



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered Charity number 276199)

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Bulletin Overview

As this issue was going to press, we received news of the death of William Waterhouse, a long-standing member of the Society. Formerly a co-principal bassoon at the BBCSO and a member of the Melos Ensemble, Bill taught for many years at the Royal Northern College of Music and was an international expert on woodwind instruments. Your editor had the great pleasure of spending an afternoon with him this year at his retreat near Cheltenham, where in his remarkable music rooms he kept a magnificent library and collection of instruments (including one of the few pédalier pianos in this country). We hope to have a fuller obituary of Bill in the next issue of the Bulletin.

We wish all members of the Society compliments of the Season and best wishes for the coming year.

The present issue continues our series of translations into English of **Alkan's letters to Fétis**, with what is surely one of the most revealing documents Alkan ever wrote, contains reviews of concerts and recordings, and also a special offer for Alkan Society members to attend a **new European music festival** featuring a range of both familiar and unusual music, concentrating on the romantic era (and featuring of course Alkan and his contemporaries amongst others). **The Alkan Society is a sponsor of the Festival, allowing members to participate at reduced cost.**

And, by the way, at this time of year, what better way to reward your friends (and yourselves) than by purchasing the **new recordings (reviewed in this issue)** by Stephanie MacCallum of the complete op. 39 Etudes, and/or the second volume of Kevin Bowyer's complete conspectus of Alkan's organ music? You can buy these (and all your other books and discs) by accessing Amazon via the Society's web-site – on which the Society will obtain a small commission which helps offset our costs. Until December 31st, the Toccata Classics web-site (www.toccataclassics.com) is offering the Kevin Bowyer disc at a bargain £10.99 – an opportunity well worth going for.

Alkaniana

Alkan to Fétis (Letter V)

We continue our series of translations of the letters of Alkan to the critic Fétis, of which the originals are held in the Fryklund collection at Stockholm. As previously, the letter is translated by the Editor, who has once again been greatly assisted in his notes and comments by those of François Luguénot.

This letter is one of the most extraordinary and revelatory documents from Alkan's hand (excepting of course his music!) We see here a man still deeply tormented by the event which four years earlier had derailed his life, and of which he ever after bore the scars. Some background may be helpful.

Alkan had known Marmontel since childhood, when the latter was a student in the school of Alkan *père*, as he mentions in the letter. Marmontel also recalled this in his somewhat smarmy tribute to Alkan in his *'Les pianistes célèbres'* of 1878, in which he characterised the school as 'like [...] a juvenile annexe of the Conservatoire.' In 1848 the Conservatoire's professor of piano, Zimmermann (who had taught Alkan himself, Marmontel, and César Franck, amongst others), retired. He had been appointed in 1821 – at the same time in fact, as Fétis became professor there in counterpoint and fugue. Although Alkan may have seemed a shoo-in for Zimmermann's position, his lack of political and social skills meant that, despite rallying such notable figures in the world of the arts as Geroge Sand to his cause, he was from the start consistently outgunned by the shrewd Marmontel. Crucial in his support of Marmontel was the Conservatoire's director, the opera composer Daniel Auber (1782-1871). Famous today for having written the first (but now scarcely heard) of the *grands operas*, *'La muette de Portici'* (1828), Auber was still in the 1840s a force to be reckoned with. He had become Conservatoire director in 1842, while his operas such as *'Gustave III'* (1833) and *'Fra Diavolo'* (1830) were still in repertory, and continued to write *opéras-comiques* which perhaps lacked the verve of his earlier works – Richard Wagner compared them to a barber who lathers, but then forgets to shave.

Why Auber stood by Marmontel rather than Alkan is not known. Anti-Jewish feelings have been alleged; but whilst we know that some composers were very jealous at the successes of Meyerbeer and Halévy – Spontini (1774-1851), for example, was alleged in a current joke to have visited the Louvre regularly to complain to the mummified Pharaohs that they had let the Jews go free – there is no evidence, either direct or reported, of Auber himself showing such resentment. Alkan himself never made such an allegation – even in the following letter.

Four years later saw the publication of a major compendium of piano music edited by Marmontel and issued by the firm of Heugel. (It may be noted, by the way, that Heugel himself, who may have been Jewish, was partner with Jacques Lovy, son of the cantor of the Paris synagogue, in founding the musical magazine, *Le Ménestrel*, which was to cause Alkan the woe he describes in his letter). The volume was entitled *'Classics for the Piano, selected works of the grand masters accompanied by traditional observations on the styles of these works and their execution, revised, fingered and accented by Marmontel, professor at the Conservatoire'*. It included works by Haydn, Mozart, Clementi, Beethoven, Hummel and Mendelssohn; and carried the endorsement of many leading French musical figures, including Auber, Meyerbeer, Halévy, and Ambroise Thomas (the composer of *'Mignon'* and *'Hamlet'*), and pianists including Zimmermann himself, Herz and Thalberg. Henri Herz (1803-1888) was a contemporary of Alkan in his studies at the Conservatoire (and was also Jewish, although in a letter to Fétis, also preserved in the Fryklund collection, he attempted to deny this); like

Thalberg (1812-1871) he was one of the great virtuosi of his day, often ranked with Liszt and Chopin.

Alkan's letter, (on three folded sheets, each headed with a number as in the translation) is a paroxysm of pain and indignation which demonstrates how deeply he was wounded by the Marmontel affair. The intensity of his feelings is demonstrated by the fact that most of the letter (up to the end of folio 3) is in a single swooping Proustian paragraph. I have subdivided it in this translation to ease the reading – my interposed paragraph breaks are marked by asterisks. Alkan's syntax and language are also raised to an intensity by his emotion, and translation of some passages has been difficult - I am of course open to corrections. In places I have provided the original French alongside my interpretation of it. Underlinings are those of the writer. The notes are my own (marked DC) or adapted form those of François Luguenot (FL).

