be grateful to hear Alkan at all on lunchtime radio: many composers - Nicolaus Bruhns of Husum (Buxtehude's favourite pupil who did his own cause no good by dying at the age of 31), obscure Venetians, Slovenes, Croats and members of the Mannheim school, to name but a few - are still banished to the wilds of "Through the Night" between midnight and 6 a.m.!

### Forthcoming concerts

Apart from Ronald Smith's concerts, we can list a few others by no fewer than four other pianists: Marc-André Hamelin's performance of the Symphony in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, on Thursday 11th April at 7.45 p.m. has already been previewed. For British members, a programme of the whole series of Harrods international piano recitals is enclosed. The rest of his programme comprises his own *Con intimissimo sentimento* (a quotation from Brahms's Intermezzo Op. 116 no. 5, and possibly other sources), a set of seven (allegedly) easy pieces; the Schumann *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 12, and the Bach / Busoni *Chaconne* from Partita in D minor.

Jack Gibbons suffered a very serious car accident a while ago, and that has kept him from the concert platform for some time. He gave a recital in the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, on 2nd March for his 40th birthday to raise money for the John Radcliffe Hospital Critical Care Initiative, the

programme ranging widely over Gershwin, Debussy, Chopin, Alkan, Bach, Liszt and "some surprises". I am sorry I could not get this Bulletin published early enough to preview this event. Maybe some members were lucky enough to hear it? I would be happy to have a report. I seem to have lost touch with Jack or his agent for the moment - if I find details in the British Music Yearbook I will add them later. The other event I know about is a Gershwin evening, billed as "A Gershwin Party", that Jack is giving at Beaulieu Abbey Church on October 5th. It takes place at 7 p.m. and tickets are £10: box office via Liz Cookson, P.O. Box 84, Lymington SO41 3ZA; tel. and fax 01590-675268, website [www.musicatbeaulieu.org](http://www.musicatbeaulieu.org) Perhaps some members near Oxford could find out any future Alkan events that Jack is planning?

A search on the Royal Festival Hall website has revealed that Steven Osborne is including Book 4 (numbers 37-48) of Alkan's *Esquisses* in his lunchtime recital in the Purcell Room on March 14th; the major work is Schubert's last Sonata in B flat major, D. 960. I believe that Osborne is to play in Husum this year: he is certainly well known for his interest in rarities - recordings for Hyperion's "Romantic Piano Concertos" series and a superb album of Nikolai Kapustin's classic-jazz fusion pieces are well worth mentioning.

Finally, "The First Sorabji Series 2001-2002" is to include a performance of Alkan's Concerto for solo piano, Op. 39 (nos. 8-10) in the Great Hall, King's College, The Strand, London WC1, on Thursday 2nd May at 7.30. The pianist for the whole series is Jonathan Powell, and I have heard excellent reports of his first recital last October, comprising Granados's *Goyescas* and Sorabji's *Fantasia ispanica*. The May recital will also include Sorabji's 1946 *Concerto per suonare da me solo* ("the work he [Sorabji] would choose to play to introduce people to his music"), and there is a pre-concert talk at 7 p.m. Entry is by programme (£5), with a retiring collection. Further information can be obtained by contacting Jonathan Powell at 43 Leweston Place, London N16 6RJ, tel. +44(0)20-8802-3261, email [jonathanpowell@parliamenthill.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:jonathanpowell@parliamenthill.freeserve.co.uk)

### News from Sweden

A new member, Fredrik Söderström, has been supplying some exciting news of Alkan activities in Sweden. The radio has carried several recitals by Stefan Lindgren including the Concerto for piano solo, the Sonatine and the Grande Sonate. Lindgren was born in 1960 and discovered Alkan's music while studying at the Juilliard School of Music. He now teaches at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm. One broadcast, on 11 November 2000, carried *Le Festin* and the Concerto, as well as a performance of the Grand Duo Concertant by Semmy Stahlhammer (violin) Johan Ullén (piano), and was introduced by the composer Folke Rabe. It was part of a series called "Seven aces in the dark" on the mainly classical station P2, which had seven concerts with music by seven different composers.

Fredrik has also kindly sent me two long papers in Swedish entitled as follows: "Alkan: En glömd länk i pianospelets historia" by Ulf Karlsson (1988) - 83 pages - and "Liszt och Alkan: Den virtuosa pianoetyden - övniingsstycke eller muterat monster?" by Anders Rådén (1998) - 42 pages. If any members know Swedish, we could arrange to have copies put in the Society Library in due course. Fredrik also tells me that Joel Hill, "who runs perhaps the best Internet Alkan site", has interviewed John Paul Bracey, one of the early Alkan pioneers for his site. Unfortunately Fredrik's fax did not transmit fully and I can only give the start of the address: [www.nettally.com/joelhill/alkan](http://www.nettally.com/joelhill/alkan) (or maybe that is the entire address?) - but seasoned surfers should be able to track it down.

