

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered charity number 276199)

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the first Bulletin issued under the management of your new Executive Committee, which was elected at the Annual General Meeting on 11th November. We are distributing this issue in time to reach UK members ahead of our President's 80th birthday concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall; to that extent, it is somewhat "thrown together". Nonetheless we hope that you find some interesting material within it.

In the absence abroad of the Bulletin Editor, this issue has been compiled by the Secretary.

There are three important enclosures in this package :

Firstly, a personal letter from our new Chairman, Eliot Levin.

Secondly, draft minutes of the recent Annual General Meeting - "draft" in the sense that they require to be confirmed at the next Annual General Meeting. Your new Executive Committee has nonetheless already set to work hard on the outcomes of the meeting, and will be reporting much more fully on its future plans at the next AGM and through the next issue of this Bulletin.

Thirdly, the subscription renewal form for 2003. We are of course heavily reliant in our plans on the continued support of members, and we are conscious that a large proportion of members has not subscribed during 2001 or 2002, whilst continuing to receive Bulletins and other literature. We can, of course, understand that people have been reluctant to subscribe when so little seems to have been happening. Nonetheless, it is manifestly unfair that those who *have* paid should, in effect, be subsidising those who have *not*.

We do value the support of all members, whose subscriptions go towards useful activities and projects reaching beyond the immediate membership. We hope that all will renew for 2003, and we are prepared to draw a line under payment of lapsed subscriptions for 2001 and/or 2002 (whilst not objecting, of course, to such payments being made). We do however have to say that no further correspondence will be sent to those who have not renewed by the middle of February 2003.

The management of the Society

Honorary Officers were elected at the Annual General Meeting on a holding basis, as shown on the enclosed draft minutes. At its subsequent meeting, Executive Committee reviewed some of these. The post of Secretary will now be held by Nicholas King, and the post of Treasurer by Averil Kovacs. Averil Kovacs will also hold the post of Membership Secretary, and Brian Doyle will become Archivist.

One task which needs to be addressed urgently is the rewriting of the Society's Constitution. This is not something we wish to labour, but the present document (which has probably never been seen by most of the membership) does require substantial attention. We intend to present an updated Constitution for endorsement at the next Annual General Meeting. As part of this process, we plan to structure the future management of the Society in a more effective way. To that extent, the appointments which are currently held are only on a short-term basis, though it is probable that the individuals concerned will be offering themselves on a longer-term basis in 2003, as well as welcoming new blood if it is forthcoming.

Web-site

We are delighted to announce that David Conway has set up an official Society website. This can be accessed on www.alkansociety.org.

The website will carry news of the Society's activities, and links to as many other Alkan events and information as we can find. We have already posted our online discography of Alkan, and there is a direct link through which you can book for our President's QEH concert on 16th December if you have not done so already.

In addition, in association with Amazon.co.uk, all visitors can purchase through our online bookstore any book or CD currently 'in print', including of course those dedicated to the music of Alkan. To make things easier, items in the discography which are 'in print' can be accessed at a single click. Please put the website amongst your "favourites", and use the Amazon link for buying books and CDs whenever you can. Each purchase made via our website benefits the Alkan Society.

You can alert all your e-mail recipients to the Alkan Society website by automatically adding a note at the bottom of each e-mail you send. You can do this by using the 'Signature' feature of your e-mail programme.

Do visit the website, and we shall welcome your comments. You can e-mail any enquiries about the site to info@alkansociety.org.

Later on, we plan to open some pages on the website which will be accessible only to members. We shall say more about this once we have organised the necessary password systems.

Data Protection Act and electronic mail

In this modern world, the Society inevitably keeps its membership records in electronic form. Please be aware of the statutory notice on the subscription renewal form, giving our undertaking that we shall not use your personal details for any purposes other than Society mailings.