Starting with a recapitulation of his comments on 5 time (see letter IV in Bulletin no. 76), Alkan uses this as an excuse to vent his bitter feelings. Now read on.....

DC

1.

[Paris, 30 October 1852]

Dear Monsieur Fétis,

I saw this morning in the Conservatoire library the two examples which accompanied your article of last Sunday.¹ I can't say that I regret that I did not know of them earlier, as they provided me with the pleasure of writing to you; the lively satisfaction of a word from you; and have caused me to write to you once again. Besides I apologise greatly for having sent you my own specimens, and even more for having lectured you (*de vous avoir entretenu*) on the difference between 5 [time] and 2 plus 3; for I see that you have so admirably understood the rhythm of 5 time in your excellent (*ravissant*) little piece. It is not only remarkable in its melody and rhythm; but, as a consequence of its true 5 beats, most rich in the variety of its accents. It is a little masterpiece which I hope to play some day. As for the one which follows, although I also like it very much, I believe its slow tempo neutralises most of its rhythm, its symmetry; and that apart from a few instances, one would believe oneself to be listening to an ordinarily rhythmized and cadenced piece. I congratulate you sincerely, dear Maître, on these little pieces which, as you say, and so well imply (*pressentir*), give only a mere glimpse of the riches of the rhythmic mine they embody.

*Since the start of this year, I have not received any journal; but that does not prevent me, illustrious Maître, from catching every line which you publish; thus I was astonished, returning home on Sunday evening, after I had sent you my last letter, to find a copy of that morning's *Ménéstrel*, accurately addressed. This was the stroke of a cunning hand, and brought tears to my eyes. Let me take matters up in more detail to make myself clearer.

*Four years ago, I believe, when the position of Professor of Piano became vacant at the Paris Conservatoire, I placed myself, as did many others in the ranks to obtain it. I have never had many friends of influence, or from whom I could hire favour; but I believed I had on this occasion to do as may others did. Judge then something of my horror (*effroi*), dear Maître, when, gradually animating myself in this pursuit, I discovered that all the odds were in favour,

¹ Fétis's own 5 time pieces were published as an appendix to his essay. – DC

not of a good musician and pianist, or a mediocre one, or a bad one, but of a candidate absolutely beyond (*en dehors*) these categories. One of the most mediocre pupils of the Piano classes, an accompanist of *sofège*, perfectly ignorant, perfectly unendowed, having drudged for years to obtain his place; and he had prepared his batteries such that anyone learning of the coming vacancy would have no hope of obtaining it.

*The details of this incredible intrigue are very extensive – just to give one example out of a thousand, I will mention that at the last moment over 400 representations asking for the nomination of M. Marmontel were received by the Minister of the Interior of the day. This is not an exaggerated figure, or one which I give at random, dear Sir, but one amongst many others for which I can furnish the proof. I am not by nature much of a fighting man; however, in the presence of the danger threatening the future teaching of so important a branch of our art, I exerted my self four-fold (*je me mis à quatre*) to try to prevent it.

*Alas! I had thought to become an intriguer; I struggled in vain. Battling furiously, using all legal means, this sad competitor advanced not a single sure step towards his object. A few days before the nomination I went to the ministries; asking, not to be nominated, for I had quite lost that hope, but that someone or other should be named, or even that the nomination be suspended. I found people who seemed to understand me, who understood the enormity about to be committed; but all took cover behind such or such an authority, who freely took on all responsibility for, who even insisted on, the nomination in question. In short, it was a done deed.

*Do you know M. Marmontel? I think not, dear Maître; for your voice would have been raised at that moment. Think of one of the worst musical organisations, educated in *sofège* and piano, which has doubtless stuck in your memory – to put it no more strongly. If I could send you examples of the embellishment, changes and additions made to one or other competition piece by the above-mentioned, you would have a portrait at a single stroke, and much more of a likeness than my poor pen can give. I say so with all the more authority because M. Marmontel was a boarder with my father while I was living there, so I have never had him out of view for a moment since I learnt of his ambitions. Even in speaking to you, dear Maître, who must have seen many strange and incredible things, I do not give the whole truth; for the truth is unbelievable.

*You will often have noticed: certain stupidities, certain absurdities, have a depth as unplumbable as the depths of beauty or genius. When this fellow got there, I fell ill. Every year, I had told myself, one or many would graduate from the school to go, in their turn, to teach what they had learned. I had dreamed of a piano school, a regeneration of that class so incredibly constituted that, in the very name of the masters, would sometimes, often, embrace ignorance instead of establishing a teaching which would leave far behind it the bad ways which had preceded it.²

*I had grown out of my grievances, and time had begun to work on me as it does on all and everything; when last Sunday I learned, thorough this officious journal, that M. Marmontel was no longer that teacher of whom I had such a poor opinion, and with reason, just a few days ago. He had become, he had transformed himself into, a savant, a man of tradition; he had just completed a complete edition of all our classical composers, no only purged of printing errors, but enriched with fingering, accents, and annotations; the whole undertaken under his auspices as Professor at the Conservatoire; approved by the Committee, and others; and commencing with 52 choice pieces!!!

² In effect an attack on the methods of Alkan's teacher, Zimmerman - FL.

2.

*I was shattered, dear Maître, and I wept. What, these composers I have revered all my life, who for many years have been my sole consolation, whom I have had the pleasure of making loved by pupils; in a few years will they perhaps be no more than lies or enigmas? Will this published edition perhaps carry its poison throughout France? Within twenty five years maybe men of goodwill will not succeed in combating these abominable traditions, which with their title and approbation will take hold of the ignorant, and will instil themselves each year in graduating pupils. I believed that nomination to have been fatal indeed, but I was far from foreseeing how much damage such a man might still do.

*And I have not told you yet, *o Maître*, how this unfortunate fellow is full in his way of zeal, persistence and conscience. He will rouse himself in the middle of the night to communicate to one of his pupils some ornament, improving Beethoven's nose (*agrément qui fera on ne peut mieux sur le nez de Beethoven*), which he has just discovered. He will take between his knees an Adagio of Mozart and will not drop it until he has decked it out with a feather, riding boots, and ringing spurs.....

