



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

Reg. Charity No. 276199

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BULLETIN NO. 42: MARCH 1991

I cannot begin this bulletin without paying a sincere tribute to Brian Doyle for his splendid work for the Society over so many years. As well as being Secretary he acted as Treasurer for much of the time, and we are all most grateful to him for his loyal support. Fortunately his services have not been lost to the Committee and he has already been of great help to his successor.

Like our founder, Dr John White, I am a chemistry teacher and amateur pianist, though unfortunately not retired or able to bring his thorough approach to the task. John has had another spell of illness, and we wish him well. He and Brian have helped to compile this bulletin, but its late appearance is entirely my fault.

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NEXT MEETING: This will be at the Guildhall School of Music on Monday 18 March 1991 at 7 p.m. Anthony Williams, the 3rd prizewinner in the Alkan centenary piano competition, will play a programme of works by Alkan, Ravel and Ginastera.

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Plans for other meetings have suffered from illness and other problems. The worst news is that EMI have ceased to show interest in the projected recording of the three chamber works, following a change of personnel. Fortunately Nimbus Records seem likely to come to the rescue towards the end of this year. This means that our plans for a recital in May, just before the recording sessions, must be postponed.

Plans to reissue other recordings by Ronald Smith have taken a setback for the same reason, but we hope that another company will prove to be more co-operative. Curiously enough, the 25 short pieces have been issued on an American label, Arabesque Recordings (Z6523), under the title "Carnival". In spite of being a digital recording, it has not appeared on CD in this country. I saw the Arabesque CD in Blackwell's music shop in Oxford, as well as the Op. 76 and 16 Studies on the same label (Z6604). The latter, however, are available on an EMI CD here too.

More news of recordings appears later in this bulletin.

Charles Hailstone reports: This was a social event as well as an outstanding musical one on a warm summer's evening which led both performers to remove their jackets before addressing the piano. It was held in a venue quite new to the Alkan Society, namely the Steinway Hall in Marylebone Lane, off Oxford Street, London. The auditorium partakes of a large lounge, so permitting of a fine accord between artist and audience. The evening was introduced by Paul Gregory, a member of both the Alkan Society and the Liszt Society.

Leslie Howard, the President of the Liszt Society, performed the first half of the evening. He began with a rarity which is perhaps not likely to be heard very often. This was Liszt's own transcription of the Introduction and March from his own great choral work, "Christus", which had only a few days previously been broadcast in full, thus increasing the interest and excitement of Mr Howard's performance. The magnificent Steinway was capable of a whisper through to the vast crescendos required and thoroughly responsive to Liszt's raging torrents of octave demisemiquavers in sections of the March in the bass. Mr Howard continued with Liszt's "Hexameron", or "Grandes variations de bravoure sur la marche des Puritains de Bellini". The introduction, two interludes and finale are by Liszt, with variations by Thalberg, Liszt, Pixis, Herz, Czerny and Chopin. It is a great virtuoso piece of compelling period interest which was executed with fire and brilliance.

Ronald Smith, President of the Alkan Society, then took the platform to perform Alkan's Symphony for Solo Piano, nos. 4, 5, 6 and 7 from the Douze études dans les tons mineurs, Op. 39, but before doing so he gave a short talk on the music, its construction and elements. Ronald's reading of the Symphony disclosed his usual careful preparation and yet again an apparently fresh approach which illuminated certain inner parts here and there with a new perception, and so introducing listeners who had not heard it before to the undreamt terrain of imagination and genius which is Alkan.

The recital closed with a warm vote of thanks from Paul Gregory. A toothsome cold collation with wine and spa water followed, permitting circulation between members of both the societies and the opportunity to discuss the music with the performers. The evening was organised by John Davies of the Liszt Society and Brian Inglis of the Alkan Society, to both of whom thanks for its success should go.