There have been some suggestions that a membership list should be published. We will consider this in 2003 and we shall of course need to check then that individual members are happy for their names

and towns (not street addresses) to be shared with others. Before we can do this, we need to address some other issues of the Society's compliance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

We are also looking into the possibility of sending Bulletins by e-mail to those who wish to receive them by that means, and shall make an announcement when we have investigated the various implications of this more fully.

Forthcoming events

Thursday 12th December 2002 at 1815hrs

Ronald Smith will be interviewed on *In Tune* (programme starts at 1700hrs) on BBC Radio 3, and will play some Alkan during the programme.

Monday 16th December 2002 at 1945hrs

80th birthday celebration recital by our President, Ronald Smith, at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. The advertised programme is Schubert *Wanderer Fantasia*, Chopin *12 Etudes op. 25*, Beethoven *Sonata in C minor op. 111* and Alkan *Octave study op. 35 no. 12 "and other works"*; we wait to see what unadvertised items may appear! Tickets are available through the usual outlets at £ 17.50, £ 15.00 and £ 12.50 - you can book through our website as above.

The Society will have a stall in the foyer where you can meet members of your new Executive Committee and give us your feedback and suggestions on the future of the Society.

Tuesday 25th February 2003 at 1900hrs

David Conway will give a members' talk, in conjunction with the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College London on "Alkan and his Jewish Roots" at the Haldane Room, Wilkins Building, University College London. This is in Gower Street; the nearest stations are Warren Street and Euston Square (Underground) and Euston (Underground and rail).

David Conway is preparing a PhD thesis at University College, London on the topic 'Jewry in Music', 1780-1850'. He is a member of the Alkan Society and a keen amateur musician, although he claims his technique does not take him much beyond some of the op. 31 Preludes.

The talk will be illustrated with several Alkan works performed by Maria Zachariadou (cello) and Richard Shaw (piano). These will include the slow movement from Alkan's Cello Sonata, and various piano solos.

Maria Zachariadou is a fine young cellist. Following studies (on a rare full scholarship) at the Royal Academy of Music in London with David Strange, Colin Carr, Zara Nelsova and Mats Lidstrom, she is currently in the second year of the Postgraduate Advanced Performance Course at the Royal College of Music, supported by an award from the Musicians Benevolent Foundation. Her teacher is Melissa Phelps (wife of Moray Welsh, the cellist on Ronald Smith's recording for APR).

Richard Shaw studied with Ronald Smith and was fascinated with the unidentifiable music coming from the master's studio. He went on to investigate Alkan's life and works, scouring the 19thC French press and locating and documenting the primary sources for the first time. Nowadays he can frequently be heard playing the piano live on BBC Radio 3's "In Tune", accompanying a variety of singers and instrumentalists.

Monday 31st March 2003 at 1815hrs

Advance notice is given of the Annual General Meeting of the Society at the Meeting Room of St. James's Church, Piccadilly (access by the alleyway to the immediate east of the church).

This will be followed at c1900hrs by a members' informal evening with Ronald Smith, at which he will talk about his career and experience, with particular reference to his research into the work of Alkan. Nearest station : Piccadilly Circus (Underground).

Other future events, of which we shall give more information in future Bulletins, are a festival at the Purcell School, Bushey from 18th to 20th March 2003, organised by William Fong, at which students will perform Chopin *Etudes* and Alkan *Etudes*, complemented by a master-class by Ronald Smith; and the annual Alkan Society Scholarship competition at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge on 7th November 2003, which will be followed by an Alkan-based recital by Ronald Smith to open the Cambridge Festival on 8th November 2003.

We also hear that on 19th September 2003 the phenomenal English pianist Jonathan Powell will play at the Purcell Room, giving a complete performance of Sorabji's epic masterpiece *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, the first in this country since John Ogdon's legendary interpretation at the QEH many years ago. This performance will start at 1830hrs, finishing at around 2300hrs.

Recent events

The annual Alkan Society Scholarship competition was held at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge on 24th October. We hope to have a report on this event in the next Bulletin.