*Hummel, Mendelssohn, Beethoven, especially in their later works, will be able to defend themselves a little; thanks to the many indications in their music, and the great precision of their notation; and, apart from changing to forte where they indicate gently, and to fast where they indicate slow, (a system which has its followers in the little church about which I will probably say a word to you below), they will probably not be disfigured by more than a half or three quarters. But Mozart ...Mozart whose system of notation accords so perfectly with the idea expressed; whose soberness in terminology, whose spirit of accentuation, are so in harmony with his divine genius; what assassinations will not be committed on his works! Of Scarlatti, Handel, Bach, where every indication is lacking – what will be left of them! O Czerny, what an example you gave in your edition of Bach! Pardon me for mentioning Czerny in the context of Marmontel and his crew. But look here, you adorer of the true gods, at the provincial teacher, maybe also the ignorant teacher of Paris, pressed by his pupils to get them to play this classical music, of which I have been speaking, seeking in the traditional notes of M. Marmontel 'qualified teacher (*professeur breveté*) & c.', the explanation of works of which he knows no more than M. Marmontel, but which he will believe he thereby understands...

*Throughout your life your plea has been for the truth in music; you have constantly proved that it exists in the other arts. What a proportion of unbelievers you have converted. How many of those whom you encounter daily would not protest if one endowed our Raphaels and our Michelangelos with three-eyed figures or four-breasted busts? What can one do against this, dear Maître? Since the nomination of M. Marmontel, all the editions of the press, of government offices, all persons of influence are constrained or circumvented by a certain battalion of whom I will say a word to you; and, since then, all this has gone further (*pris une extension*), by the whole distance (*s'est avancé de toute la distance*) which separates, I suggest, the oral tuition of M. Marmontel and that of his written, fixed, tuition.³

*Few know M. Marmontel better than I, but I am not the only one to suffer from his bad works; many artistes know only too well what this means, for his pupils, without exception, take advice from right and left, lacking confidence in him; thus exposing the secrets of their master. However I have never found anyone, with a little influence or merit, who has not invariably replied to me when I spoke of M. Marmontel: 'He's a decent fellow' or some such

³My translation may be skew, but Alkan's Franch gets quite contorted here; I assume he means that, thanks to this printed edition, Marmontel's seditious ideas now extend beyond the Conservatoire across the nation. – DC.

thing. I would bet that the two publishers who have the least bad editions of Mozart and Beethoven, free of dross, Brandus and Richault, I bet they wouldn't demur. There's something curious here in that, unless the work is undertaken by a foreign hand, these common faults of printing, which one finds in all the editions, will never disappear; M. Marmontel is incapable of recognising even the most blatant, still less those which leave some uncertainty even amongst the most enlightened artists.

*In the committee of the Conservatoire, indeed, there are a few maîtres who know and understand M. Marmontel almost as well as I. Thomas, for example, thinks exactly the same; nonetheless he has not feared to subscribe his name to the general approbation. Thalberg, whose goodness and indulgence equal his merit, has done the same. (I don't know if he is aware of the situation). And thus would be accomplished little by little one of the greatest acts of vandalism ever afflicted on the arts; little by little we would see the instrument which possesses the richest and most beautiful literature of all, perhaps, we would see its texts altered in the most deplorable way, to serve - even by virtue of these very alterations - from generation to generation!

*I will tell you soon of a little cabal of individuals; they are 12 or 15 at the Conservatoire; completely united; hand in glove with the secretary of the Director (some of the teachers, who honour the school, have no part in this); such masters of the place, despite their incomparable artistic inferiority, that, if tomorrow a Director undertook to purge the Conservatoire, he would run the risk of a debacle and being forced out himself, so numerous and strong are their connections, so admirable is their discipline. I will cite just one fact: this year it was decided amongst them that Herz would have no nominations to the public competition. Despite one pupil, amongst others, of Herz, who had wowed (*enlevé*) the public, despite M. Auber himself, and two other most competent and influential members of the jury, Herz could not obtain one nomination. His approval was nonetheless gained for the work of M. Marmontel.

3.

In placing the number '3' at the top of this page, I should perhaps ask your pardon for this invasion of your working time (*d'envahir à ce point vos laborieux moments*), and yet I shall not. It seems to me on the one hand that, unless I am no true visionary, you will find yourself as much and more indignant as myself at the crime committed and to be committed; and on the other, you will not for a moment accuse me of personal animosity; that you will see in me only an experienced musician, horrified at the ravages which will, in his view, promote the most false, the most reckless, spirit⁴, supported by a mighty power (*une puissance énorme*). For the rest, I imagine you receive the Ménestrel, and perhaps you have already been struck, not by the eulogy of M. Marmontel by the Editor, which is of little importance, but by the advertisement of his publication; and doubtless you will realise its significance. I know that, like all busy people, you find the time to do everything; and I do not doubt that you will take note of all this. I will be careful however today to anticipate nothing of what you might think or say; recalling to myself that, it was only a week ago, after having spoken to you about 5 time, that you kindly directed me to your examples, which I had not yet seen, and which showed me the superfluity of all that I had written to you.

