

# THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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BULLETIN NO. 31 : JANUARY 1987

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REPORT ON THE DECEMBER MEETING: A talk by Harold Truscott at the Thomas Coram Foundation on December 8th, 1986.

The following is an edited version of Mr. Truscott's most illuminating and scholarly talk entitled 'Why Alkan's music is so pianistic'. His talk has of necessity been edited, partly for reasons of length, and partly because some of his remarks related directly to illustrations from recordings or examples at the keyboard. It is hoped that those who know Alkan's Concerto op. 39 will recognise the passages alluded to.

Mr. Truscott began by explaining that whilst thinking about his talk it had led him into related areas, and thus not all that he would talk about and not all the music examples would bear directly on Alkan. It would all, nevertheless, have a bearing on what is, and what is not piano music.

"What do I mean by pianism? I mean the pianistic quality of music which is conceived in terms of piano sound as distinct from that of any other instrument or instruments. In terms of what is practicable on a piano keyboard. In terms of those shapes and figurations which are natural on the piano. In terms of what are natural hand and finger positions on a keyboard. An important requisite is that the composer should be a reasonably good pianist. There is a lot of badly conceived piano music by outstanding composers. Composers who are not pianists can have the most peculiar views on the subject. Many great composers have written music for the piano without really understanding it from a practical point of view - Sibelius for instance. He is rightly thought of as an essentially orchestral composer. The number of works by which he is well known is surprisingly few - 8 symphonies, counting the early Kullervo, the Violin Concerto, 8 or 9 tone poems, a few suites of incidental music and 1 mature string quartet. A large part of the complete published music consists of collections of piano music plus the Piano Sonata. Although he wrote a great deal of piano music when money was tight, that does not apply to the later successful years. Again and again he returned to the piano which he never understood in practical terms as though he were determined to conquer it. His Piano Sonata was written in 1897 when he was 28. In the same year he wrote his Karelia Suite. In the first movement Intermezzo of the Suite, Sibelius might have been simply continuing what he had already written in the Sonata, in both first and last movements. Listening to a piano arrangement of the Intermezzo it

is obvious it came from the same stable as the Sonata's finale and it could easily be part of the Sonata. The Sonata's finale sounds like a piano arrangement of an orchestral original. Not all of Sibelius's piano writing is as orchestral as the Sonata, but as a rule when his writing is more pianistic the ideas lack character. I think he found it very difficult to think of really fine ideas that were genuinely pianistic. There are five exceptions, the three Sonatas op. 67 and two Rondinos op. 68. In these splendid works he solved the piano problem by keeping the music very spare.

What I have been talking about is germane to certain aspects of Alkan's piano writing. The question, or more often criticism, of orchestral piano writing comes up with a number of composers, Schubert for one, Alkan is another. What I mean here by orchestral writing is not as straight forward as in the case of Sibelius's Piano Sonata, which is simply a case of music that is essentially in the orchestral idiom of a particular composer being written for the wrong medium, almost as a piano arrangement of orchestral music. What I am talking about now is rather more subtle than that. Bigness of style in a piano work, especially if it uses a lot or even all of the keyboard as Alkan often does, is almost bound, by some critics, to be adversely criticized as orchestral piano writing. Music that belongs properly to the orchestra rather than the piano. Beethoven's Piano Sonata in B flat op. 106, the 'Hammerklavier', is one such case. Often regarded by many as asking too much of the piano, and that it was really orchestral music. The conductor Felix Weingartner went to the trouble of orchestrating it. He later admitted, after all his trouble, that Beethoven knew what he was doing when he wrote the work for the piano. Brahms's three Piano Sonatas were described as symphonies in which Brahms expected two hands to be able to do what only an orchestra can properly cope with. This has its roots in Schumann's comment that the Brahms Sonatas were 'veiled Symphonies', by which he referred to the character and sweep of the works and did not mean that they were not piano music. It has become almost to be expected that any large scale work of a sonata kind for piano will be described by some critics as orchestral. Some years ago the composer/pianist John McCabe examined one of my own piano sonatas, a work on a large scale. He said that it suggested orchestral music, but when he considered the idea of orchestrating it he realised it would be a very tricky business, if not impossible. In other words, in spite of it suggesting the need of an orchestra to deal with its broad span, it was still piano music.

