

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

President:

RONALD SMITH



Hon. Secretary

BRIAN DOYLE
146, Brocks Drive,
Cheam, Surrey
SM3 9UT

BULLETIN NO. 41 : JUNE 1990

EDITED BY DR. JOHN WHITE

MEETING at the Hinde Street Methodist Church at 7 pm on wednesday, 28th March 1990.

About a dozen Members and several guests formed an appreciative audience for an evening devoted to the exploration in words and music of Alkan's "Esquisses" Op.63. During the first half of the evening Brian Inglis gave a general talk and introduction, followed by John Lewis and Peter Grove, two pianist-Members of the Alkan Society, who introduced the pieces they were going to play with illuminating comments and details. After an Interval (during which a plentiful selection of refreshments was available), John Lewis and Peter Grove each gave a complete performance of Book 2 and Book 4 respectively of Alkan's "Esquisses". All the pieces were played with assurance and brought to life convincingly and enthusiastically. Unfortunately, Margaret Pitts was indisposed because of an injury to her hand and therefore could not perform. (A reasonably complete version of Brian Inglis's talk will appear in the next Bulletin.)

NOTES AND NEWS

The January 1990 Number of the Bulletin of the Société Alkan is full of interest and plans for the future. Here are a few of the items that caught my eye.

In May and June this year there is to be a series of concerts in Paris, when pianists of various countries will play Alkan.

Interesting research is being carried out by Philippe Maillard and Brigitte François-Sappey.

Five musicologists are to prepare an authoritative volume that will contain a thematic catalogue of Alkan's works, a bibliography, a discography and a critical edition of Alkan's correspondence. The five are: Constance Himelfarb, François Luguenot, Hugh Macdonald, Jacques-Philippe Saint-Gérand and Britta Schilling.

An interesting and amusing article on the "Marcia Funebre sulla morte d'un pappagallo" by Father Jacques Arnould, a Dominican friar.

Much space is devoted to the "Twenty-five Preludes" Op.31. The "Avertissement" which appeared as a preface to the first edition only, is printed in full. (Readers may remember that the importance of this preface was stressed in our own Bulletin about two years ago.) A critical review by François Joseph Fétis published in 1847 in the "Revue et Gazette Musicale" as well as his comments on the "Marche Funebre" Op.26 and the "Marche Triomphale" Op.27 (with a few musical illustrations).

In spite of administrative difficulties, the restoration of Alkan's tomb should be completed by June or July this year.

Last September John Fritzell wrote to from Sweden and spoke of three radio broadcasts

that he gave on the life and works of Alkan. The programmes each lasted 1½ hours and were a great success. Recently he has written again expressing his disappointment that no mention of these has been recorded in the Bulletin. I have written to John with our apologies for this unintentional oversight and, to make some amends I give two extracts from his second letter:-

"..... in these programmes which I called (translated) 'Alkan's Alchemy' I presented Alkan's music to the Swedish public, played excerpts and recordings by Ronald Smith, Kevin Bowyer and the late Raymond Lewenthal. Not just piano music but the 'Cello Sonata' and Funeral March for a Dead Parrot as well. Moreover I talked at length about the Alkan Society. Partly because of these programmes I received a scholarship to be able to continue my piano studies and Alkan crusade. I have been collecting Alkan's music and have almost everything by now - also his letters. I have found in a private collection letters by Alkan to Jules Massenet, among others, written in 1877! I have also studied Alkan's position when it comes to keyboard technique, his possible influence and influences and will gladly write an article about this.. .."

In the April 1990 number of "Music and musicians" Gordon Reynolds gives a very appreciative review of a programme of Piano Duets played by Anthony Goldstone and Caroline Clemmow ("Virtuoso Variations for Piano Duet", Symposium 1037). The programme includes Alkan's Fantasy on Mozart's Don Giovanni, Franck's Duo sur la "God Save the King" Schubert's variations on a theme from Herold's opera Marie and the Variations Brillantes which Mendelssohn and Moscheles 'cooked up for a concert in 1833'. Concerning the Alkan work Gordon Reynolds writes:- "They open with Alkan's highly entertaining Fantasy on Mozart's Don Giovanni, a real virtuoso nail-biter, with octave work which makes even the listener's wrists ache (but clearly not theirs)- and yet it is real music, worthy of Liszt, and a sight more interesting than much of the master's froth. Written in 1844, it holds the attention throughout and is played with a sense of fun."