Adieu, dear M. Fétis. And, if you feel disposed to hold against me the length and tenor of this letter, be so good as to take into consideration the depth and not the form of the sentiments which drive me; as also the instinct which makes me appeal to you, as t the man who can best

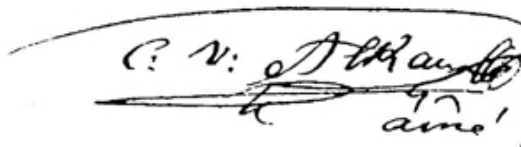
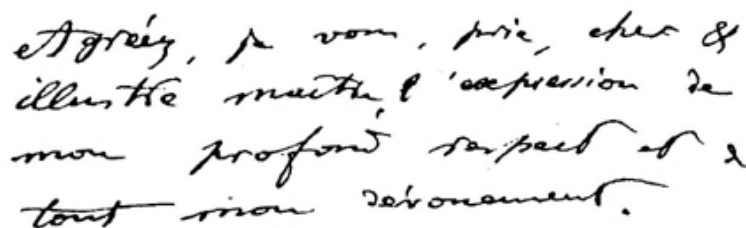
⁴ *Esprit* – might refer to Marmontel himself, or the type of (un)musicality he represents - DC.

feel the wounds dealt to the world of music; by virtue of his profound love of art, and the immense services which he has rendered, and daily renders, to it.

Agréez, je vous prie, cher & illustre maître, l'expression de mon profond respect et de tout mon dévouement.

C: V: Alkan ainé (signature)

Saturday evening.



Samedi soir.

Erik Chisholm and Alkan

Correspondence with members of the Society has drawn attention to the interest of the Scottish composer Erik Chisholm (1904-1965) in the music of Alkan. In the realms of transcendental piano virtuosity, Chisholm is perhaps more usually recalled for his association with Sorabji, who performed for him his 'Opus Clavicembalisticum'. But Chisholm made two arrangements from the Etudes of Alkan's op.39 – the Symphony (nos. 4-7) for string orchestra, and the Concerto (nos. 8-10) for string orchestra and piano. According to information on the Chisholm website (www.erikchisholm.com) the arrangement of the Symphony was performed in 1937 at the Atheneum Theatre in Glasgow – that is, at a time (and certainly in a place) when Alkan's music was generally forgotten or ignored. The manuscript of the transcription of the Symphony is with many of Chisholm's other works at the University of Cape Town, but a copy of the score is owned by the composer's daughter Morag, who believes that it has not been performed at all in recent years. Brian Doyle notes that the arrangements are listed in an ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Artists and Publishers) publication of 1977, together with two Alkan Suites arranged by a Richard R. Austin, made from the op. 31 *Préludes*. Perhaps there is scope in all this for a project for the Alkan bicentenary?

Concerts

Kevin Bowyer at the City of London School, 10th October 2007

An expectant audience of around forty people, including a smattering of Society members (two, apart from members of Committee - where were the rest of you?), gathered in the Hall of the City of London School for the launch event, organised by Toccata Classics and supported by the Society, of Kevin Bowyer's latest CD of Alkan organ works. This is the second of three recordings on the instrument of Blackburn Cathedral. One notices with interest that this latest release "includes" first recordings, whereas the first disc was emblazoned overtly as "first recordings", a label which might well attract adverse action under the Trades Description Act were one so minded.

The school organ, built by J.W. Walker in 1987, is stimulating both to play and to hear. Alongside two of their other instruments in London, that of 1990 at St. Martin-in-the-Fields and of 1993 at the Royal College of Music, and upgrading in the mid-1990s of the fine machine at Holy Trinity, Sloane Square, it represents arguably a high-point in Walker's modern work, before the sudden death of their Managing Director and the loss of a particularly gifted voicer, since when their fortunes have been rather mixed.

For all that Alkan's piano music is nowadays much more familiar to audiences, the organ works have, together with the chamber works, remained all too rare in concert programmes. This may have much to do with the fact that the aspiring performer still has to rely, in most cases, on photocopies obtained from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, a situation which we hope might be redressed in time for the bi-centenary in 2013. Your reviewer must of course declare a particular interest in this event, being with John Wells (based in Auckland, New Zealand) the only other organist to have made a point of featuring this repertoire in recordings and regular live programmes, and was therefore especially interested to hear another colleague's interpretations.

One of the chief issues facing the performer of this repertoire is whether to approach it from first principles as outright organ music which happens also to suit the pedalier or harmonium, or to concede (especially given such inherent matters as compass and dynamic indications) that it is primarily conceived for those other media and therefore to tackle it from an essentially pianistic viewpoint. Either view is defensible, and it was provocatively instructive that Kevin demonstrated the former approach and therefore gave substantial food for thought as compared to those who adopt the latter style. There is also the issue of how to adapt music written on two staves for an organ with pedals. By and large, Kevin's conclusions in this regard accorded with those of other artistes.

Kevin opened his recital with the unpublished *Pro organo*, an album-leaf in C minor dating from c.1850 (so not such a "very early" work as announced), and new to your reviewer. There were immediate overtones in the first section of Alkan's essential harmonic style, coupled with redolences of Brahms, and a second section in the tonic major over an obdurate tonic pedal-point.

Kevin then introduced us to three of the *Douze etudes* for solo pedals, dedicated to the contemporary virtuous Lefébure-Wely, justifiably using the epithet "notorious". Quite apart from their technical challenges, frequently involving chords of three or even four parts with simultaneous use of heels and toes of both feet, a major difficulty of playing these on the organ is that they are written down to the bottom A of the pedalier, whereas the standard organ compass stops at C, so that some element of compromise is necessary, whether of

octave transposition, the short-term drawing of stops sounding at lower pitch, or the occasional judicious use of the manuals. There is also the issue that the organ, unlike the pedaller, is not capable of highlighting dynamic tonal contrasts between the parts, nor can there be any tonal fade on sustained notes.

The positioning of the organ in the Hall gave us all an excellent opportunity to see at close quarters Kevin's reaction to these challenges. First up was the energetic no. 8 in D minor, contrasting rhetorical octave passages with sections of more lyricism in three parts. This was followed by the enigmatic no. 10 in D, featuring two-part work with semiquavers against triplet quavers, and the sustained but highly-chromatic no. 11 in F minor. All of these were delivered with consummate accuracy and finely-pointed musicality.