Fredrik has also told me of a CD by Janos Solyom containing music by Brahms and Alkan, and sent me a rather unclear (and now faded) fax of the programme notes. Averil Kovacs has given me a

rather unflattering account of the CD, made at live performances in London in 1992, so I don't think members need worry about rushing to find it. But any other reports of the disc and its contents will be welcome. I can just make out the usual mention of the Talmud and the fatal bookcase in the programme notes... It is on Artemis Arte CD 7134 and the other works on the disc are Clementi's Sonata in D major, Op. 40 No. 3, and the Brahms 1st Sonata in C major, Op. 1.

Fredrik wonders whether Fauré ever saw the score of Alkan's *Comme le vent*, in view of his own Prelude Op. 103 No. 2 - any comments from readers who know the piece?

### News from Australia

Our member Rex Burgess has been active on his Sydney community radio station 2MBS-FM. He told me last August that he was preparing a 2-hour broadcast for Saturday 17th November called "Spotlight on Alkan", which would include the following works and performances:

Le festin d'Esopé	Ronald Smith
Grand Duo Concertant	Dong-Suk Kang / Gardon
Concerto da Camera no. 2	Hamelin / BBC Scottish Symphony / Brabbins
Bombardo-Carillon	Clemmow / Goldstone
Zorcico	Ringeissen
Funeral March for a Dead Parrot	Ensemble 2e2m
Concerto for solo piano	Stephanie McCallum

An item on "Tomorrow's World" (BBC-1 TV) on November 29th, 2000, concerned the Australian Stuart piano with its novel arrangement in place of the bridge-pins which is intended to improve the tone. As reported by e-mail to Averil Kovacs by Patrick Lee, "demonstrating it was none other than Stephanie McCallum playing 'Chanson de la Folle'...". A search on the website the following week ([bbc.co.uk/tw](http://bbc.co.uk/tw)) found the item in question, though not the musical illustration (the fact that my Internet café does not have sound was not responsible for this). However, it did lead to a website for the Stuart piano itself, and a separate search for Stephanie, an honorary member of the Society, revealed her own excellent website.

Mark Coughlan, who played for the Society in its early days, is featured on a website with the address <http://www.music.uwa.edu.au/Staff/MarkCoughlan.htm>. He was born in Perth, studied initially at the University of Western Australia, then moved to London to study with Ronald Smith. He was later appointed Director of Keyboard Studies at U.W.A., and is now the Head of the School of Music. He has received some excellent reviews for a recent Beethoven recital in Sydney, and he describes his principal research area as the 19th century piano sonata and the music of Alkan.

Our Vice-President Roger Smalley also works in the music department at U.W.A. The last time I saw him a few years ago for a session of piano duets - including, naturally, Alkan's Three Marches, Op. 40 - (his brother lives near Salisbury) he was about to write a concerto for the contrabassoonist in the local professional orchestra.

### Obituary

I am sorry to report the deaths of two long-standing members. Tony Webster of Tenterden, Kent, died last year. He was a keen supporter of the Society, along with his wife Tania. He knew Ronald Smith and was always keen to stay in touch when his work took him abroad to France. We send our sympathies to Tania and hope she will retain her own interest in Alkan in the future.

Helmut Ganteführer of Recklinghausen, Germany, was an Honorary Member who had supported the Society from its earliest days. He was a loyal and generous supporter: his last letter to me enclosed a large donation to our funds. Helmut died in July 2000, and I have already sent a letter of condolence to his widow, Gunthild Habisch.

### **A new pédalier for the 21st century?**

The small Italian company Borgato has sent me details of a new double piano, the "Doppio Borgato" and I have appended a monochrome photocopy of the colour photo that was in the booklet. Borgato is a relatively new company, founded in 1990, which already claims to have the support of several famous pianists. The pedal-piano is actually two concert grands, as you can see, with the pedal-board (37 pedals) connected to a second piano on the floor. The booklet mentions works for the pedal-piano by Schumann, Gounod and Alkan, and an inaugural concert was given on 30 September 2000. The first half featured the double piano: no Alkan, but three different pianists played works by Schumann, Bach and two new commissions by Fabrizio Marchionni (b. 1976) and Franco Oppò (b. 1935). Details of the piano, (a visit to the atelier to play the piano can be also arranged), can be obtained from Borgato, Villa Pisani, Via Risaie, 1, 36045 Bagnolo di Lonigo, Vicenza, Italy, tel. 0444.436367, fax 0444.832312, and email [borgato@borgato.it](mailto:borgato@borgato.it)

### **An interview with Marc-André Hamelin, by Richard Murphy**

This was made at the Blackheath weekend in May 2000 with Mr Hamelin, and I apologise to Richard for holding its publication over for so long. However, it should still be of interest in view of his forthcoming recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in April. [Richard's comments and editorial remarks are shown in square brackets.]

RM: *Would you outline the chronology of your acquaintance with Alkan?*

M-AH: That's very simple in this case - and it isn't always so when trying to recall first musical impressions. One of my father's [the late Gilles Hamelin] early inspirations was Harold Schonberg's book 'The Great Pianists' [Victor Gollancz, 1964], which is really full of fascinating information. At the time the book came out, it was really quite precious, and in some ways it still is. It mentioned Alkan in a chapter with Henselt, and I think my father may have been interested in both, had any of their music been available at the time.