The second volume in the series of Alkan C.D.s issued by Epic/Sony Records and played by Osamu Nakamura has now been released in Japan. It contains the following works:- Fantaisie sur Don Juan, Bourrée d'Auvergne, Etude Op29, Impromptu in F sharp major, Minuet from Mozart's Symphony in E flat major and Les Mois Op74. There are no plans to release the recordings in Europe or in the U.S.A..

Stephanie and Peter McCallum have been made Honorary Members of the Society in recognition of their promotion of Alkan's works through their lectures and recitals which they have continued since their return to Australia. Stephanie has recently added the Major Studies Op35 to her repertoire.

There was a performance of Alkan's Piano Trio Op30 in April on BBC Radio 3. The performers were Isabella Petrosian (violin), Anthony Lewis (cello) and John Bingham (piano).

Last year Peter Grove, our Member from Salisbury, was fortunate enough to spend a week in Husum, Germany to attend a series of piano recitals each of which featured performances of rarely heard works including some by Alkan. In the following article Peter gives his impressions of Husum and the performances that he heard.

I heard from the Society about a series of piano recitals last August, entitled "Raritäten der Klaviermusik im Schloß vor Husum". It was the third such series, conceived and organised by the pianist Peter Froundjian, who was born in Berlin and is now a lecturer in piano at the regional music school in Husum. Music by Alkan was featured in two programmes, and the whole week sounded so intriguing that I decided to go, even though my knowledge of Husum or its castle was minimal. Most of my German friends were able to quote the line from Theodor Storm (one of the few famous Husumers) about the "grey town by the sea", and Schleswig-Holstein and much nearer Denmark than any part of Germany I knew.

It was quite a surprise, therefore, after travelling for several hours north-west from Hamburg, to find the dockside crammed with a fair and thousands of visitors gorging themselves on sausages and beer. An estimated two hundred thousand had come for the annual "Husumer Hafentage", a giant regatta. It made the place extremely lively, and the first couple of nights were quite noisy. But at the end of the weekend, the crowds melted away, the local cleaning services went into action, and by the afternoon the place was transformed, reverting to the quiet but very pleasant holiday town I had expected all along. It was a great area for cycling, with vast flat areas protected from the sea by dykes; the beaches were vast, and the resorts free from the modern "amusements" that have ruined so many British seaside towns.

The concerts took place in a long narrow room, the "Rittersaal", observed by some severe stags' heads and an audience of up to 150. A magnificent Steinway had been brought from Berlin, complete with technician Thomas Hübsch: a little puzzling when they are made in Hamburg, but easily explained because Thomas had known Peter Froundjian in Berlin, and treats the week as a holiday from his normal demanding work at the Philharmonie. It was an intimate, friendly atmosphere, and the audiences were evidently knowledgeable and quick to appreciate the quality of the musicians. It was not the first series to contain any Alkan: Rainer M. Klaas had played "Le festin d'Esope" in 1987 and ten "Esquisses" in 1988. But an evening and a half of his music certainly justified the description of "Schwerpunkt" (focal point) in the publicity.

Michael Ponti (who has also recorded some Alkan) opened the week with some of the better-known composers: Schumann's first Sonata, but with the original "Presto passionato" finale rated as "too difficult" by Clara, Skryabin's ninth sonata, some short pieces by Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky, and six of Liszt's Transcendental Studies. He is a smash-and-grab virtuoso of the traditional kind, thrilling to hear if a little unsubtle. After the onslaught of his second encore, the sixth Hungarian Rhapsody, the critic in the local paper suggested that he might try a much bigger room, or a smaller piano, for his next recital. It did seem that the week was going to wear the ears out. Fortunately there was plenty of refined playing to come during the next few days. The piano, which I was allowed to try, seemed to take on a different character every day; always a sign that the instrument has been well prepared.

The concerts were impressively covered in the local press, with some lengthy and scholarly reviews. The "Husumer Nachrichten" is a daily which effectively serves as a national paper, with some pages in common with others in the region as well as its own material. It is rare to see such detailed articles in British papers, either local or national: six hundred words or more (many of them quite long!) is at least twice the usual allowance found here.

