

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

Reg. Charity No.276199

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The Annual General Meeting

This was held in the Cristofori Rooms on 17 July 1991. with an encouraging attendance of eleven members, several more than in 1990. Apologies were received from Eliot Levin, Richard Murphy and Maurice Glover.

It was decided to simplify the subscription to £10 per year for all members (£7 for students). Although the postal costs are greater for overseas members. those in the U.K. are more able to attend meetings. and it was felt that this was a fairer system on balance. As before, wives or husbands are included in the subscription. At the same time, the financial year will now begin in January, which means that the first increased subscription will have in effect run for eighteen months.

Still on financial matters. the Society's Auditor is now John Needham: our Treasurer works in his office and the arrangements are thus made more convenient. A letter of thanks has been sent to Keith Craft for his valuable work over many years.

The late Charles Keauffling has left the Society a generous legacy which will make our finances much safer. We have been reluctant to venture into ambitious or risky projects and this extra security should be a great help. The remains of the 1988 Festival Fund will now be absorbed into the general fund.

An up-to-date list of the contents of the Society Library in the Guildhall School has been obtained and will be published. We hope to fill any obvious gaps when we can.

Ronald Smith

Our President celebrated his 70th birthday in January and we send him our congratulations. He reports that the chamber music has now been recorded by Nimbus in their new concert hall. The two CD set. which will include some solo items. should be available from May 6th.

Of more immediate interest: Ronald will be giving a recital for the R.A.M. Club on Tuesday 17th March at 7.30 p.m. in the Royal Academy of Music. The programme will contain some Alkan. including the octave major-key study from Op. 35. Members of the Alkan Society will be very welcome: admission is free and a glass of wine will be available.

News from France

The Société Alkan has been very active, in particular in assembling a major new book about Alkan. It is a symposium edited by Brigitte François-Sappey and published by Fayard at FF150. A most impressive and scholarly production of over 300 pages includes a full chronology of his life by Constance Himelfarb. who also gives a survey of contemporary press accounts. Pierre Réach, who has recently re-recorded the Grande Sonate and Sonatine, discusses the unique problem of constructing an Alkan recital. The editor has written a general survey of the piano music as well as a detailed discussion of the Grande Sonate. Hugh Macdonald. the author of Alkan's entry in the "New Grove".

writes about his approach to the piano in a chapter entitled "La voix de l'instrument". after the piece in the fifth book of "Chants". Britta Schilling contributes a fascinating chapter on Alkan's use of titles. François Luguenot and Laurent Martin, respectively Secretary and President of the Société, discuss the interpretation of the music, and Luguenot also gives a survey of Alkan's correspondence. There are chapters on the chamber music and the works for organ or pedal-piano, as well as consideration of Alkan as a "French composer of Jewish religion". There is a survey of the legal archives relating to Alkan and his family. a full catalogue of his works both surviving and lost. and selective bibliography and discography.

For anyone well-versed in French. this is a most important addition to the literature and well worth careful study. For anyone going to Paris, the publishers' bookshop is Librairie Arthème Fayard, 75 rue des Saint-Peres. 75278 Paris Cedex 06. (It is closed on Saturdays, but I saw the book in plenty of other shops.) The Société Alkan is offering it to its members or to non-members for a small surcharge: for details of postal charges etc. you could enquire to the Society at 145 rue de Saussure. 75017 Paris.

A request from Constance Himelfarb

She is preparing an edition of the correspondence of Alkan. which is to appear in the Belgian book "Musique et Musicologie" edited by Malou Haine and published by Pierre Mardaga. (Also to appear in the series is an edition of the correspondence of François-Joseph Fétis, who was a friend of Alkan.)

She would welcome any information which could lead to an extension of the corpus of Alkan letters. which so far numbers around one hundred and forty. Her address is 1, rue Froide, 14000 Caen, France.

French radio carried a major series last December, devised by Brigitte François-Sappey, with five three-hour programmes on France-Musique covering Alkan and the "romantic century". There were some intriguing juxtapositions of pieces by Alkan and his contemporaries. as well as several less obvious comparisons: for example, an extract from Schoenberg's "Moses und Aron" was followed by some of Alkan's Jewish liturgical pieces. The recordings used were not all from the usual discography either: the Piano Trio was played by Jean Hubeau, Olivier Charlier and Philippe Muller; the Symphonie by Aldo Ciccolini; the cello sonata by Dominique de Williencourt and Elisabeth Cooper; the violin and piano Duo by Olivier Gardon and R. Pasquier.

Towards the end of December, an hour-long discussion of Alkan's correspondence with Georges Sand was broadcast by France-Culture. The participants included François Luguenot and Brigitte François-Sappey.