He became aware that Raymond Lewenthal had recorded an RCA LP of Alkan, and that he had edited a collection for Schirmer. So he acquired both of those on the same day. Because I can remember where we were living at the time, I can say with certainty that I was not more than seven or eight years old [1968-9]. I started the piano when I was five, so it was not long after I started my piano studies, and I can honestly say that we discovered the music together. I found it quite fascinating.

I latched on to *Le Festin d'Esope* because, listening to the record from the start, that's the first thing I heard. We're talking about one of the most startlingly original pieces of music ever written. Who else could have concentrated such a wealth of invention in the space of eight or nine minutes, and who seemed to have fun doing it too?!

RM: *Did your father play this music?*

M-AH: No. I tried some of the miniatures, but at that time I really couldn't get very far, and I found the music rather hard to read - unsurprisingly. After that, I didn't hear any more for a good number of years, except that, not long after in Montreal, my father found the book of virtuoso exercises based on Alkan's works by Vianna da Motta. This allowed me to see a sample of Alkan's other works and to be aware of what was there. Lewenthal's collection did not include a works list, which, at that time, would have been incomplete anyway. There is still the possibility that some works have remained buried, as shown

by my discovery of the *Etude alla-barbaro* about four years ago [1995] and which had not been mentioned in print.

I have the original edition with me, which I've proof-read, and Billaudot are going to publish it. It's dissimilar to *Allegro barbaro*, but it's in the same key, in 6/8, and with alternating chords with a melody in the top for most of its length. It's interesting enough to be published - not a minor work by any means, although perhaps not a major one either. It was published in 1857 by a minuscule publisher named Nowinski in Paris. François Luguenot researched the publication date.

I think my next exposure was probably buying Ronald Smith's LP of the Grande Sonate in my teenage years. I hadn't studied any of the music very seriously, though I think I was able to give a good approximation of *Le tambour bat aux champs* and some of *Quasi-Faust*, but not all. I didn't study that fugue until before my recording. In the meantime, I'd got a few scores in Montreal, such as the arrangement of the first movement of Beethoven's 3rd Concerto, but what really got me going was finding, in 1980, a remaindered copy of Ogdon's recording of the Concerto in Toronto. It was one of the greatest things I'd ever heard, especially the first movement. I got the score in Montreal some months later, but only the first movement, because I hadn't realised that it was in three movements. When I got to Philadelphia I got the other two movements from the Billaudot distributor, Theodore Presser, and I started work, firstly, on the third movement.

RM: *What else were you playing around this time?*

M-AH: Well, this is when I started university in 1980. It still behove me to adhere to more standard repertoire - I remember the Bach 5th French Suite, Schumann's *Etudes Symphoniques*, Bach's Italian Concerto, Chopin's 2nd Sonata.

The real beginning of my exploration for unknown repertoire didn't really start in earnest until I got out of school [university], although, in my Bachelor's recital at Temple University, I played the Stefan Wolpe Passacaglia, which was a bold move, and at my Master's recital, the Ives Concord Sonata. To compensate, I played the Chopin Barcarolle and Prokofiev 7th Sonata in the second half. The seeds of exploration were there. I'd wanted to play Alkan's Concerto, but I didn't have the courage to play it until 1988, in Quebec City, at an afternoon performance, and with *Le Festin d'Esopo* - without interval. I have that performance on a poor tape, and it's certainly not the worst one I've ever done.

RM: *What was the audience's reaction?*

M-AH: You can imagine, with an extraordinary piece like that, when you first experience it, it's like getting a 4" x 2" in the face! Some people take it less well than others. I do understand that the length of the first movement can be really daunting. Relief comes when you realise that the last two movements together are shorter than the first by quite a bit.

RM: *Did you ever have a feeling of rebellion against the 'standard core' repertoire that every pianist learns?*

M-AH: I'm not sure that that feeling ever entered my mind. More and more I've come to see the whole of the piano literature as one body of works, whether it be familiar or not. There can be many reasons why a work is not familiar to us today. I can see no reason why the Dukas sonata, for example, should not be as familiar as the Schumann Fantasy or Medtner's 'Night Wind' Sonata (Op. 25 No. 2) or Schubert's B flat sonata (D. 960). The attitude of the public can be a problem; many people say "If I don't know this, it can't be good", or, "If it's not known, there must be a well-founded reason for it". You've only to look at the world reputation of Mahler symphonies or Schubert piano sonatas during the early decades of the twentieth century. The public may have needed the time to teach themselves how to adjust their time-scale to concentrated listening. After all, these pieces express themselves in different ways from the more easily assimilable standard repertoire that everybody's familiar with. When you've had the necessary exposure to Schubert you realise that what people thought were undue lengths are in fact perfectly proportioned works, and that Schubert knew exactly what he was doing. He needed space, and he used it. So it is with the first movement of Alkan's Concerto.