A lecture-recital by Dr Michael Struck from Kiel University on the Sunday morning introduced a newly-published piece by Joachim, the violinist for whom Brahms wrote his Concerto. Composed in 1856, it was a set of Variations on an Irish folksong, and surprisingly well written for the piano. Brahms and Joachim discussed the work on several occasions, and there is a direct reference to the slow movement of the Brahms F minor Sonata in one variation, as well as a suggestion of the D minor Ballade op. 10 in another. It was quite an achievement to be giving the first known performance of a piece written so long ago. I hope I was not in breach of copyright to claim the first British performance fourteen days later! Dr Struck also discussed and played a very late Schumann work, the five "Gesänge der Frühe".

Ronald Smith was, remarkably, making his German début with his all-Alkan recital. He and his wife had not had the best of journeys, with a strike of British Airways stewards almost thwarting their attempts to come, the long journey from Hamburg, and a minuscule hotel room when they did make it. The evening was very warm, and an obviously musical daddy-long-legs which had plagued Michael Ponti the previous day was still there. But none of that seemed to affect his marvellous performance, opening with an account of the Symphonie as good as I have heard from him. He seemed to be making a special effort to put the music across clearly, giving the phrases time to make their point in the opening movement. The demonic finale lacked nothing in power and was received with great enthusiasm.

"This piece isn't so loud," he said, introducing the major-key study "Chant d'amour, chant de mort" before the interval. The "Song of the Mad Woman" gained some extra John Cage-style atmosphere from the birds calling outside the open windows: it would be nice to say they were seagulls, but I have to admit that they were members of the crow family! Three other well-chosen short pieces followed: "Fa", the Debussian "Les soupirs" and the "Allegro barbaro".

"Now we come to the difficult part of the programme!" Having already given enough to wear out most pianists, Ronald thus introduced the Trois Grandes Etudes Op. 76. Rightly did he quote in his programme notes the Guardian's remark that they should carry a Government health warning. To play these works "live" is a dangerous undertaking, but he survived the test well; there were a few anxious moments in the immense right-hand piece, but far fewer than in his London recital at the end of that exhausting Alkan Festival. It was no surprise that he restricted us to his one favourite encore, the dreamy Prelude "Je dors, mais mon coeur veille".

Wilhelm Barten, in a perceptive review, made the excellent point that Ronald did not approach the music "with the attitude of a keyboard lion - quite the opposite. He played with musical earnestness, coupled with a personal modesty which one might regard as typically British". Barten found the programme well chosen and was impressed by the music, finding only a certain "episodic" nature in the op.76 set.

Ronald certainly made a lasting impression with the audience. Thomas Hübsch, who must have prepared pianos for most of the world-class virtuosi, rated him as his favourite musician of the week. There may have been more superficially sensational performances, but it was the musical sincerity and commitment which impressed him so much. A British visitor from Denmark who had come especially for the Alkan evenings was similarly impressed. As a collector of old recordings by the likes of Barere, Godowsky and others, he was critical of many contemporary players and obviously a hard man to please. The chance to hear Alkan's music live had attracted at least one other Briton to make the journey from Denmark.

If Ronald's evening was already a high spot of a crowded week, Marc-André Hamelin created a furore the following evening with, as Wolfgang Plenio said in his review, "stupendous technique - at the boundary of the incredible" (it looks better in German). This young pianist comes from Canada and was the first prizewinner in Carnegie Hall in 1985; his recordings include Ives's "Concord" Sonata and a disc of Godowsky pieces and arrangements. Opening with a brilliant account of the Bach-Busoni D major Prelude and Fugue, he moved on to seven of Godowsky's notorious arrangements of the Chopin Etudes. These audacious pieces are perhaps not for the purists in the way they combine pairs of studies, invert the two hands, or transcribe them for a single hand. A better excuse for not playing them is their sheer impossibility for all but the superhuman. Hamelin played with complete command, ending with a thunderous arrangement of the "Winter Wind" A minor from op.25. He did not exactly make them sound easy, but his performance outdid anything on the studio recording by Bolet.

After a first half like that, the Alkan Concerto promised to be something special, and indeed it was. It was refreshing to hear a new interpretation of the work, bursting with youthful vigour and yet full of insight. His tempi were fast but he sustained them impressively, only occasionally rushing his fences. I took a look round the audience after the first movement: many had not read in their programme that it lasted half an hour, and they were visibly stunned! The Adagio, beginning like a Chopin Nocturne and building to Rachmaninov dimensions (to paraphrase Plenio), was beautifully played. The high standard was sustained through the Finale, with enough in reserve for the "più mosso" towards the end. It was breathtaking.