The second section of Kevin's recital was devoted to seven of the *Onze pièces dans le style religieux* op. 72, including many of those which are most gratefully written for the organ. No. 1, *Tempo giustissimo* in C major, is a striking march, which Kevin delivered with brisk authority, though your reviewer felt that for all its sense of conviction the detached style of playing sat uncomfortably against Alkan's explicit instruction "aussi soutenu que possible". No. 2, *Andantino* in A major, was played with appropriate use of flute stops; perhaps on the fast side for the tempo indication, and therefore losing much of its potential intimacy, though this might be excused in such an acoustic with an instrument designed to lead rather than to cajole. No. 3, *Quasi adagio* in D minor, is a rare example in Alkan of extended fugal treatment. For this, Kevin made frequent use of reed stops, which are particularly brightly-voiced on this instrument, and whilst these brought pungency to the chromaticism, they sometimes militated against the *dolce* instruction at the top of the score. No. 4, *Assez doucement* in G, was taken as a broad alla breve (although marked in common time); the menace of the middle section in C minor, with its insistent dominant pedal, was served well by this reading, if the innocence and guile of the outer sections were thereby sacrificed.

No. 5, *Lentement* in D minor, is a mawkish invention relying for much of its effect on dotted rhythms, both in the main 2/2 sections and the 3/4 interjections. This persuasive performance was followed by the last two of the set. No. 10 is a rumbustious *Modérément* movement in 2/2, relying for much of its effect on canonic writing, and for all the world often more reminiscent of a fairground than a sacred building. A few of the chromaticisms in the middle section did not seem to be those which Alkan had written, and there was some untidiness at the reprise; nonetheless this was a stimulating reading which captured much of the pagan character of the piece. The group was concluded with the wayward no. 11, *Dolcemente* in A minor, with its insistent bleak bare octaves on the sub-median and a contrasting lyrical trio for its middle section. It might be felt that this could have been more wistful, though the specification of this organ does not lend itself readily to such treatment unless one is especially dextrous with stop-changes. Beyond this, your reviewer was brought up sharply against a chordal mis-reading which he has perpetrated for nearly thirty years, and therefore retreats with abject shame from further comment.

Kevin concluded his recital with the *Transcription du Messie de Handel* which is attached to the end of the op. 72 set. This is a straight re-working of the so-called "Pastoral Symphony", which apart from being transposed into B major (was this Alkan attempting to reflect authentic pitch?) and a couple of spurious imitative murmurings introduced into the middle section is no more nor less than what any competent organist will reproduce from any standard vocal score of the oratorio: a sheep in sheep's clothing, in which Kevin shepherded us with elegant balm.

The evening concluded, after thanks to Kevin and to the City of London School for hosting us, with drinks and nibbles provided by Toccata Classics, during which several people took

advantage of the opportunity for discounted purchases of Kevin's first two Alkan CDs and of other recent Toccatà Classic output.

Nicholas King

Alkan Society Piano Competition 2007

The 2007 competition on 3rd November, organised by Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, was widened to participants from all six colleges "on the hill" who co-ordinate their musical activities. This resulted in a gratifying increase to nine in the number of candidates (although one subsequently withdrew), representing all eligible colleges except Churchill, and an equally encouraging increase in the number of listeners, which averaged twenty throughout the afternoon.

In order to further enhance the attraction of the competition, participants had been invited to present a short programme of their own choice, including at least one of the *Chants* op. 65, rather than being limited to a specific piece.

The first performer was Mateusz Borowiak (Girton College), who presented Alkan's *Scherzetto*, two of his own Mazurkas, and Liszt's *Gnomenreigen*. His playing exuded an immediate sense of musicality, authority, poise and command, and it was immediately clear that his inventive and well-prepared programme had set an impressive standard for others to emulate.

Charles Curry (Fitzwilliam College) followed with Chopin's *Scherzo no. 4* and Alkan's *En Songe*. Most of this was controlled, though definition was often blurred, and there was some tendency to contest rather than to control the more challenging moments.

Steven Dodsworth (Magdalene College) played *La Vision* and *Les Cloches*, followed by Bridge's *Rosemary* and Chopin's *Nocturne in E minor, op. 72 no. 1*. Sadly, the Bridge (although memorised) seemed to be completely misunderstood, and the programme needed better technical control throughout.

Faye Dorey (Magdalene College) grouped *Les Cloches*, *Graces* and *En Songe* with Chopin's *Prelude in D flat, op. 28 no. 15*. She showed good musical awareness and an emerging sense of pianism, despite some limits of interpretational insight and a rather informal stage manner.

Marianne Neary (Fitzwilliam College) performed *Le primer billet doux* and an arrangement by Michael O'Suilleabhain of *Woodbrook*. Within its limits, this programme was capable, if occasionally exploratory.

After a tea break, Alex West (Fitzwilliam College) played *Petit Air à 5 voix*, *Notturmino-Innamorato* and *Preludes 6, 5, 3 and 11* from Shostakovich's op. 34. This was an interesting juxtaposition of styles, in which he showed confidence and good pianistic awareness.

Daniel Tse (Robinson College) gave us *La Vision*, *Petit Air* and Chopin's *Nocturne in G minor, op. 37 no.1*. This was another convincing performance, perhaps needing more tenderness and warmth of tone.

Catherine Zhang (New Hall) closed the competition with *La Vision* and the first movement of Beethoven's "*Pathétique*" *Sonata in C minor*. A number of mis-readings and difficulties with filigree work led to problems, though she recovered her poise well in the later stages.

The adjudicators - Michael Downes (Director of Music at Fitzwilliam College), Rohan Stewart-Macdonald (Director of Music at New Hall) and Nicholas King (representing the Society) had no hesitation in awarding the 2007 prize of £100 to Mateusz Borowiak, with Alex West as runner-up. Commendations were given to Daniel Tse and Faye Dorey. Summing up on behalf of the adjudicators, Nicholas King congratulated the organisers on

their initiative in expanding the remit of the competition, and hoped that future interest could be stimulated further. It was clear that whilst some competitors had given no more than the merest of nods to the requirement to include an Alkan *Chant* in their programme, the more able had embraced the spirit of the occasion well in their programme selection, a point which might be borne in mind by future entrants.