One work of Alkan's that will show in itself just about everything one wants to know about his pianism, including the orchestral angle, is the Concerto which forms 8,9 & 10 in the Studies in the Minor Key Op. 39. In fact everything we need for this purpose is in the immense first movement. This huge composition, in which everything orchestral and solo piano is to be played with the two hands, is almost, but not quite, unique. Schumann's F minor sonata does not come into consideration here. There are two predecessors to the Alkan Concerto, one of which is inadvertant. The first, written for harpsichord, is Bach's Italian Concerto. It is not on anything like the scale of Alkan's work. Such a scale was impossible to the Baroque conception of music. Of course the nature of Baroque music did not call for any tremendous difference between the character of the music of the orchestral group, and that of the solo parts. The main difference was in gestures suitable to the solo instrument, the difference in sound between massed strings and the solo strings or wind instruments and

decoration also natural to the solo instrument. It was another story with the symphony orchestra of the developed classical concerto and that of the Romantic composers. In this, in his solo Concerto, Alkan faced a major problem unknown to Bach. Still, the difference between orchestral group and solo music in Bach's work is quite apparent. The other work, which I have called inadvertant, is by Chopin. He wrote two normal piano concertos - the F minor in 1829 and the E minor in 1830. In 1832 he began a 3rd Concerto in A major. He sketched and may even have completed the first movement and then left it. In 1841 he rewrote it for two hands, arranging the orchestral tuttis for piano solo and issuing it as *Allegro de Concert Op. 46*, but the concerto origin is plainly visible in the piece. I have called it inadvertant because the piece was not designed at its conception to be for two hands only, as the Alkan work was. So far as I know at no time did Alkan envisage an actual orchestra with his Op. 39 Concerto. Nor does Chopin anywhere attempt to suggest orchestra and piano simultaneously, as Alkan does.

I would like to point out that when I refer to the orchestra in this discussion of the Op. 39 Concerto movement, I am referring to Alkan's orchestral suggestion in his piano writing. There is not a thing in the opening passages of Alkan's Concerto that suggests anything other than piano music of a bold, forceful, mainly chordal type, with a momentary glimmer of something more tender a little less than half way through. The quiet simple melodic line at the end punctuated by the soft supporting chords at intervals, suggests that it is leading to something new. Taken on its own there is nothing in it to suggest that it is not piano music. On the other hand, there is nothing in it that could not also be played by an orchestra, with one exception. Orchestrating the passage would not be difficult. The exception is the right hand Tremolando. With that one exception, Alkan has brought off a masterly piece of what could only be called compromise, and this in the orchestral passages of this Concerto, is one of its greatest qualities. The ability to suggest an orchestra without being orchestral.

Tremolando is an important aspect of piano writing in general, and therefore as an aspect of Alkan's writing in particular. In the 19th Century orchestral works were often arranged for piano duets or piano solo. In the case of normal piano concertos it would be for two pianos, the orchestral part on a second piano. Of course in some ways, especially in matters of colour, the piano was deficient. That did not matter since colour was not the object of the arrangement and one did not expect it. One of the things involved was tremolando, and this is where the common sense of many critics and reviewers has deserted them. One of the more prominent orchestral effects is string tremolando. It is especially prominent in Sibelius for instance, and also Bruckner. If one listens to a piano arrangement of the opening of Bruckner's 4th Symphony for instance, it will be found that the piano tremolando sound is no substitute for the strings. Critics argue that such things on the piano are no substitute for the original, and they are right, but when a composer uses a piano tremolando in a piano work, they go on to say that he is writing orchestrally for the piano. They cannot have it both ways. The very thing that makes it useless as a satisfactory substitute for the orchestral tremolando is what makes it pianistic. It is a legitimate technical devise on the piano, in piano music. A composer using it for its piano effect in a piano work is not writing orchestrally for the piano, he is writing pianistically. Returning to