Not content with his achievements so far, Hamelin delighted the audience with a selection of contrasting encores, beginning with Alkan's "Le premier billet doux", to go to the other extreme of length. He followed with Joseph Lamb's "Ethiopia Rag", a traditional slow ragtime, and continued the American theme with a scintillating account of Zez Confrey's "Kitten on the Keys". Finally he did something I had thought impossible: reduced an earnest German audience to helpless laughter with a grotesque "Humoreske" by Rodion Shchedrin which portrays "wrong-note" music in hilarious style, matched by Hamelin's facial expressions as he seemed to appeal for help from his listeners.

I only hope that Mr Hamelin's agents enable him to play this kind of repertoire in America too. It is good to know that he will return to Husum this year with an even more unusual selection of pieces. There are some more Chopin-Godowsky Etudes (Godowsky is one of the "Schwerpunkte" in this year's programme), the first German performance of Sorabji's Sonata No.1 (a name known to Alkanists, of course) and Frederic Rzewski's "The People United Will Never Be Defeated", 36 Variations on a Chilean Protest Song, written in 1975.

One of the more thoughtful players of the week was the Belgian Jozef De Beenhouwer, who gave some lovely performances of music from his own country as well as some most impressive pieces by Clara Wieck/Schumann. (The typically thorough programme gave both names, according to whether the pieces were written before or after her marriage.) Schumann's circle was also represented by Heinrich von Sahr and Ludwig Schunke (the latter died at only twenty-four), and the British interest by W. Sterndale Bennett, another composer much respected in his day and scarcely played now.

The other British pianist, by coincidence, is also known to me as a son of Salisbury (his father was head of music at the school where I work) and very occasional teacher. Hamish Milne gave a memorable recital which greatly impressed the connoisseurs. His account of the Bach-Busoni "St Anne" E flat prelude and fugue was admirable for its

clarity and control: such a long piece has to be carefully handled to avoid overstatement. After a "bonbon" of Sterndale Bennett's "Rondeau à la Polonaise" came the B flat minor Sonata by Julius Reubke. Reubke is known mainly to organists for his "Sonata on the 94th Psalm" but his other work (he died at 24), dedicated to Liszt, is less well known, possibly because there is less of a shortage of piano music from the period. In one movement lasting over half an hour, it uses the evolutionary technique of the Liszt B minor sonata, but with harmony that looks forward to Wagner and beyond. Milne recorded it several years ago and it is a magnificent work which reveals new depths every time I hear it. His performance in Husum was stupendous: the dynamic range covered every nuance from pp to fff, everything beautifully balanced and controlled. A member of the audience described it as "großartig" (magnificent), adding in English "here is a man who can do exactly as he wants with the piano". As an answer to the critic of the excessive volume of Michael Ponti's playing in the small room, one could not have wished for a more convincing case. Thomas Hübsch was delighted that his work in preparing the piano was shown in such a good light.

Hamish Milne is particularly known for his interest in Medtner's music, and he gave a fine selection of pieces after the interval. The composer's final work, the Elegie in E flat minor, was followed by seven "Skazki" (Fairy Tales). More Medtner came in the encores: a song arrangement by Milne himself and another Skazka. His fine classical playing was well shown in a remarkable Minuet by Mozart, and, if one needed any reminder, a virtuoso technique in the Chopin/Liszt song arrangement "The Maiden's Wish".

The prize for cantabile playing went to Jean-Marc Luisada in an exquisite recital of Haydn, Schumann (Humoreske), Bizet (Four Rhine Pictures), Fauré (two Nocturnes) and Chopin (Andante spianato and Polonaise). This musician was a prizewinner in the 1985 Chopin competition and he combined a secure technique with a sense of rubato which approached, but never exceeded, the extremes. His treatment of inner voices was likewise romantic in the Hofmann or Horowitz tradition. He has an expressive face and, like the late Glenn Gould, uses a chair in preference to a stool, as well as audibly singing along with his performance. But he charmed his audience and was rightly described by Wolfgang Plenio as "poet and actor". His Chopin playing was heard in full measure in his fourth (!) encore of the B flat minor Scherzo, before a profoundly expressive Brahms Intermezzo to close.

Idil Biret is a distinguished musician from Turkey, and the first to record all Beethoven symphonies in Liszt's transcriptions. She included the first symphony in her recital, a masterly example of the transcriber's art. Her recital was the only one which disappointed me in general. In spite of a formidable technique, her balancing of chords needed more care (she could learn from Hamish Milne) and it was one of the few times when the piano sounded ugly. All the same, Weber's A flat sonata was worth hearing; not a great work but effectively written for the piano. The twentieth century was represented by some Skryabin studies and some Preludes by her fellow countryman Adnan Saygun.