Nicholas King

Thomas Wakefield at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, 3 November 2007

Once more an enthusiastic audience welcomed Thomas Wakefield in making one of his all too rare concert appearances, in the annual recital following the competition for the Alkan Society Scholarship (see above).

Starting with Busoni's well-known arrangement of the Bach Chaconne from BWV 1004 – as, Wakefield recalls in his notes, did Ronald Smith in the very first of these recitals – he swiftly reminded us of his own great musical strengths – an awesome technique, a convincing sense of architecture, and a refined intellectual judgement.

The same qualities were displayed in his reading of Beethoven's A major sonata op. 101, in which the incisive march movement, following on the reflective first movement, gave a sure promise of the Prokofiev sonata that would close the concert.

Alkan's 3-minute '*Petit conte*' starts off as an innocent, fairy-tale, with the odd unexpected incidental, as so often with this composer, hinting at the varied landscapes and keys it will explore before all ends happily ever after. Next we had, in contrast, Alkan's terrifying left-hand etude from the op. 76, carried off with inimitable aplomb, as if for Mr. Wakefield playing a virtuoso piece with the sonority of two, or even three, hands was an everyday affair. To see one hand mastering the entire keyboard in this way is of course an excitement of a special sort, of the order, say, of watching a funambulist traversing Niagara; but as always Wakefield did not neglect to infuse his performance with the utmost musicality, giving his audience the best of both worlds, the sporting and the artistic.

In the second half, following a rapt account of Chopin's G minor *Ballade*, we had a small selection of five of the op. 63 *Esquisses*, including the hallucinatory '*Les soupirs*' (no. 11) and the bizarre '*Les diabolins*' (no. 45) – not quite as extreme as I would have liked it.

But the climax of the concert in every way was a stonking performance of Prokofiev's *Seventh Sonata*. This is surely the greatest outcome of the 'mechanical music' of the Soviet era, of which the most notorious product was perhaps Mosolov's '*Steel Foundry*'. Whereas Mosolov's intentional 'barbarism' was largely for show, with Prokofiev it becomes both a metaphor for the war – the piece was written in Tbilisi where he was an evacuee from Moscow – but also for the duality of any artist working in a totalitarian system, with its driving outer movements bounding, but not smothering, its voluptuous, bitter-sweet central movement. As Wakefield quotes in his programme notes; the critic Felix Borowski wrote of the last movement that it shows 'the heroic inflexibility of a people who are not to know defeat', whereas Prokofiev himself noted more drily 'the finale is in seven-eight'. But what a seven-eight! As Prokofiev conceived it, and as Wakefield played it, it storms the universe, an acid, cleansing, coruscation.

Returning to the stage after applause scarcely less thunderous than his performance, Tom Wakefield gave us as a parting gift, a wry Alkan *Marche* to complete a memorable evening.

David Conway

Nicholas King at St. Michael's Cornhill, 12 November 2007

On November 12 our Secretary gave a recital at St. Michael's, Cornhill as part of a series of lunchtime concerts, a tradition in the church since 1916.

He opened with the Fantasy on 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undem' by Liszt, on a theme from Meyerbeer's *Le prophète*, which, he warned, would last for thirty minutes. Nicholas continued with an Adagio by Frank Bridge and ended his programme with *Variations sur un Noël* by Marcel Dupré, a sparkling set of variations on a French carol growing ever more ornate and intricate as it proceeded.

The instrument at St. Michael's is typically English in having been built piecemeal over the last three centuries. Nicholas King applied his resources and skills to produce a series of registrations which at once suited each section of the pieces he played and demonstrated the range of the instrument. We look forward to his future recitals.

Eliot Levin

Recordings

Alkan : Douze études dans les tons mineurs, op. 39

Stephanie McCallum, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ABC Classics 476 5335 (double CD)

The Australian pianist Stephanie McCallum has built an impressive reputation for her performances of virtuoso music of the 19th century, and also for her advocacy of demanding contemporary solo and ensemble works. Your reviewer had not heard her for a good twenty-plus years, when she came to England to study with Ronald Smith, and so approached his task with particular interest.

One might have expected that a pupil of Smith would have absorbed many of his characteristics in tackling these studies, and that the CDs might have turned out to be mere re-workings of his readings. There are plenty of us, past pupils of Smith or not, whose own fumbled attempts to perform these studies tend to take his interpretations as their starting point. So the first thing to be said is that if you are looking for updated clone performances, you will be surprised.

From the very outset it is clear that McCallum has taken a fresh root-and-branches approach which reveals not only a consummate pianism but also a penetrating, though never arid, academic understanding. Delicacy and clarity pervade the challenging fingerwork throughout, whilst the meatier material is always delivered with the utmost regard for tidiness; the heroics are borne with assured conviction, and yet their detail is always immaculate. McCallum shows that she understands how to point the often-convoluted harmonic structures, bringing out their inexorable logicity without sacrificing the overall surge of the music; most of all, pedalling is controlled to an exemplary level, never masking the texture nor serving to cover up the most formidable of challenges to technique, as one so often hears from those whose emasculated performances of this repertoire strive to overcome the successive Everests which it presents to the player.

Within seconds of first starting to listen to the discs, your reviewer's arm stretched to other recordings to compare the timings. All twelve of McCallum's movements are a tad more spacious than previous recordings - the discs run to a total of 2hrs 6mins - and yet this is never at the expense of ducking the challenges. Indeed, in the most precipitate passages she is every inch the master; it is in the more lyrical passages that she brings a refreshing spaciousness to interpretation, which can only serve to heighten those which are more intense. Melodic lines

are always well-defined, in whichever voice they appear; tempi are chosen which only rarely require any concession to challenges of technique; fingerwork is always crisp, clean and tidy.