Alkan's Concerto, the one thing that stands out from the rest, as a piano sound in that large opening passage, is the use of the right hand tremolando. This again, while it suggests a vague orchestral connection, is kept securely to the keyboard because it is high up in the treble of the piano. Normally if a piano tremolando is to be used in a piano arrangement of an orchestral work, it is heard in the lower part of the keyboard. Alkan's in fact is high in pitch so that he secures for these bars a vague orchestral suggestion, without compromising the pianism of the device. Only the piano could give us the sound that comes from these bars which is right for the music and is no substitute for anything else.

The plan of Alkan's Concerto movement links him to another earlier composer, Dussek, in an interesting way. The classical piano concerto, as established by Mozart, had certain habits which the majority of composers of this type of work tended to follow. Dussek is the odd man out in this respect. Mozart usually begins his solo entry with some definite virtuoso assertion of solo character, not necessarily thematic, and then moves to a solo version of the orchestra's main theme. It is when he comes to the second group that the soloist asserts his independence by starting the group with a new theme entirely his own, which the orchestra may or may not share later. Dussek reverses this process. His soloist begins with quite new material, but uses a second subject main theme that has already been played by the orchestra before his appearance. It is Dussek's plan that Alkan follows in his Concerto. Another feature in Dussek's sonatas and concertos is his love for very large transition passages. Alkan follows him in this respect to.

There is yet a third way in which Alkan resembles Dussek in this matter. In the classical concerto space was left towards the end of the first movement, and sometimes the other movements, for an improvised cadenza, which meant that the bulk of the coda of the movement was left to be improvised. Improvisation was a recognised feature of piano playing at this time. Mozart and Beethoven were both masters of improvisation. Later it deteriorated and eventually dropped out. Performers today usually play cadenzas written by others, either the composers or someone else or even themselves. The draw back to this is that one can sometimes hear quite unsuitable cadenzas which wreck the rest of the movement. Beethoven solved the problem for himself when he wrote in a cadenza as part of the first movement in his 'Emperor Concerto'. Because of this Beethoven is often credited with getting rid of the cadenza problem. He did so in that work, but he is sometimes credited with getting rid of the cadenza. This he could not do. The most any composer can do is to get rid of it as far as his own music is concerned. One composer who did, is Dussek, though no one ever mentions it. He was a virtuoso pianist, and might have been expected to retain this habit in his own concertos for his own performances. He did not, except in his first three concertos. In the remaining nine there is no room for improvisation of any kind. Nor is there in Alkan's Concerto. There is enough virtuosity in both composers works to make it unnecessary. I am not suggesting that Alkan was definitely influenced by this great, underrated composer, but many composers owe much to him, and Alkan may be one.

I would like to pick out a few points which are pianistically and musically of the greatest interest. One of the wierdest moments comes in the long passage in which the rhythm of the orchestra's opening theme is tapped out on one note or

octave, interspersed with short bursts of tremolando, against one part of the second subject tune. An expression that is at the furthest pole from the warm lyrical atmosphere it generates in its original natural guise, which is how we usually hear it. Here we must mention Sibelius again, for what develops, the tune set at an oblique angle below the repeated octave bears an uncanny likeness to part of the third movement of Sibelius's 4th Symphony. Sibelius later develops his passage at a different pitch, but for the length of the passage referred to, the pitch is identical in both instances. Sibelius was unlikely to have been influenced by the Alkan passage. He almost certainly did not know Alkan's music, after all Alkan was one of the forgotten men for a very long time. Apart from that, Sibelius's orchestral passage grows far too much from the mood, condition and material of the symphony as a whole, to be anything but genuine individual Sibelius. But there it is, decades before the 4th Symphony was written, well before Sibelius was even born, with a prescience that is astonishing, since Alkan's passage matches the 20th Century thought of Sibelius yet is not out of place in this Concerto movement. Alkan had this vision arising from a totally different context, and for a space these two widely separated composers march together in an uncanny comradeship, only to part and never meet again.