Nicholas King performed the D flat major *Grand Prelude* during an organ recital at St. Michael's Church, Cornhill on 7th October.

ARTICLES

Our thanks to the Editor of *Musical Opinion*, Denby Richards, and Max Harrison, for allowing us to publish the following article, which appeared in *Musical Opinion*, Summer 2000.

Alkan: the Centenary Continues

by Max Harrison

Whether the 21st century will prove as obsessed as its predecessor with anniversaries remains to be seen. But one such 20th-century celebration has already found a double echo. Clustering around the end of March 1988 was a group of events which marked the centenary of the death of Charles-Valentin Alkan. During the preceding 100 years, and the sensational character of much of his music notwithstanding, he had been an obscure figure although always with distinguished advocates. Thus Busoni placed Alkan with Liszt, Chopin, Schumann and Brahms as one of the five greatest composers for the piano since Beethoven. To that list we should now have to add further names, principally those of Debussy, Rachmaninov, Bartók, Szymanowski and Messiaen, yet Busoni's essential point survives. If Alkan remains less prominent than the others this is because of the outlandish executive demands imposed by his finest works and their embodiment of an extreme manifestation of the French *style sévère*. Further, in place of the idealising humanism of the other composers' music his most characteristic pieces suggest a mortifying realism. One might apply a phrase of Nathaniel Hawthorne's and say they are "baroquely complex and therefore truthful and precise." Although universally regarded as the supreme pianist of the 19th century, Liszt recognised Alkan as possessing the greatest

technique he had ever known; and he is also on record as having said Alkan was the one person in front of whom he was nervous of playing. Of Alkan's own performances his contemporaries wrote about their energy, fullness, clarity, refinement and sensitivity, of his remarkable gradations of touch, of his ability to stir the hearers' emotions by adapting the singer's art to the keyboard - which is something Chopin and Liszt also did of course. And yet although a crucial figure in 19th-century Romanticism, Alkan stubbornly remained an outsider. As such his name would inevitably arouse nervousness in the corridors of the BBC, but such is the hypnotic glamour of a centenary that a dozen years ago Alkan briefly starred as *This Week's Composer*. Considerably more to the point was a certain chamber concert in the Wigmore Hall on the centenary day itself, March 29th 1988.

Anyone turning back to the issue of *Musical Opinion* for the following June will get the impression that this occasion was a considerable one. Certainly that was what most of the packed audience evidently thought and the great majority of them crowded backstage, not merely to congratulate the three artists but to express astonishment at what they had heard. Those responsible were the violinist James Clark, the cellist Moray Welsh, and the central hero in the Alkan revival that was going on then and has continued ever since - Ronald Smith. Although the great majority of Alkan's works are for solo piano he also composed orchestral and vocal music and in particular the three chamber pieces heard on that memorable evening. These are the *Grand duo concertant* for violin and piano Op.21, the Trio for piano, violin and cello Op.30, both dating from the early 1840s, and the *Sonate de concert* for cello and piano Op.47 of 1857. Clark and Welsh took part in commandingly virtuosic accounts of two works each, but Smith was at the piano throughout that long concert, not only playing everything from memory but, still more to the point, demonstrating all the intellectual stamina and emotional adventurousness the task demanded. Even a dozen years later this occasion stands out as one of the high points of his inspired advocacy of Alkan.

As everyone said at the time, it was obvious that this music should be recorded, and promptly. EMI was supposedly interested, seemed to remain so for a considerable while, yet did not in the end make the records - and this despite having issued many previous Smith Alkan performances, including his magnificent 1977 set of the 12 Studies in minor keys Op.39 (of which more below). Several other firms claimed to be less frightened of Alkan's chamber works than EMI and one, Nimbus, did in fact record the three items in 1992. Two years later they recorded Smith in several further solo pieces. Yet beyond that they followed what some might describe as a policy of masterly inactivity and steadfastly refused to make the recordings available. Indeed two years ago at the Royal Academy of Music Ronald Smith gave an extremely amusing lecture about the very long chapter of accidents, broken promises, misunderstandings and other troubles which attended the recording and issue of Alkan's chamber music.