THE DISCOGRAPHY

The compiler has received two letters relative to the new edition of the Alkan Discography. Nicholas King has written to point out that no. 6 of op. 72 is not included in his 1988 recording for Symposium Records. The listing on page 13 thus needs amending to nos. 1-5 and 7, 9 and 11. The same error occurs in the Discographie des oeuvres d'Alkan issued in June 1989 by the Société Alkan, Paris. Any other errors noted will be much appreciated, as the discography is now on computer disc and therefore very simple to amend.

The second letter comes from our member in Finland, Paul Turunen of Helsinki, who kindly supplies the key to the prefix KBI. He says: "The prefix stands for the Keyboard Immortal Series. It is the label of a California-based company, Sony/Superscope, 8150 Vineland Avenue, Sun Valley, California 91352. KBI was a series devoted to (mainly) Ampico piano roll recordings of several notable pianists such as Rachmaninoff and Cortot. I think it was published in the 1790's."

Mr Turunen goes on to say he has seven of the records in his collection and asks the meaning of the prefix VLR in John Paul Bracey's mono recording of the Symphonie, c. 1965. Perhaps someone knows the answer. If it is an Australian label the V might stand for Victoria. The compiler wishes to thank Nicholas King and Paul Turunen for their letters.

The Compiler also wishes to thank Chris Jennings, our member in Terrace, British Columbia, Canada, for his appreciation of the Discography and a query about the prefix RCD. The address is: Ribbonwood, P.O. Box 56-361, Auckland 3, New Zealand.

Five copies of the Discography have now been deposited for the National Libraries, including those of Scotland, Wales, Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and Trinity College in Dublin.

In an exchange of Discographies, the Compiler has received a copy of the Thalberg Discography from Daniel L. Hitchcock, the Co-ordinator of the Sigismond Thalberg Society, P.O. Box 47032, Wichita, Kansas 67201, U.S.A. Two of our members also belong to this new Society. Thalberg, the composer and virtuoso pianist, was a contemporary of Alkan.

Charles Hailstone (Compiler)

CHARLES-MARIE WIDOR

In his book "The Life and Times of Charles-Marie Widor, 1844-1937" (OUP, 1987), Andrew Thomson touches briefly upon Alkan. Discussing Widor's organ Symphonies the author writes: "He had some precedents in Alkan's Symphonie for Piano Solo (part of the Etudes, Op. 39 of 1857, dedicated to Fétis) and Franck's Grande pièce symphonique (from the Six Pièces, 1860-61, dedicated to Alkan)." The author quote Widor's observation in an article in the Bulletin de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1927 about Alkan's compositions as "today very unjustly neglected".

Note: As well as organ, choral, song, orchestral, chamber and stage works, Widor wrote two piano concertos (op. 39, 1876 and op. 77, 1905), a Fantaisie for piano and orchestra, a suite for piano, and four piano chamber works.

Charles Hailstone

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

This was held at the Abbey Community Association on Wednesday July 18, 1990.

Only five members were present: John White, Charles Hailstone, Brian Doyle, Brian Inglis and Peter Grove. This was to be Brian Doyle's last AGM as Secretary of the Society. He mentioned the need for a new letter heading and a new publicity leaflet giving a summary of Alkan's life and work, details of the Society's activities and a list of available recordings and books etc. One idea for the future which has been mentioned at committee meetings is the possibility of discontinuing having four meetings per year and instead just have one. This would take place on a Saturday from lunchtime through to the evening with talks and recitals with suitable intervals for refreshments. (Perhaps members could let the Secretary know what they think of that idea.)

Brian Doyle also mentioned the need to increase subscription rates, not only to keep pace with inflation but also to bring them into line with other Societies. The rates have not been increased for 4 years. The Society needs to increase its income in order to expand its activities, possibly sponsoring recitals and recordings. Again, members' views would be welcomed.

Regarding the Society's accounts: The income for the year ending 31st May 1990 from subscriptions and donations was £715. The expenditure was £489, giving an excess of income over expenditure of £226.