My final point comes from the huge coda of the movement. It illustrates Alkan's grasp of the piano for purposes of orchestral suggestion in yet a different, and perhaps, the ultimate way. The passage begins with a low, quiet rumbling shake, and against this, at the extreme upper end of the keyboard, chords staccato and just on the borderline of audibility. This is already a remarkable suggestion, but notice how he allows the volume to grow gradually, without changing the extremes of height and depth of pitch, by increasing volume and intensity and so doing what critics never allow for in this kind of Alkan writing - filling the intervening space, almost the whole of the keyboard with rumbling echoes, and from the single notes in the bass he adds just one to make an octave. So that from what appears on the page to be tiny, quite inadequate means, he obtains an earfilling crescendo to lead to the chordal theme from the orchestra's initial tutti, the volume at full pelt".

Ronald Smith gave the vote of thanks. He said 'everything we have heard in this talk is both completely valid and profound. We have been listening to a very remarkable exposition.' I am sure that everyone present would agree with Ronald's comments.

#### ALKAN FESTIVAL 1988

Plans for commemorating the centenary of Alkan's death are now taking shape. The Festival Committee (Brian Doyle, Eliot Levin and John Newing) have had discussions with Ronald Smith and professional advice from Denise Kantor and Helen Anderson. Helen has had a meeting with Nicholas Snowman, the Artistic Director of the South Bank. It is planned that the main event would take place on two consecutive days, November 29th and 30th and consist of a talk on Alkan's music, a solo recital by Ronald Smith, an organ recital by Gillian Weir and a concert of the three chamber works. We are awaiting confirmation of the availability of these dates. November 30th will be the 175th anniversary of Alkan's birth so there are two Alkan anniversaries in 1988.

In order to put on these and other events we will need sponsorship. If any members have any connections with, or know of any possible sponsors, please contact the Secretary.

#### RONALD SMITH

Our President has a busy schedule in the coming months. He will be giving a recital at the Ripley Arts Centre, 24 Sundridge Avenue, Bromley, Kent on Friday February 6th (wine and cheese at 7.15 p.m., recital at 8.00 p.m.). The programme is Schubert's Sonata in A minor D.784, Chopin's Etudes op. 25 and Alkan's Trois Grandes Etudes op. 76. On Saturday, February 21st at 7.30 p.m. a lecture/recital at Hayward's Heath Music Club (details from Mrs. Ingleton tel: 0444-413946). Works include Study for left hand op. 76 and Festin d'Esopo. On Wednesday March 4th (7.30 p.m.) he will be playing at Brighton College and will be including Alkan's Trois Etudes de Bravoure (Scherzi) op. 16. In March he will be touring Canada and the U.S.A. In April he will be recording op. 16 and op. 76 for the B.B.C. for broadcasting at a later date, and he will be recording these works for E.M.I. in early June. E.M.I. will be re-issuing, in 1988, all of his previous Alkan recordings to commemorate the Centenary. They will also be re-issuing shortly his recording of the complete Chopin Mazurkas on 2 LPs. We are very pleased to say that he has kindly agreed to give an Alkan recital at our meeting on May 29th (see forthcoming meetings).

Ronald's book on Alkan's works Vol.II will now be published in April/May. An order form will be sent with the April Bulletin.

#### CONCERT REVIEW - by Eliot Levin

Recently, at an all Beethoven concert, Ronald Smith played Beethoven's Second (following the precedents of the re-numbered Schubert and Dvorak symphonies) Piano Concerto at the Fairfield Hall in Croydon.

In some minds Ronald Smith is associated with highly virtuosic music and, in the case of Alkan, with music in which tempo tends to be strict and rubato out of place. Added to this, on records sometimes he is given (rather than gives) a somewhat brittle and cold sound. Technically the work can present him with few difficulties, albeit that the composer was himself a distinguished virtuoso player. This is itself a trap. Joyful feelings on obtaining tickets to hear this or that soloist of renown have been stilled as Bach or Mozart has emerged, modelled with incredible accuracy in clotted cream. But how much emotion is there in a gâteau? How much tension can be sustained by an eclair?