But at last it is over. Nimbus's recordings of the Grand duo, Cello Sonata and Trio plus the piano solos taken down two years later have finally appeared as a 2-CD set from Appian as APR7032. They can be placed with Appian's 2-CD reissue of Smith's EMI reading of the Op.39 Studies (APR7031) which, along with much else, incorporates a four-movement symphony and even vaster three-movement concerto and was reviewed here in May 1997. The chief thing to say about the new issue is that the music still sounds as astonishing as one had remembered it. The Trio, for example, is full of classical precedents descending from Haydn and Beethoven yet these are drastically rearranged by the music's explosive vitality. In fact this intensity, which is almost as evident in many quiet, slow passages as in quick, energetic ones, is as much part of the explanation for Alkan's neglect as the technical demands he makes on his performers. To hear, one after another, two CDs of his music leaves one experiencing a most unusual combination of exhilaration and exhaustion. Another difficulty is that so much happens, and goes on happening, in short spaces of time. This is not merely a matter of the teeming notes but of a rapid succession of musical, which is often to say developmental, structural events. The exposition of the Trio's opening movement is not repeated and both the development and recapitulation are so condensed that one needs the recording process's capacity for frequent repetitions if one is to grasp the music's argument fully. A further problem, a result, presumably, of Alkan's

reclusively turning away from society, is that his works deal in what may be termed the more remote areas of human experience, with climates of feeling not often touched on in the outputs of more readily acceptable composers.

Perhaps this is most evident in the Grand duo, which is at once ferocious, recondite, almost incessantly surprising and in a variety of ways, in terms both of expression and the craft of composition. The American poet Robert Frost wrote of "the road not taken," but here it *is* taken and leads in a number of directions, not least in the slow movement's use of the very bottom register of the piano. Both instruments are pushed to the limit of their capabilities, as they are again in the Cello Sonata, whose slow movement is a remotely strange meditation on a passage from the Book of Micah. However, of these three works this is the one, demonically virtuosic though it is, that it is least hard to imagine entering the active concert repertoire. Even here, however, there is a feeling of almost cubist dislocation with regard to this music's classical precedents. And yet, like any successful large-scale work of art, each piece is both an essay in construction and a living organism. Each is solid: you can walk round it; and that solidity is in the music's ambience, both real and imagined. Can such pieces be said to exist outside the cage of history?

Some of the piano solos have an almost comparable weight, particularly Op.35 Nos.10, 11 and 12, the last three Studies in major keys. (No.5 of this set, the *Allegro barbaro*, in the lydian mode and more barbarous than Bartók's piece of that name, is included on APR7031 with all of Op.39.) "Very different aspects of love" might be the most apt summation of the slow No. 10, which is headed with a Latin tag meaning "Just when you expect light comes darkness." No. 11 studies diverse ways of almost burying a melody in its constantly changing accompaniment while No.12 is some kind of ultimate as an exploration of octaves. Also here are the grim *Marche funèbre* Op.26 of 1844, once in the repertoire of Rachmaninoff, and the first of the Two Capriccios Op.50, namely the *Capriccio alla soldatesca*. It is inexplicable that they did not also include its companion piece, *Le tambour bat aux champs*, which normally goes with it, especially as Smith has recorded these two aloof yet very attractive items together before, on a long-defunct Oryx LP. And that omission is the sole weakness I can find in this belated echo of the 1988 centenary. Its companion echo, mentioned at the beginning, refers to the other side of Ronald Smith's advocacy of Alkan, his writing. It is all but a quarter of a century since he told us the lifestory of that "dark and turbulent genius" in *Alkan Vol 1- The Enigma* and he followed this in 1987 with *Alkan Vol 2 - The Music* (reviewed in *Musical Opinion* October 1987). Those two hardbacks have now been reprinted by Kahn & Averill as a single paperback (£15.95, ISBN 1-871082-73-0) and the relentless forward sweep of Alkan scholarship is reflected in the revisions.