NOTES AND NEWS

Universal Edition no longer distributes the Billaudot editions of Alkan's works in the U.K. They are now distributed by United Music Publishers Ltd., 42 Rivington Street, London EC2A 3BN. Tel: 071-729 4700.

Editions of Alkan's "Le chemin de fer" Op. 27 and "Bourrée d'Auvergne" Op. 29 have been published by the Well-Tempered Press, distributed by Masters Music Publications Inc., P.O. Box 4666, Miami Lakes, Florida 33014-0666. (Note: this is the address on the cover, but my letter was returned. An alternative address might be P.O. Box 810157, Socca Raton, Florida 33481-0157. It is thought that these are the only two Alkan pieces published by the firm at present. They are photographically reproduced from the Billaudot edition, apart from the title-page, which mis-spells "Bourrée" with one r. P.G.)

Frank Lioni of Holland reports that there have been two one-hour programmes about Alkan on Dutch radio and also some requests from listeners.

Britta Schilling has been made an honorary member of the Society. Britta has written numerous articles on Alkan for French and German publications. Her thesis on Alkan, "Virtuose Klaviermusik des 19. Jahrhundert am Beispiel von Charles-Valentin Alkan", has been published in Germany. She has recently been devoting her time to publications on Liszt and has kindly sent the Society a copy of Volume 5 of Franz Liszt's "Sämtliche Schriften" (complete writings), published by Breitkopf und Härtel, of which she is a co-editor.

The conductor Mark Starr has orchestrated Alkan's Andante romantique Op. 13 No. 2 for piano and strings. He has kindly sent a copy to the Society for our collection in the reference library of the Guildhall School of Music.

The piano duettists Matthew Stanley and Berendina Cook were interviewed by Chris de Souza on "Tuning Up", the Radio 3 series which introduces young musicians and their repertoire. They did not play Alkan in their recital, but told an amusing story of an incident during a performance they gave of his Don Giovanni Fantasy, when the piano started to roll away from them. Members who know the recording for Symposium by Anthony Goldstone and Caroline Clemmow will appreciate that there was very little chance to retrieve the instrument, as both players are kept very busy throughout the piece!

The new Secretary heard an outstanding recital in Fordingbridge by the husband-and-wife duo Helen Krizos and Peter Noke which included Stravinsky's "Petrushka" and several rarities including Peter Warlock's arrangement of Delius's second Dance Rhapsody. He naturally took the chance to recommend the Three Marches Op. 40 of Alkan as an entertaining addition to their repertoire.

Ronald Smith, Moray Welsh and Nona Liddell played the three chamber works in Salisbury Medieval Hall last May. The reviewer for the Salisbury Journal (for once not the Secretary) gave a very enthusiastic review of both the performances and the music. Among his comments were: "The opening movement of the Trio almost takes the listener aback in the rapid development of its thought; but even more impressive is the slow movement, with its juxtaposition of opposing elements, sensitively conveyed by the performers. With double-stopping, the two strings sound almost like a Haydn quartet; this is interrupted by powerful solo piano passages of Beethovenian - or Brahmsian - weight." Of the violin and piano duo: "The slow movement, intended to evoke Hell, has a varied, almost Lisztian, piano part; but one of its finest moments was one of utter simplicity, an unadorned, limpidly scored piano theme, answered by a marvellously soaring violin melody. This episode was very tellingly realised." And: "The cello sonata was energetically and convincingly played. It is probably the most immediately approachable of these chamber works, although, despite its more conventional layout, it has many harmonic surprises and twists. The rapt slow movement, of religious inspiration, featured eloquent cello lines and a celestial piano part."

With sympathetic views such as these in the provinces - more perceptive than several London reviewers one might mention - the unhelpful attitude of EMI is hard to understand, until one remembers the way music is marketed as a "product" these days. It is to be hoped that a recording will be made with due sense of urgency.