If the encores during the week had been unpredictable, the final "Gala Evening of Encores" was a unique event with four pianists from previous "Raritäten" playing almost forty short pieces. Peter Froundjian proved to be as stimulating a player as he is an organiser, in a selection of Scandinavian pieces and some transcriptions by Percy Grainger and Ignaz Friedman. The American Daniel Berman gave us some Abram Chasins (born New York of Russian parents), Respighi, Liszt's arrangement of Schumann's "Widmung", Tausig's version of a Strauss waltz and as an encore (!) an arrangement of Gershwin's "I got rhythm" by Earl Wild of which he gave the first performance in Carnegie Hall. Rainer M. Klaas had to abandon his opening piece, the Alkan "Toccatina", but after that disastrous opening he gave a formidable collection ranging from the first version of Liszt's 10th Hungarian Rhapsody to his own transcription of Debussy's "Sérénade interrompue" for left hand and Takemitsu's "Rain Tree Sketch". Finally the Ukrainian-born Boris Bloch charmingly rewrote his promised programme and showed off his abilities as a virtuoso of Horowitzian dimensions in some Russian pieces, a couple of Scarlatti sonatas, some Liszt and Weber. There were some encores for four hands too, but none for eight (does anyone know Chaminade's "Les noces d'argent"?).

It was a thought-provoking week: so much good music which has been forgotten in the normal round of concerts, and a standard of performance which exceeded all expectations. Rightly did Michael Struck describe Husum as "no longer a white speck on the piano map". A particularly charming touch was that all performers, whether male or female, received bouquets (British promoters please copy!). Every member of the audience received a red rose and commemorative card after the final evening along with their glass of Sekt, courtesy of the Nordfriesland Foundation which sponsored the series. It was by general consent the best series so far, and it is good to see that the money has been found for a further week in 1990 (and I hear from Hamish Milne that he is already being considered for 1991). The "Schwerpunkte" include the Godowsky which I mentioned earlier (as well as Hamelin's contribution, Geoffrey Douglas Madge, who has recorded all the Chopin-Godowsky Etudes, will play his Sonata No.1). There will also be seldom heard works by Liszt, Skryabin, Rachmaninov and Ravel; Scandinavian, French and Polish late romantics; political pieces such as Paul Dessau's "Guernica" and K.A. Hartmann's "Sonata 27th April 1945". Janice Weber has recently recorded the Liszt Transcendental Studies in their original, allegedly unplayable, versions, and her all-Liszt recital includes seven of them.

You need not ask where I shall be from 18-25 August this year! If you are intrigued by the thought of a week of obscure music in a locality far from anywhere, information is available from the Stiftung Nordfriesland, Postfach 1140, Schloß vor Husum, 2250 HUSUM (Germany); telephone (010-49) 48 41 67 0. It might help to know a bit of German!

By the way, there is another Husumer who ought to be famous, the composer Nicolaus Bruhns (1665-97). Unfortunately the attention given to Theodor Storm leaves little room for him in the public mind. A pupil of Buxtehude, he is known here mainly for a few organ pieces, but there are a dozen cantatas besides. There is a Bruhns Society, and even a Bruhns Museum, in Husum which organised a complete recording in the local church of his known output on eleven LP sides. The founder of the society, now run by his widow, was obviously as committed to the cause as any Alkanist to our composer. I signed a receipt for the records which declared that I would make his name known, and I like to keep a promise. The music is certainly worth reviving.

Peter Grove

A MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

The end of our year is approaching and once again we come to the question of who is to take over from me as Secretary of the Society as I am definitely giving up the post on July 31st.

As most Members will know, I wanted to hand over to a new Secretary last year but no-one volunteered so I have stayed on an extra year which means I have been Secretary for six years. Some Members, notably Elizabeth Upchurch and Brian Inglis, took over some of my duties which considerably lightened the load and means that my successor will find the post less time consuming. If any Member feels that he or she would like to take over from me, or would like to know more, please contact me (081 641 1763) before the A.G.M. on July 18th. The Society cannot function without a Secretary so if no-one comes forward then the future of the Society is bleak.

NEXT MEETING

The Annual General Meeting at the Abbey Community Association, 29 Marcham Street, SW1 on Wednesday, July 18th at 7 pm.