RM: *Did you ever bring Alkan's music to your teachers?*

M-AH: No. I was made to feel that I should concentrate on standard repertoire. All my teachers were good and taught me good things. From 1980 to 1986 my teacher at Temple University was Harvey Weedon, who possibly gave me more than any other teacher, but there was one area on which we didn't agree: the value of unplayed repertoire. I did bring Roger Sessions's 1st Sonata to him in 1984 -

a piece I really liked. (There's a marvellous Robert Helps recording on CRI) - and his reaction was "That's not really an audience piece, is it?". That remark set me thinking: "does it have to be?" What is 'an audience piece'? An instant pleasure? I don't see why anything needs to be an instant pleasure. If you really have a thirst for discovery, or are blessed with the spirit of exploration, you'll return to those pieces. I am hoping, when I programme these works, that there's a kernel of interest in them for people to latch on to the first time, so that they may want to return to them, and I won't deny that there are many works I play that are better appreciated the second time. So that there can be a second time, there also has to be a first. That's why I play them.

RM: *How have agents and promoters reacted to seeing Alkan's name on the programmes you submit to them?*

M-AH: Because of my recordings, some people want it very much. Because of strictures of touring and the fact that I want to homogenise my programmes within a tour, I'm not always willing to play the Concerto because it requires a great expenditure of energy. But if it fits, of course I'll play it. I still believe in the music very much. So I'm asked for it reasonably often.

On my recital debut at the Berlin Philharmonic [November 1998] I submitted a choice of three programmes, and the new director, who is something of a pianophile, chose the one with Schumann's Fantasy and Alkan's Concerto.

RM: *Are there any disappointments for you in Alkan's music?*

M-AH: Yes, occasionally, when the level of invention and imagination isn't maintained, something that could be said of almost any composer. A few years ago I was asked to play the complete Op. 31 Preludes for the Newport Festival (it turned out to be for an audience of about 12) and I felt that there was little justification for playing them as a group. For a start, the first four preludes are fairly slow, therefore contrasts are not well established.

I don't think that the cut Alkan advises in the Concerto's first movement is any good at all. This was probably a very reluctantly made concession to programmability - eliminating in the process most of its difficulties.

RM: *The word 'banal' is frequently encountered in writings on Alkan's music. Would you use it?*

M-AH: Take the example of the Sonatine's second movement. Depending on how you feel, you can think it's completely naïve or, on the other hand, that it's written by someone who knows exactly what's going on and pretends not to know. There's a very fine line that's being trodden, and it's a line he treads a lot. In most cases, I think he knew what he was doing. The instances where the music is really quite banal may be the result of a theatrical and dramatic miscalculation. Alkan's references to marching-band music may well sound banal, but he wrote many marches which are very interesting and inventive, and which are not close to marching-band music.

RM: *What part does 'bel canto' melody play in Alkan's music?*

M-AH: Of course he uses it where appropriate, but it might not have been an element of his natural thinking. I've a feeling that many of his melodic lines are better spoken than sung - because of the tempi employed.

RM: *And how do you view Alkan's use of ornamentation?*

M-AH: He obviously had full knowledge of the preceding piano literature on which he developed. There are some things in Alkan which are unique, and you have to give him credit for being an inventor at the piano. It's a safe guess that this degree of invention and innovation was the inspiration for da Motta's book of studies. Harmonically and melodically, I always thought Alkan was closer to Berlioz than Liszt, but perhaps more consistently interesting. I find the angularity in the *Symphonie fantastique* very close to Alkan. Furthermore, Alkan seems supremely confident in the structural element of his vocabulary; he was always very aware of form - almost unerringly in whatever timescale he chose to adopt, from the simplest of miniatures to the first movement of the Concerto, which is an absolute marvel of proportion and construction. All of the proportions of the Sonata-allegro are there. They're just so distended in time that it almost necessitates a road-map for the listener, and which Ronald Smith feels that he has to provide.

RM: *You've said that Medtner made his piano writing comfortable for pianists, that Chopin showed less care for other performers of his music. Do you sense that Alkan wrote at the piano or away from it?*

M-AH: I conceive of this music being written away from the piano, but by someone who knew the

instrument well enough to be constantly innovative. The fugue in *Quasi-Faust* is only the most obvious example of 'paper music' - you need a slide-rule to figure out fingerings. With some appoggiatura playing, it can be made performable.

RM: *It has been said as a criticism that you 'Chopinize' Alkan's melodies, thus weakening the 'senza rubato' rigour that people have come to expect from reading Lewenthal on the subject.*

M-AH: Lewenthal approved of rubato in these cases. You can't play ornamented music, such as the lyrical melody in the Concerto's first movement, without making it sing, whether it be Mozart, Chopin or Alkan. It has been inculcated in the brains of those who have known Alkan for a long time that Alkan disliked tempo rubato. It can't possibly be true for all circumstances, and that that melody has to be played metrically. Others have tried, but to me, it sounds mechanical. The ornaments become bunched up, and what they need is enough space to breathe, without sprawling.