Surely there must be some downsides? Well, this reviewer for one would have welcomed a tauter rhythm in the second subject of *Scherzo diabolico*, a more orchestral (rather than pianistic) approach to the opening sections of the first movement of *Concerto*, and more sensuality in a few of the sexiest passages (if one is allowed to express it thus). But he would also venture to suggest that were this his first exposure to Alkan, such considerations would never come to mind, and that if he had no pre-conditioning of previous performances, he would not be raising any objections.

Sorry, but any thoughts at a blow-by-blow dissection of each study rapidly evaporated as your reviewer got further into his task. This is a performance which in its overall mastery defies that kind of nit-picking.

Can this recording out-Smith Smith? No, for the simple reason that that is to compare different approaches. Of course Smith remains a quintessential yardstick; and yet McCallum offers a view which at the least stands alongside it, and most certainly serves as an object lesson to many others who have attempted fragments, or all, of this oeuvre. Speaking as a pupil of Smith, one cannot but accept that he would have applauded this fresh insight which another of his pupils has brought to bear on the fruits of his life's work.

Let us not mince our words. Long live the memory of Smith, but bravo bravissimo to McCallum for this fresh insight into these seminal pieces, and a five-star rating to this recording, which is supported by excellently-perceptive sleeve notes by Hugh Macdonald (though Smith would have had even more difficulty than your reviewer in reading the very small type in which they are presented).

Get this recording now, and come to it with an open mind. Neglect it, and her, at your peril.

Nicholas King

Alkan: Organ Works, vol.2

Kevin Bowyer, organ of Blackburn Cathedral. Tocata Classics TOCC0031

Everyone who has enjoyed volume I of Kevin Bowyer's *intégrale* of Alkan's organ works will need no persuasion from me to acquire this second volume – indeed they will probably have it already. For those who do not know this music, Nicholas King's review (above) of Kevin Bowyer's recital at City of London School, which included a number of pieces from this disc, will doubtless have excited their curiosity. But like volume I, this recording is not just for the curious; it reveals a major and little-appreciated dimension of Alkan's genius, and also places these works as vital 'missing links' in the French organ tradition. The splendid organ of Blackburn Cathedral enables Bowyer to display these works to their maximum advantage.

The disc begins with the enigmatic '*Pro organo*', an album leaf of about 1850 which may be an entity in its own right, or (since it is headed by the word 'Praeludium') the precursor to a suite which was never (?) elaborated. This little piece is like a glass of clear water, compared to the complexities and turbidity of much of what follows.

The present writer candidly admits that, despite the excellent performances, the Six Preludes '*pour les pieds seulement*' (nos. 7-12, the first six being on volume 1) have, to him, the least to offer, certainly on disc - when seen live the acrobatics of the performer are a wonder to behold, whatever one's opinion of the music. I am inclined to agree with Ronald Smith that a 'rather savage' joke may underlie these pieces, which demand miracles of execution to

somewhat limited total musical effect. We may marvel at no 12, a chaconne with 40 variations – we will wonder how the performer does not get his feet permanently entangled in the crossings in no. 9 – we will certainly be engaged by many remarkable moments of tone-colour and contrast - but we won't perhaps feel any strong urge to listen to any of them again..

But the bulk of the disc is taken up with the '*11 pieces in religious style and a transcription from Handel's Messiah*', op. 72, which are a very different matter. The variety, colour and different perspectives of these pieces belie any blandness which the title of the collection suggests, and constitute an exploration of an untrodden musical world, which has been rarely since revisited. Having now heard some of these pieces live twice (at Nicholas King's recital reviewed in Bulletin 76 and at Bowyer's recital reviewed above) and listened carefully to this new recording, I find them consistently engaging and displaying new facets. What an astounding contrast, for example, between the steamroller course of no.10 and the fractured progress and ultimate collapse of no. 11, the longest of the set! We badly need after this disturbing piece of musical psychosis, the further glass of water provided by the simple transcription from the Messiah.

Bowyer is performing great services to Alkan and to the organ repertoire as a whole through this series and, like volume I (and doubtless the forthcoming volume III), this recording is a must – particularly, as noted in the introduction to this issue, as it is on offer at the Toccata website at a specially reduced price.

DC

Coming soon.....

Brian Doyle writes:

A reminder that Alban Gerhardt and Steven Osborne are recording the Cello Sonatas of Alkan and Chopin for Hyperion on December 19th 2007. This is a wish come true for me as I have often thought that these two works would make an ideal coupling for a CD. Both works were written within a few years of each other, and there is the connection with the leading French cellist, Franchomme. The Chopin work is dedicated to him, and he premiered the Alkan work with Alkan at the piano. It is no surprise to me that it is Hyperion Records that are undertaking this recording.

A comparison of recordings of the Concerto op. 39, 8-10

The September/October issue of 'International Piano' magazine carried a review by John Kersey of the available versions of Alkan's Concerto for solo piano. Kersey has not quite covered the waterfront; he omits the recordings by Stefan Lindgren (Bulletin 76) and the recent version by Stephanie McCallum (this issue) and was unable to track down the 1990 recording by Osamu Nakamura. Nor does he mention (wisely, I should say) the computer/disklavier version by 'Michael Nanasakov' (Jujichi Nanasawa). Nonetheless that still gives the two versions of both Marc-André Hamelin, and Ronald Smith, McCallum's 1991 recording, and the versions of John Ogdon, Jack Gibbon and Mark Latimer.

Smith's second recording is regarded, despite the player's technique and sense of structure, as insufficiently dramatic - 'a direct, unfussy presentation'. Ogdon, at the other end of the scale, often loses the detail in pursuit of the 'big picture', and shows 'lack of focus' in the last movement. McCallum's clarity is seen to be on the plus side, her caution on the negative.