The Secretary received an urgent phone call from the organiser of the Salisbury recital, to say that Moray Welsh had left his cello part for the Trio in London. Not many provincial towns could rustle up an Alkan chamber work on a Sunday afternoon, but fortunately Salisbury has a founder-member of the Alkan Society in residence. It was an honour to have my copy marked-up by such a distinguished musician, as well as a relief to have saved part of the concert!

HUSUM 1990: There were no Alkan works in the fourth festival of Piano Rarities (a lengthy account of the third featured in the previous Bulletin). A shorter account must therefore suffice. Janice Weber included some of the original versions of the Transcendental Studies in her all-Liszt recital. Their immense difficulties under the pressure of live performance made a disappointing comparison with her studio recording. However, her superb performance of the rarely-heard "Réminiscences de 'Lucrezia Borgia'" (1841/48) amply redeemed matters.

Other high points included some sensitively played Scandinavian works - Sibelius, Mankell and Palmgren - from Bengt Forsberg, as well as the Partita (1927) of Karg-Elert, best known for organ works. Bengt has been heard with other Swedish musicians twice at the Wigmore Hall since last summer, first accompanying the wonderful mezzo-soprano Anne-Sofie von Otter, and recently with the principal cellist of the RPO, Mats Lidström, in more rarities including the Karg-Elert sonata. It is good to know of musicians who are so willing to step outside the usual repertoire.

Igor Shukov gave an exemplary recital of works by Skryabin: he is one of the foremost interpreters of his music, but little known in this country. A more mainstream recital came from the American Abbey Simon, who produced some of the most refined playing ever heard, coupled with an immaculate technique. All of 68 years old, he lacks only the thunderous fortissimo of younger players. Some lucky connoisseurs heard him in the Wigmore Hall last September.

But as in 1989, the recital by Mark-André Hamelin was the most eagerly awaited. He gave us some more Godowsky-Chopin studies, including the "Revolutionary" for left hand alone. Then came an early work by Sorabji, the first Sonata, which had some ravishingly beautiful sounds as well as technical difficulties aplenty. Then came the hour-long 36 variations on a Chilean protest song, "The People United will Never be Defeated" by Frederic Rzewski. Written in 1975, this is a fine work, beautifully clear in its use of variation form, and encompassing a huge range of styles from baroque to jazz. Hamelin's performance was spellbinding. He has recorded both the Sorabji and Rzewski works, and Alkan figures in his plans; presumably the Concerto which he played so well in 1989. He too, is appearing at the Wigmore Hall, for once in classical repertoire: a two-concert cycle of the Beethoven cello works with fellow-Canadian Sophie Rolland. (The second recital is on Thursday March 21st).

NEW PUBLICATIONS: John Wells has edited three short organ works for Musica Antipodiae: the Grand Prelude in F Op. 66 No. 1, and the Prayers in G and A, Op. 64 Nos. 1 and 2. Interested organists need not write to New Zealand: they are available from Brian Jordan Music, 10 Green Street, Cambridge CB2 3JU. Tel. 0223-322368. Price £2 each plus p. & p.

MORE ALKAN RECORDINGS: There has been a delay in the release of Stephanie McCallum's recording in Australia of the Concerto for solo piano, Op. 39, and the Chants, Op. 70. The company has asked her to re-record the works. Although they were delighted with her performances, they were less than happy with the recording quality. She was to record them in December at a different venue and on a different piano. The recording should be available soon.

Stephanie recently took part in a performance of the Cello Sonata with Georg Pedersen. She reports that it "sparked a lot of interest and the audience was very enthusiastic". They have recorded the work for broadcast on ABC.

John Wells's CD of organ works has been well received by several reviewers. A publicity leaflet is enclosed, together with an order form for two other recent CD's by Bernard Ringeissen and Laurent Martin (President of the Société Alkan). These can be ordered from Brian Doyle, as can Ronald Smith's two excellent books about Alkan's life and music.