RM: *Do you use Alkan's fingering?*

M-AH: When he indicated any, it was a reflection of how he wanted that passage to sound. I haven't always used it. One has to take his fingering seriously, even though one might not end up using it. The effectiveness of many fingerings is dependent on the hand that is playing them.

RM: *Are you aware of any influence that Alkan may have had on other composers?*

M-AH: None, apart from Ravel in at least two places: Op. 76 No. 2 at the end uses a B flat in a D major arpeggio - see Ravel's left-hand concerto ending. Also in Op. 15 No. 3 - Morte - Le Gibet's B flat in an E flat minor context. These cannot possibly be coincidence. It carries on for several bars in both cases.

Other influences he may have had are harder to trace, because his music was unavailable for so long, and recordings hardly existed. There was no performance tradition to absorb for any composer or pianist. It's good to see his music back in the stores. I bought the great majority of my Alkan scores in Foyle's during my first visit to England in 1988.

RM: *Which single movements or pieces would you not want to be without?*

M-AH: The first movement of the Concerto; Le Festin d'Esope; the Symphony - a masterpiece through and through; Quasi-Faust; 3rd movement of the Sonata; La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer; Prelude in G major - Dans le genre gothique; Sonatine, 2nd movement; Op. 15 No. 3 - Morte.

## Recordings and reviews

More out of a sense of duty than from any pleasure, I report on a full-page advertisement in *International Piano Quarterly* (Summer 2001) for some Japanese recordings of Alkan. "The masterpiece of the early years of Alkan (published in 1837), performed by a computer and a player piano" appears on JNCD-1009, thanks to the efforts of Michael Nanasakov. The works covered are Opp. 12, 13, 15, 16 and 17. The same "artist" has also rendered 27 of Godowsky's studies on Chopin's Etudes (JNCD-1001), the 12 Studies in minor keys by Alkan (JNCD-1006), the Bach-Godowsky violin sonatas (JNCD-1007) and the Bach-Godowsky cello suites (JNCD-1008). These discs can be ordered on the Web via [www.nanasawa.net](http://www.nanasawa.net) and further information is available from Nanasawa Articulates, 8-18-10 Shakujii-Machi, Nerima-Ku, Toyko 177-0041, Japan. While I know that the latest computer technology has brought new life to piano-roll recordings by the great pianists from the Golden Age, and I am quite a fan of the player-piano studies of Conlon Nancarrow, I cannot believe that Mr Nanasakov's efforts are likely to have much artistic merit. Unless the committee grants me the money to buy these discs, I do not intend to review them in these pages...

The BBC Music Magazine of February 2002 carries a review by Duncan Druce of the new recording of the Sonate de concert for cello and piano by Emmanuelle Bertrand and Pascal Amoyal on Harmonia Mundi (HMC90 1758), which was mentioned favourably in the last Bulletin. He describes the recording of Alkan and shorter Liszt pieces as "original yet satisfying", and that the playing shows "imagination and thoughtfulness. One result of the extreme sensitivity of modern recording technology is that musicians with fine technical control can play in an intimate, unemphatic way, confident that their most subtle expressive touches will 'tell'". Of the Alkan work,

he writes that it "creates a powerful effect ... with shadowy low cello matched with crystalline piano figuration ... the outer movements...draw from Amoyal some stunning virtuosity, based on precise, high-speed finger-work. Bertrand's tone is able to balance the most explosive piano passages with no sense of strain, and in the *Finale alla saltarella* the spot-on ensemble playing is extremely exciting. In short, this is a winner!"

There do not seem to have been any more reviews in the English press of the APR release of the chamber music by Ronald Smith and colleagues, but three French journals carried reviews: *Répertoire* (Jan. 2001) and *Classica* (Nov. 2000) seem concerned with the claim that it is the premiere recording (which it was - it just took several years to be released!). Coming from the country which gave us the word chauvinism, that is par for the course; the latter revives the old bookcase story, by the way. *Monde de la Musique* (November 2000) compares James Clark (violin) unfavourably with Tedi Papavrami on Valois, but does say that while lacking a certain *éclat*, his dialogue with the piano has the makings of a good performance. Moray Welsh (cello) takes risks but his performance alone justifies the purchase of the set, giving a good account when compared with Chiffolleau (Timpani) and Henkel (Valois). Ronald Smith receives approving comments from all three articles, however. *Répertoire* mentions a string quartet which was recorded in America a few years ago, making the APR less than a complete set of chamber music: does anyone know anything about that? I know only of the fragment on the Symposium collection (1062).