The Lyon Biennale last September. an eleven-day festival devoted to French music. included a major Alkan concert given by Huseyin Sermet (piano). Wang Jian (cello) and Louis Robilliard (organ). The programme. headed "Le Berlioz du piano". contained the Sonatine, some Preludes and Esquisses, the cello sonata and the Impromptu on the Luther chorale.

There are also reports of a performance of the Grande Etude for left hand by Michel Béroff at the Paris Conservatoire on 22 February. On 11 April. Pierre Réach will play the Grande Sonate there, with a preceding radio discussion of the work on 1st April, the anniversary of Alkan's burial. Another broadcast of the cello sonata comes from Alain Meunier and Jean-Claude Penetier on 25 April. It is a pity that French radio stations are not available on satellite!

We congratulate our French colleagues on stimulating such a wide interest in Alkan. It is particularly good to see so many new artists performing the music too.

RECORDINGS

Olli Mustonen's recording of the Op. 31 Preludes (Decca 4330552) was well received by Stephen Johnson in the "Gramophone" and Bryce Morrison in "Hi-Fi News and Record Review". His timings make an interesting comparison with Laurent Martin's: Mustonen takes 47 minutes compared with Martin's 67. leaving room for Shostakovitch's 24 Preludes Op. 34 on the same disc. His playing of the latter work is described by Johnson as "simply phenomenal" and by Morrison as having "dizzying pianistic aplomb". Of the Alkan, both reviewers are also very impressed with both the playing and the recording quality. Our French colleagues are less complimentary, preferring Martin especially in some of the slower pieces: "Chanson de la folle" receives particular criticism for its hurried pace and consequent lack of acceleration in the central section. When we remember the dismal lack of recordings a few years ago. it is encouraging actually to be making comparisons these days.

Stephanie McCallum's disc of the Concerto and the fifth book of Chants has been released in Australia. The "Sun Herald" of Sydney for February 23 carries a review. The writer mentions Stephanie's premiere of the Chants in London and is obviously very impressed with her commanding performance. We are doing~ our best to obtain copies for members to purchase.

The new French book mentions a new CD in its discography which has recently been released on the Adda label (581285) and which I found in a Parisian shop last month. It contains the C sharp minor Concerto da Camera Op. 10. "Les Mois". "Salut cendre du pauvre" and the Funeral March for a Parrot. The performers are the Ensemble 2E 2M directed by Paul Méfano. The pianist is François Bou. The Concerto is accompanied by an ensemble of twelve string instruments. I am not totally convinced by M. Bou's performances. which sometimes lack a certain swagger in the playing, but enjoyed the disc all the same. The "Parrot" is taken well below the marked metronome speed -a fault not entirely absent from the old recording by Lewenthal. in spite of his warnings in his notes to the score -but it is well sung by the vocal quartet in authentic French. A larger group of singers would probably work better. The disc contains good notes by Paul Méfano and François Luguénot, and is boldly headed "Vol. 1" of presumably a major series of Alkan recordings. It will be interesting to follow the progress of this venture. The selection of works for the first volume is not the most obvious, especially if newcomers are to be convinced of the quality of Alkan's music, but in view of the progress made in France recently, it may sell well enough. I hope the series keeps going.

For our members, the most interesting recording about to appear is the long-awaited Symposium disc no.1062 containing some 77 minutes of music. The contents will be as follows (pieces are listed in chronological order of composition):

Rondo Brillant Op. 4 played by Christine Stevenson

Second Concerto da Camera Op. 10 played by Anthony Goldstone

Pas Redouble for wind band

Fragment of a String Quartet in F minor

Etz Chayim sung by members of Kentish opera

Les Regrets de la Nonnette played by Ronald Smith Halelouyah sung by Kentish Opera

Eight Preludes for organ (sur les gammes de plain-chant) played by Nicholas King

Beethoven 3rd Piano Concerto: Concert transcription of 1st movement with cadenza, played by Thomas Wakefield

Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un Pappagallo (Kentish Opera + instr.)

Transcription of Siciliano from Bach's Flute Sonata in E flat BWV 1031, played by Penny Loosemore

Organ Prelude in F major, Op. 66 No.1, played by Nicholas King

Bombardo-Carillon for pedal-piano 4 feet, played by Anthony Goldstone and Caroline Clemmow.

The notes will be by Richard Shaw. I know that this will be of great interest, both for the rarity of the works and the known quality of the performers. The price will be £10 including p & p in the U.K.; add £1 for Europe and £1 per disc (£3 minimum) outside Europe. Details from Symposium Records at 110 Derwent Avenue, East Barnet, Hertfordshire EN4 8LZ (tel. 081-3688667). As mentioned in the last Bulletin, it may be possible to make a cassette edition on subscription in advance, at the same price as the CD: please let me know if you would want this to be done, so that we can have some idea of the demand.