Kersey is clearly taken with the bravura of Latimer's attack (my word) on the Concerto, which he curiously characterises as 'Alkan as if re-imagined by Anton Rubinstein' (a slur, I

should say, on both composers!). He seems to recognise that Latimer's 'thumb[ing] his nose at mere note-accuracy' is not sufficient for the piece; but on the other hand, whilst praising Hamelin for his technique and subtlety, describes him as 'an Apollonian, examining the music from a distinct and removed perspective' – 'not, perhaps, a version to like, but without doubt one whose authenticity of spirit cannot and should not be ignored'.

Kersey finally plumps for Gibbons, as between the rationality of Hamelin and the indulgence of Latimer, 'capturing the Byronic spirit of the work whilst staying fully in control'. Hamelin is rated as a 'close second', whilst Kersey concludes that Latimer's performance is 'controversial for all the right reasons'.

DC

Alkan at Large

How to start a music festival – including Alkan!

About three years ago, for no very good reason save that my wife Nadia was brought up nearby, she and I bought and began to restore a mediaeval house in the beautiful town of Levoča, Slovakia. In the heart of the historic Spiš region – bounded by the High Tatra mountains in the north and guarded by the majestic and mighty ruin of Spiš Castle to the east and close to the magnificent *Slovenský Raj* (Slovak Paradise) National Park – this is one of the most exquisite and forgotten corners of Europe. Levoča itself is an almost completely preserved Gothic Renaissance town, with a fairy-tale town hall, its church with its mighty carved altar by Master Pavol (the tallest in Europe at over 18 metres), and still surrounded by most of its walls. It is a paradise for both the nature lover and the sight-seer.



Staying there this summer, and meeting with Nadia's long-lost friend Pavel Uher, who is now a stage and opera director, we decided that what the town needed was a first-class music festival – one that would be consonant with its own cultural heritage and would attract newcomers to visit this marvellous region. Thus was born *Levočske Babie Leto* – in English, **Indian Summer in Levoča**, which will be the first annual international classical music festival in Eastern Slovakia, to be held around the first week in October when the region has a legendary period of warm weather. We very soon gained the enthusiastic support of the Mayor of the town, and of many other local inhabitants; and with Pavel's connections, we had the opportunity of performances from some of Slovakia's leading musicians.

But how about musicians from elsewhere? Starting from scratch, and running on a not-for-profit basis, we could only offer expenses and a very modest honorarium. I e-mailed a number of musical friends and acquaintances, basically asking them if they would be willing to come to the middle of nowhere to perform at an unknown event. Amazingly, they all said - 'yes!' – and so the prospect of the Festival became a reality, and it will take place from 27th

September to 5th October 2008. Our world-class line up includes the **Stamic Quartet** of Prague; the British **Holywell Ensemble**, and also from England the doughty organist **Nicholas King**; from Spain the tenor **Jose Maria Guerrero**; from Poland the young virtuoso **Tomasz Kamieniak**; from South Africa the pianist **Petronel Malan**; from Slovakia the pianist **Marian Lapšanský**, the Slovak Chamber Orchestra, and soloists of the Slovak National Opera and Ballet.

The core of our programme is the 19th century romantic repertoire, but including contemporary music as well, with a few surprises! Thus the Stamic Quartet and Marian Lapšanský will play the Piano Quintet of César Franck (a staunch *Alkanien* himself), but also the excellent Piano Quartet of the Slovak composer Eugen Suchon, the centenary of whose birth falls in 2008. The Holywell ensemble will play Beethoven's own transcription of his Septet for piano, cello and clarinet, the Second Piano Trio of John Ireland, and Milhaud's jazzy trio for piano, violin and clarinet. Jose Guerrero will give a recital of Spanish song, accompanied by guitar, ranging from folk song through Granados and de Falla to Garcia Lorca. The flamenco troupe 'Los Remedios' will present a 'Night in the Gardens of Spain' to include traditional and classic Spanish music as well as the tangos of Piazzolla.

Of course we couldn't neglect Alkan and his contemporaries – and the twin spirits of Alkan and Liszt run through the programmes, with a decent dash of Thalberg. Nicholas King will play, on the great organ of St. Jacob's Church, music of Alkan, Liszt's astounding *Fantasy on 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undem'* on a theme of Meyerbeer, and a transcription of Mussorgsky's *'Pictures from an Exhibition'*. Petronel Malan will play a programme of Mozart and Mozart transcriptions (including pieces by Hummel, Alkan and Thalberg), concluding her recital with Liszt's Sonata. We will also hear a rare outing of the *Preludes* of the Russian composer Zhelobinsky (once in the repertoire of Horowitz). Petronel will also give a performance of Liszt's 'mini-concerto' *Malédiction* with the Slovak Chamber Orchestra. Tomasz Kamieniak will perform Alkan's Concerto Op. 39, 8-10 and couple with it Liszt's transcriptions of the Pilgrim's Chorus from Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, Sigismund Thalberg's fantasy on Bellini's *'La Sonnambula'* and rarely heard music by Josef Wieniawski, the piano virtuoso brother of the more famous violinist Henryk. (Tomasz will also be giving a concert of his own virtuoso transcriptions of modern film-music, a speciality of his).

And there will be many other events – including a special art exhibition and opportunities to go sightseeing in the town and region.

The Festival is a 'not-for-profit' organisation, so although we are seeking financial support from sponsors and grants, the core of the Festival will be its audience. We are inviting those attending to become Founder Patrons, giving them the best seats at all concerts and the opportunity to participate in receptions, meeting the artists, etc. **I am delighted to write that the Alkan Society has agreed to become one of the Festival's sponsors, as a consequence of which members of the Society are entitled to become Founder Patrons at the reduced price of £130 (instead of £150).** Travel to Levoča is inexpensive (SkyEurope fly regularly to the nearby airports of Poprad and Kosiče from Luton) and there are good and inexpensive hotels – so the Festival offers excellent value as well.

If any members want further information (including copies of the Festival bulletin), advice on travel or accommodation, or help in making bookings, do please contact me (info@alkansociety.org or info@lblefestival.eu). And do look at the Festival website www.lblefestival.eu for full programme, background information and latest news.

David Conway