### The World of Business

The Secretary regularly consigns the business pages of the newspaper to recycling still unread, but a couple of items may be of interest. **Nimbus Records**, the Monmouth-based company, have now gone out of business into official liquidation. It appears that the rot set in with the Robert Maxwell affair, and the strange Russian count who ran the company and foisted his own singing on unsuspecting purchasers probably did not help. It looks as if we and APR rescued the chamber music tapes just in time. **Black Box**, who released the Florian Uhlig Venezia album with an Alkan Barcarolle (Op. 65/6), has become part of the Sanctuary Group. Chris Craker, its founder, will continue as managing director and become the Creative Director of a new division called Sanctuary Classics and Jazz. Sanctuary already owns ASV (who released the Jack Gibbons double-album of Op. 39 and a dozen short pieces) and has interests in management, publishing, TV and the recording business. So it looks as if the innovative ideas of **black box** (in lower-case) will be able to continue for the moment. The distributor **The Complete Record Company** has ceased trading because of financial difficulties. As reported regularly by Norman Lebrecht's vitriolic column in the Daily Telegraph, these are hard times for the classical recording industry, which sells about 3% of the total output of CDs and is resorting to ever more gimmicky presentation and marketing. But thank goodness for enterprising firms like Hyperion who seem to survive, and for different reasons Naxos.

Rather old news was the closure of **International Piano Quarterly** by the *Gramophone* group, a very shabby treatment of a successful journal whose early issues had sold out. Fortunately the name was acquired by Orpheus Publications and the journal has continued with a new format (A4 rather than A5), the same strengths and recently a move to a bimonthly publication called **International Piano**. Meanwhile, Harriet Smith, the editor of IPQ before its closure (and deputy editor of *Gramophone*) started up **International Record Review**, which in its serious and thorough content is rapidly becoming one of the most respected journals in a competitive market, and without compromising its standards by moving towards the popular end of the classical area like its senior rival.

## Scores

My local branch of Percy Prior's finally produced a score of Alkan's Etude *Alla-barbaro* after three months, and it is much as the description by John York in Piano magazine quoted in the last Bulletin. It is a handsomely re-engraved edition from Billaudot costing £7.60 in the UK for seven pages of music. The piece is in 6-8 time, and the texture is mostly alternating chords between the hands, with full-chord grace-notes highly reminiscent of the hunting-style piece *L'Hallali* in *Les mois*, Op. 74 (3rd suite, No. 9). Some terrifying-looking broken chords and 'blind' octaves add some variety and technical challenges. Estimated duration is 2½ minutes: can we perhaps expect it as an encore from its discoverer one day?

One small correction to my item on the edition of *Les regrets de la nonnette* produced for the Grade 6 volume by Trinity College, London: Nicholas King, the Chief Examiner, has pointed out that the examination board is not connected with the music college that has relocated to Greenwich. Therefore the addresses given in the last Bulletin are correct: 89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7TP, tel. +44 (0)20-7820-6100, fax +44 (0)20-7820-6161, e-mail [info@trinitycollege.co.uk](mailto:info@trinitycollege.co.uk) and website [www.trinitycollege.co.uk](http://www.trinitycollege.co.uk) Without taking a strongly anti-French line, it is perhaps worth noting that the volume of ten pieces - three baroque/classical, three romantic, three 20th century and one study - costs £4.25 for 30 pages of music, of which three are the Alkan piece. Small quibbles about the editing of the piece from across the Channel can be taken in context, therefore, and the volume is available on the shelf of just about any music store in the country...

## Other news

A memorial to **John Ogdon** has been proposed for his birthplace of Mansfield. A bust made by Joy Bently is to be placed in the Palace Theatre: the District Council is providing the site and suitable lighting, but the funding is to be by public subscription. It was Ogdon who gave the first known modern performance of Alkan's Cello Sonata in the Netherlands (does anyone have a recording of that?), as well as making a memorable recording of the Concerto for solo piano (reissued on CD in the Philips "Great Pianists of the 20th Century" series). If any members are interested in being involved, donations can be sent to Mr John Wakefield, 8 Warwick Street, Mansfield, Notts. NG18 3AE, cheques payable to The John Ogdon Memorial. Further information from Mrs Noreen Reeves, who has been researching Ogdon's life, on e-mail [noreen.reeves4@btopenworld.com](mailto:noreen.reeves4@btopenworld.com)

The new *Pianist* magazine has a very good feature on Alkan by our member Martin Anderson in its second (Winter) edition of January 2002, sub-headed "Neglected Titan of the keyboard". This magazine attempts to cover new ground by publishing sheet music connected with a cover CD for beginners in the piano, as well as the usual features on piano music, pianists and record reviews. The review section includes the Bernard Ringeissen Etudes (Op. 35 in major keys, plus *Scherzo diabolico* and *Le festin d'Esope* from Op. 39) on Naxos. Stephen Priest, unlike Martin, seems to have confused the major- and minor-key Etudes, mentioning the Symphony and Concerto, and I sent a letter to the Editor to try and keep the discussion going. Whether it will be published is another question altogether... The magazine is published by Studio Press (UK) Ltd., Gladston Road, Uppingham, Rutland LE15 9EU, tel. 01572-821166, fax 01572-822800, and the editorial is at 6 Warrington Crescent, London W9 1EL, tel. 020-7266-0760, fax 020-7266-0731; editor in chief is Erica Worth on [erica.worth@zoom.co.uk](mailto:erica.worth@zoom.co.uk)

*Pianist*, and other piano magazines published in January, carry a full-page advertisement from Danacord for the series of "Rarities of Piano Music" CDs made at the Husum festival, taken from their website [www.danacord.dk](http://www.danacord.dk). With twelve years already represented, the print-out of the range

of pianists and composers represented ought to persuade a few critics of the aims and objectives of the festival, since some still seem not quite sure why we release, say, a Sonata by Antoine Mariotte, in preference to Beethoven's *Diabelli* variations... The decision on the disc from 2001 is yet to be made, because there were problems with the tapes made at the first three evenings, so I cannot give an exclusive preview of the repertoire at this stage.