Some of these, however, are modest, amounting chiefly to the addition of a few paragraphs and of several footnotes. Most of the main text is otherwise as in the earlier publications and the original pagination has been retained - so we return to page I for the start of what had been Vol.2. There is here a very thorough discussion of all of Alkan's compositions including central achievements such as the *Grande Sonate of 1847* with what Smith calls its "exorcism by fugue." All this is greatly helped by the use of nearly 300 music examples and certain of these are more clearly printed than hitherto. Alan Ridout's Foreword to Vol.2 has been omitted and we have also lost the endpapers of Vol.2 which reproduced an Alkan manuscript. There are considerable additions to the List of Works and to the Bibliography. Also there are appendices on the activities of the Alkan Society of Great Britain and the Société Alkan in France. Most striking as evidence of the greatly increased amount of work on Alkan's behalf is the extension of the Discography from ten to 22 pages. Thus besides the performances dealt with above there are now three other recordings of the Grand duo, four of the Trio, five of the Cello Sonata. And it is not only the compositions that have survived so well for this book remains both enlightening and extremely enjoyable to read, particularly on the music. There in fact Ronald Smith writes with an eloquence which matches his playing.

The following article is adapted (and updated) from ‘Ronald Smith at 80’, the Piano Feature in *The Piano* magazine (April/May 2002 Issue), with the permission of the publishers, Rhinegold Publishing Limited.

Despite a promising career as a composer, for Ronald Smith the pull of the piano was too strong. Richard Shaw profiles a major pianist who shows no sign of slowing down.

It will come as a surprise to concert-goers who have seen him in action recently – or heard some of his latest CDs – but Ronald Smith recently celebrated his 80th birthday. Eighty he may be, but he shows no signs of slowing down gracefully. He celebrates in various ways this year. For the writer Bryce Morrison his barnstorming recital in the Fairfield Halls, Croydon in January was “very exciting and full of vitality and imagination”. Smith returned there to celebrate the Hall’s 40th Anniversary of its special Lunchtime Recitals in October. Within weeks he also gave recitals in Hastings, in Somerset, and at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. He continues to play for music clubs up and down the country (and tells me that he still has Beethoven’s *Emperor* Concerto and Tchaikovsky’s First very much in his repertoire). Appian Recordings have recently released four new CDs of music by Chopin (including all 27 *Études*), Liszt and Beethoven, and a further Schubert CD (APR 5568) has just appeared. Copies of all these will be available at Ronald Smith’s Queen Elizabeth Hall recital on Monday, December 16th, although those unable to wait that long can always go direct to the following webpage: <http://www.aprecordings.co.uk>

Naturally, these composers are dominating his recital programmes at present. Smith wrote a pioneering study of the French composer Charles-Valentin Alkan (revised and reissued by Kahn & Averill in 2000) and generous helpings of Alkan are often added, for good measure. As his agent Anthony Purkiss says, these heroic programmes and the energy and authority of his performances are truly extraordinary. We should relish the chance to hear Ronald Smith while he’s *still* on such good form.

Aged just 16, Ronald Smith was given a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music, but that was as a composer. There is a BBC recording of his charming and very polished *Scherzetto*, written the following year, but his *Violin Concerto* of 1941 is quite a different matter. It is highly likely that he would have been one of Britain’s leading composers, had he chosen to follow this path. Already he has his own distinctive voice, and the music unfolds with great individuality and flair. Other orchestral works were also broadcast by the BBC, and conducted by Sir Henry Wood, Charles Groves and others, but piano playing soon took over. His compositional perspective (a finely-tuned orchestral ear, broad architectural vision, and awareness of compositional processes at work) has remained a powerful and guiding force in all his performances at the piano.