I have heard the two piano recordings. Both are of good quality. Ringeissen made a recording several years ago (now reissued on CD) of most of the works in Georges Beck's edition. His CD of minor-key studies has some very fine playing, although Ronald Smith's LP's remain the definitive performance. Only two blemishes spoil Ringeissen's performance: he irons out the irregular bar-lengths in "Comme le vent", in spite of Alkan's careful marking "(sic)" which assures the sceptic that he really meant it. And in the finale of the Symphony he bowdlerises the remarkable chord in bar 267 (both Lewenthal and Smith assure us that for all its wildness it is quite logical), playing a commonplace diminished 7th. These are annoying faults in an otherwise valuable recording.

Laurent Martin's is the first complete recording of the Preludes Op. 31. Our French colleagues describe the performance as "splendid"; a view echoed by the specialist French press. I would certainly agree that the pieces are well played. My sole reservation is that perhaps as a set it has fewer outstanding pieces than, say, the complete Esquisses. But one cannot expect every item to be a masterpiece, and it in no way detracts from the value of the issue.

We have heard recently of a new recording by the Finnish pianist Olli Mustonen, also of the 25 Preludes, coupled with Shostakovitch's 24 Preludes, on Decca 433 055-2. Mustonen played the Preludes at the Salle Gaveau in Paris last May, and "Le Monde" carried a major article by Gérard Condé as a preview. My counterpart François Luguenot expressed some reservations about Mustonen's live performance, but admitted that he was comparing it with long-familiar interpretations of the better-known pieces by Ronald Smith and Laurent Martin.

Another CD is reported in the French bulletin, by Alan Weiss on the Fidelio label, recorded in Holland. A well-filled disc contains the first Nocturne, seven Esquisses, Le festin d'Esopo, the Prelude "Le temps qui n'est plus", "Fa" from the op. 38 Chants, the Toccata, and the Grande Sonate Op. 33. Apart from some reservations about his use of rubato, Weiss earns enthusiastic comments about his technique and his commitment to the music.

Weiss played the Sonata in his recital in a series of three organised by the French Alkan Society. The complete Concerto was played in the third concert by the Austrian pianist Margit Haider; another fine performance, to judge from the bulletin. The series was judged an artistic success but a financial disaster because of less than abundant audiences - nevertheless always warm and enthusiastic. How often have we heard that here too!

Less enthusiastic comments have greeted the Japanese issue of Alkan works, already up to the fourth volume, played by Osamu Nakamura. Made by Epic/Sony Records, these are not available in Britain, and perhaps it is just as well. It is a great pity that such an ambitious project, including some first-ever recordings, should be marred by some poor performances and mediocre piano sound. Further comment would perhaps be unwise for legal reasons...

Other scholarly items in the recent French bulletins include an immense analysis of "Le festin d'Esopo" by Constance Himelfarb (a 9-page article taken from "Analyse musicale, 3e trimestre 1990) and a most interesting account by Raymond Lewenthal of the rich repertoire of piano music for one hand. I have the original English version of Lewenthal's article if any member is interested. Keen French scholars must make their own translation of Ms Himelfarb's article.

Godowsky features strongly in the repertoire for one hand (twenty-two of his fifty-three Chopin Study arrangements are for left hand). As a major composer in the Husum week, he was featured in an exhibition of music, photographs and recordings collated by Peter Seidle of the shop Opus E in Karlsruhe. I mention Mr Seidle only because I forgot to acknowledge his excellent Alkan exhibition which he mounted the previous year, which contained several LP sleeves I had not seen before.

A smaller exhibition of memorabilia connected with Felix Draeseke (1835-1913), whose Op. 6 Sonata was played by Claudius Tanski, was brought from Magdeburg by one of his descendants, taking advantage of the new freedom in the united Germany. There is a Draeseke Society in Germany, but I did not find the sonata impressive enough to consider taking out a subscription...

Speaking of subscriptions: Because of the delay in the appearance of this bulletin, we feel that an increase would not be appropriate this year. A form is enclosed for subscription renewals: please return it to the Treasurer and not to me.

A final reminder of our meeting on March 18th (details on page 1) which we hope you can support.

Peter Grove