### The Internet

Steve Smythe has had quite a lot of "Alkanerie" on his own website for some time, which attracts enquiries from around the world. He has recently registered the domain name [www.alkan.org.uk](http://www.alkan.org.uk) and linked it to the Alkan part of his site. This can be considered as our unofficial website for the moment, until we get our own site. The Secretary is not competent to develop this himself, and has no Internet access in his office, and I am happy for this to happen.

I have recently acquired a hotmail address: [peterjgrove@hotmail.com](mailto:peterjgrove@hotmail.com) However, I cannot recommend it as a very good way to communicate with me, as it does involve my going to the Internet café to pick up and send e-mails. For the foreseeable future, the most reliable ways remain ordinary post (snail-mail), telephone (my number has an answering-machine) and fax.

### From Chapter XII of *Les Pianistes Célèbres*, by A. Marmontel (1887)

#### CH.-VALENTIN ALKAN

If ever there were a strange, eccentric artistic personality to study, it must surely be that of Ch.-V. Alkan, in whom interest is quickened by a screen of mystery and enigma which surrounds him. This eminent master, one of the doyens of the French school, almost always lived a solitary life in the middle of the Parisian turmoil and artistic movement, fleeing noise and celebrity with as much care as others sought them. Valentin Alkan remained obstinately remote from the crowd which made the fashion and the brilliant successes, contrarily to the customs of all the other virtuosi whom the twin love of popularity and riches threw into the huge current of journeys and international concerts. A faithful Parisian, one might say Parisian of cult and religious attachment, Valentin Alkan broke only once with his sedentary traditions and calm, reverential life, spent entirely in the fecund shadow of work; he bowed on that occasion to pressing requests from his friends and our old master Zimmermann; but that excursion into the militant world of concerts was merely a rapid escape and a brilliant exception. The dreamy artist, the philosophical and somewhat misanthropic musician soon return<sup>ed</sup> to the fertile peace of his solitude.

Valentin Alkan was the eldest of four brothers, all distinguished musicians. His father, a hard-working and intelligent man, ran in 1833, when I knew him, a small boarding-school in Rue des Blancs-Manteaux. Young children, the majority Jewish, received there an elementary musical education and also learned the first rudiments of French grammar. Valentin Alkan, born in Paris in December 1813 [sic], a precocious child and gifted with exceptional talent, was admitted to the Conservatoire before the statutory age, took the first prize in *sofège* at the age of eight years, and the first prize for piano at ten years in Zimmermann's class. He won in 1826, at the age of thirteen years, the first prize for harmony in the class of Dourlen, an excellent and affectionate teacher beneath his austere and cold appearance. Taken to Paris in 1827 by my grandmother, I received, on Zimmermann's recommendation, several lessons with the young Alkan, my elder by four years; but, with such a small difference in age, this work could never be very serious, and we had to break it off

after a few weeks.

It was at about this time that Valentin Alkan began to develop as a virtuoso. A favoured student of Zimmermann, he was sponsored by him, presented in all the soirées where his brilliant and numerous clientele called for him. Thanks to this support given to his young but already magnificent talent, Valentin Alkan could be included, at the age of seventeen years, among the number of celebrated virtuosi.

I can still see this house of *M. Alkan père*, this patriarchal environment where the talent of Valentin Alkan was formed, and where his hard-working youth developed. I spent several months there as a boarder, at the same time as Ravina and Honoré, in company with a group of children who came to take lessons in solfège and receive elementary musical education. It was like a preparatory school, a junior annexe of the Conservatoire. Some fine evenings were spent effortlessly in the room of Valentin Alkan, who was not yet the solitary man, the hermit of his maturity. Gay, joyful, confident in life, he had, like all of us, the faith, the enthusiasm and the precious illusions of youth.