Smith went on to study with Marguerite Long and the Russian Pierre Kostanoff in Paris. Long was of most interest for her first-hand comments on playing Debussy, Ravel and Fauré. Kostanoff, a great teacher who had studied with a pupil of Siloti, taught him to consider the use of relaxed weight. But the most he ever learnt about music was to come from listening to four key artists, Adolf Busch, Furtwängler, Toscanini and Casals, and two very special pianists, Rachmaninov and Josef Hofmann.

His extensive recording career began in 1950, with Bach’s Triple Concerto in C, when he and Dennis Matthews joined the legendary Edwin Fischer, another important influence. David Mottley produced of many of Smith’s famous EMI recordings of Chopin, Alkan, Balakirev (“*Islamey* in just two takes!” Mottley recalls in amazement), Beethoven, Schubert and Liszt in the late 1960s, 70s and 80s. These were all made in Abbey Road Studio One at a time when the larger recording companies were less concerned about short-term profit.

Appian Recordings, with the support of the Alkan Society, recently brought out the pioneering CDs of Alkan's chamber works (APR 7032), recorded for Nimbus back in 1992. The cellist Moray Welsh remembers Smith's characteristic passion and "wild inspiration". Everything (as always with Smith) was memorised and superbly prepared, and in performance he clearly relished living dangerously. "He had this total commitment to finding the spirit of the music regardless of the normal parameters of safety! There was never a dull moment!" Bryan Crimp, who has produced Smith's most recent CDs for APR also reminds us that "Ronald Smith is not a 'patch man'. Everything has to be done in complete takes and only *in extremis* will he agree - usually for the sake of the engineer and producer! - to do the odd page or two in isolation. Such stamina and determination would leave a pianist half his age standing!"

Ronald Smith has always been committed to helping young, talented pianists (and many a seasoned one, too) in spite of his performing commitments. Freddy Kempf, for example, studied with him twice a week for eight years. Another young pianist to make the track to Smith's home in Kent was the pianist William Fong, now Head of Keyboard at the Purcell School, the specialist music school. Fong was bowled over by Smith's appearances in the North East and, aged 8, made termly visits to Smith in Hythe. Years later, as a postgraduate, he stayed with the Smith household for a month at a time, for some four years. Ronald Smith's own daily schedule set the pace. The master was at the piano from 6.30am and through the morning, returning in the late afternoon and evening. Ten hours' quality work at the keyboard was the norm for him then (just as it is to this day). It was, Fong recalls, an infectious model.

For Fong, "Smith was the clearest thinking musician I've ever come across and is rare in combining both intellect and instinct. He was an outstanding teacher, for he takes the broadest view of education, providing students with the tools to allow them to grow and develop in their own way."

Attending a masterclass set up by Whitstable Music Club earlier this year (what an imaginative way to breathe fresh life into the Music Club circuit!), it was inspiring to see (and hear) Smith the teacher in action. As only great teachers can do, he was quick to take stock of each player's special qualities, before guiding them to develop (or rethink) their ideas further. The very talented and virtuosic Teo Gheorghiu (a 9-year old from the Purcell School) was encouraged to respond more to the harmonic tensions and architectural shapes in Chopin's Op25 *Études* (nos 2, 7 & 12). Elsewhere, Smith reminded us of the warm, rounded sound of Edwin Fischer's *pianissimo*, and the basic sound of some of the pianists was given a instant richness when the master demonstrated his flexible forearm touch on their own arms. The points raised inevitably shed light on Smith's own preoccupations as a performer: respect for the composers' intentions, and a keen awareness of how the details fit into a broad scheme.

When Ronald Smith does eventually decide to abandon the ivories, he really should consider writing his memoirs, covering seven decades in the profession. As a born raconteur with a keen memory, a wicked sense of humour and lots of diaries in the loft, he could have a best seller on his hands.

The next issue of this Bulletin is scheduled to be posted at the start of March 2003. Articles, contributions and other comments will be welcomed by **22nd February 2003**, by post or e-mail.

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