Ronald Smith's playing was disciplined and accurate - these things one expects of him - but it was also warm, and in the best sense, romantic. The distinctive, highly individual style of the pianist was everywhere evident, but always with and within the score, never idiosyncratic.

The first movement cadenza turned out to be unusually long, very exciting, superbly constructed and completely unknown to your critic, to whom the thought

occurred that Artur Schnabel might have been its author. Later he learned that he was in good company for when Schnabel played it in London before the war, the critic of the Times thought so too. In fact it was one of Beethoven's own compositions. Its many brilliant strokes included references to the last movement. It allowed the pianist to delight with an enormously wide tonal palette over the full range of dynamics and to thrill with brilliantly executed ornamental devices and a number of matchless trills. At several points it seemed about to end, but no, deftly, in the manner or improvisation both gifted and playful, it resumed; audience, orchestra and conductor shared the humour.

The size of the orchestra, unusually small by modern norms, and the splendid acoustics of the hall allowed harmonies, structure, detail and balance to be heard as perhaps they were intended. This is not to be read as implying that the performance was in the modern purist, pallid style; au contraire, the orchestral support was full-bodied and enthusiastic.

The size of the audience was, alas, also small, reflecting, perhaps the lesser popularity of this concerto in comparison with the composer's others. Ronald Smith's advocacy showed us the shallowness of this judgement and left us wishing that he would play more works with orchestra than he does at present.

#### RARE ALKAN

At two of our forthcoming meetings we will have the opportunity to hear some rarely heard Alkan works. On January 28th Mark Coughlin will be playing the Super Flumina Babylonis, paraphrase of Psalm 137 op. 52. Sorabji in his book "Around Music", described it as one of the finest of Alkan's shorter works. Mark will also be playing nos. 10, 11 and 12 from the Etudes in the Major keys Op. 35.

At our March meeting Thomas Wakefield will be playing the Scherzo Focoso op. 34. Very little is known about this work, it does not get a mention in any of the literature on Alkan and this may be its first performance (see forthcoming meetings).

#### MARK COUGHLIN

Mark, who is playing at our January meeting, was born in Perth, Australia. He studied for five years with Roger Smalley before coming to England to study with Ronald Smith. He is returning to Australia in May to complete a Masters degree. He is hoping to return to England next year.

#### FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

A recital by Mark Coughlin on Wednesday January 28th at 7.00 p.m. in the Music Recital Room at the City of London School, Queen Victoria Street, London EC4 (please note that, since our last meeting at the school, they have moved to this new address). Nearest Underground - Blackfriars (District/Circle line). Mark's programme is:- Bach/Busoni Chaconne, Beethoven's Sonata in E Minor op. 90, Chopin's

Etudes Op.25 nos. 6&10, Alkan's Super Flumina Babylonis op. 52 and Etudes op. 35 nos. 10,11 & 12.

For our March meeting we are very pleased to welcome back Thomas Wakefield who has given many memorable recitals for us in the past. The meeting will be on Wednesday March 11th at 7.00 p.m. in the Music Recital Room at the City of London School. His programme will include Alkan's Scherzo Focoso op. 34, Minuetto alla tedesca op. 46 and works by some of the 'lost Romantics' - Tausig, Henselt and Paderewski.

As mentioned, our May meeting will be an eagerly awaited Alkan programme by Ronald Smith. This will be on Friday May 29th at 7.00 p.m. in the Lecture/Recital Room at the Guildhall School of Music, Silk Street, Barbican (nearest Underground - Moorgate).

Members are welcome to bring guests to any of these meetings.

SUBSCRIPTIONS:-

£6.00 for London Members.

£4.00 for members out-of-London and students.

£7.00 for overseas Members (payable in sterling).

Members in the U.S.A. should either send a cheque in sterling drawn on a British bank or send cash in sterling.

All rates cover husband and wife membership.

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