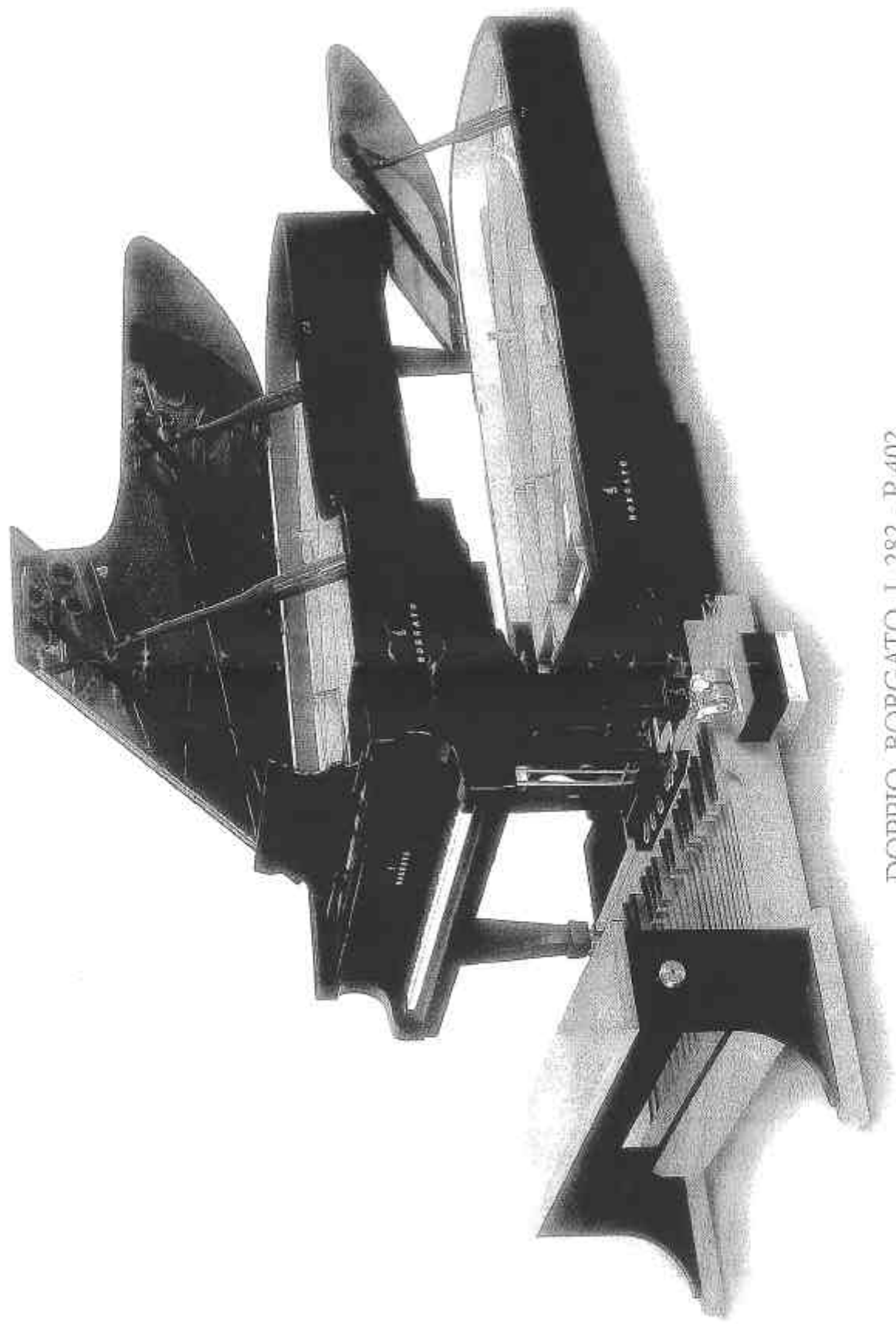
Already in full possession of his reputation as a virtuoso, he added to his lessons in harmony some rigorous and serious lessons in counterpoint and fugue taken with Zimmermann, a very skilful contrapuntalist and passionate in this instruction. I have said that Valentin Alkan was his favourite student; it was also him whom he showed to us as the typical hard-working artist, researcher, lover of high art, never making sacrifices for the sake of superficial success, having a horror of the banal, following his course without ever thinking of popularity. And, in effect, by this chaste probity of inspiration and application, Valentin Alkan placed himself at the side of Hiller, Chopin and Stephen Heller; but, let us also say, the horror of repetition and commonplace formulae sometimes led him into contrary excess; he excessively expanded certain frameworks; he transformed concertos and sonatas into veritable poems divided into several verses, thus breaking the normal equilibrium and changing the proportions of the harmonic structure, without always motivating this revolution. These reservations aside, the compositions of Alkan respond well to the ideals and the prophecy of Zimmermann; they show a great master, in the "psychic" sense of the word, a man of profound faith and of unshakeable convictions, whose considerable body of work shines with beauties of the first order.

**[To be continued in Bulletin 59]**

**And finally...**

I was playing through the LP of musical settings of classical literature, kindly given to me by Joachim Draheim, which includes the *Esquisse* Op. 63, No. 34, "Odi profanum vulgus et arceo: favete linguis" (the opening line of Horace's 1st Roman Ode), played by Mr Draheim. The next track is Massenet's duet setting of "Horace et Lydie", an excerpt from Alfred de Musset's 1837 imitation of an Horatian ode. Alkan's 5th Chant from the third set, Op. 65, is subtitled "Horace et Lydie". Are there any classical scholars out there who can shed light on this apparent coincidence?

**PETER GROVE**



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