Other news

Young Musician of the Year: Ronald Smith's pupil, Frederick Kempf, has won his section of this year's competition. His semi-final performance included Alkan's Etude in E major Op. 35 no.12. We congratulate Ronald and his pupil. The TV broadcasts of the competition begin on March 30th.

Kevin Bowyer has been playing more organ pieces including the Benedictus and the twelve pedal studies. Performances in Canada, the USA and Finland will be followed by one in Westminster Cathedral on June 7th. His BBC recording of the pieces in St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol, was broadcast in February, unfortunately a little too early for working members without time-switches. The pedal studies, containing fugues, four-part chords and other unlikely examples of pedal dexterity, were played with amazing command.

Mr Bowyer's record of Sorabji's huge first Organ Symphony, recorded in Salisbury Cathedral, was also broadcast last year.

Ronald Smith's recording of the Sonatine was broadcast in an edition of "Your Concert Choice". Towards the end of Mozart's year, the "Don Giovanni" Fantasy was played in a late-night broadcast by John and Katherine Lenehan in the "Mozart Plus" series which also included Grieg's wicked two-piano versions of some of the sonatas.

Some members were able to hear some recitals at St John's, Smith Square in January and February. and I apologise to any who did not hear about them. Janos Solyom gave three Sunday morning recitals which included the Symphonie, the Concerto, the Sonatine and Le Festin d'Esopo. Marc-André Hamelin played the Concerto in a recital which left Paul Griffiths of "The Times" almost lost for ways to do justice to his playing. in a review head "Ultimate perfection". "Someone who operates at this level of virtuosity for almost an hour, who can clinch one spectacular effect after another, and who has the whole thing pour out from memory. is simply way beyond mental reach." Griffiths was equally impressed with the quality of the music itself: "virtuosity gone mad", perhaps, but "almost the ultimate 19th century piano concerto". Adrian Jack in "The Independent" noted the number of piano-buffs and pianists in the audience (Donna Amato and Hamish Milne included) ready to "take a roll-call of the casualties", but admitted that the sadists were frustrated by the secure performance in spite of the "bat-out-of-hell tempi" in the outer movements. For those who missed it, Hamelin has apparently recorded the work for imminent release, and it should make an intriguing comparison with Stephanie McCallum's disc: it looks like a case for disregarding the cost and buying both versions.

Dr Alkan in Israel sent an article from the "Wall Street Journal" by Donal Henahan; written in the centenary year which attempts to account for the lack of attention to the anniversary in the USA. He says that most of the ingredients for a cult following are there: the march for a dead parrot, the Satie-esque short pieces. "One might imagine him today writing incidental music for Monty Python." He does point out, rightly, that the Op. 39 Etudes ("Brobdingnagian pieces"), including the Concerto and Symphonie have principally kept Alkan's reputation from sinking out of sight. The third ingredient of the cult appeal. However, namely Alkan's mysterious death, is no longer present, thanks to Prof.

Macdonald's research. (He followed up his 1973 "Musical Times" article with some new findings in the March 1988 edition.). though the file is "evidently not yet closed".

More on recordings: Pierre Réach's new recording of the Grande Sonate and Sonatine is on Vogue VG 651645006. The French Bulletin finds much to admire in the performances. with one or two provisos: the softening of the double-dotted rhythm in "Quasi-Faust". and the insufficiently slow tempo for the finale. Ronald Smith's version remains the benchmark for the Sonata. Lewenthal's for the Sonatine. in the opinion of the reviewer; while Alan Weiss's performance. in spite of several liberties. is also convincing. It seems that Réach's version is the easiest to obtain in France; in Britain, I would hope that Ronald Smith's reissue is still available, though discs have a habit of disappearing from the catalogues in unseemly haste.

Future recordings on the Marco Polo label, listed in the discography of the French book, include Bernard Ringeissen's of the Concerto in Mark Starr's orchestration, and a new collection by Laurent Martin with the Rondeau chromatique op. 12, the 1st and 2nd sets of Impromptus Op. 32, Alleluia Op. 25, Super flumina Babylonis op. 52 and the Variations on a theme of Steibelt Op. 1. This last piece is the recent discovery, estimated date 1828, which has been republished by Billaudot. I presume that U.M.P. has it in the shop in London, or can easily obtain it; certainly the Société Alkan has it available on subscription to members.

In conclusion: I have reported on many past events in this Bulletin, and I hope the next will have rather more forthcoming events. It is quite difficult to obtain advance information about BBC broadcasts except from the performers involved, and I am sorry that there was no time to let you know of at least some of them.

Apologies also to members with full diaries for the short notice of Ronald Smith's recital on March 17th at the R.A.M., but I hope that a few may be able to get there.

Peter Grove