

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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Registered Charity No. 2761991

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REPORT OF THE JANUARY MEETING: A lecture/recital by Roger Smalley with Cathy Travers at the Royal College of Music on January 8th. There were 20 members and six guests present. (The following is a summary of Roger Smalley's talk)

Roger Smalley began the evening with an introductory talk on Alkan's **Benedictus op. 54** for pedal piano which he has transcribed for two pianos. He explained that in his transcription he had endeavoured to preserve the textures of the original. There had been a previous transcription, in the 19thC by José Vianna da Motta in which he had filled out the textures. Roger then gave a brief summary of the work. "It is in three parts, ABA form. The opening section is in D minor and is predominantly in the lower registers of the piano and is counterpointed by a high ethereal melody. The two melodies are closely related by the interval of a fourth. The two ideas are alternated twice and then the tempo changes to an alla breve, very vigorous, highly contrapuntal march-like section. The key changes from D minor to D major. It gathers momentum and builds to a splendid climax. The original melody appears in D major and the piece ends suddenly." Roger then commented on the possible meaning of the title. "Alkan frequently put religious titles to his works. The text of the Benedictus - Blessed is he who goes in the name of the Lord. The idea of salvation and redemption, moving from the gloomy slow D minor to the glowing D major and being one of those spiritual progressions which we find in other works such as the Quasi Faust movement of the Grande Sonate". There then followed a splendid performance of the Benedictus by Roger Smalley and Cathy Travers.

Next came the **Three Marches for four hands op. 40**. Roger commented "These Marches are wonderful, vintage Alkan. Very witty pieces, a rare commodity in music. The **1st March** is a brisk march and the only one which has a direct da capo of the first section after the trio. The trio is one of his typical drum and pipe imitations. **The 2nd March** is quite a bit slower. It is in E flat but has a lengthy introduction which suggests that it is going to be in C major. The trio is extremely witty and is constantly interrupted on unexpected offbeats. The march returns in a shortened form and leads to a coda. **The 3rd March** sounds like a brass band march and could be arranged for that medium. It has another exceedingly witty trio in which the melody is decorated by more and more grace notes. In the accompaniment there are sforzandos, seemingly at random and always in the wrong place. The first idea comes back briefly then at the end it suddenly bursts into a riot of banging and crashing and dies away to nothing at the end". Roger and Cathy then played the Three Marches bringing out the humour of the pieces.

After the interval we came to Alkan's **Impromptu op. 69** for pedal piano. Roger described the work as "Alkan's greatest work for pedal piano and one of his half dozen greatest works". Roger has arranged the work in quite an elaborate way but again has not changed the textures. He then commented on the title - "Impromptu is a very strange title, suggesting a small lightweight work. In fact it is an exceedingly weighty piece."

"It is based on the Chorale of Luther - Ein Feste Burg and he only uses the melody of the Chorale. In form and treatment it is very unusual. In some respects it is like a theme and variations, but in other respects it is like a passacaglia. Another interesting point about the piece is that although it is continuously played it is divided into four sections - a first movement, scherzo, slow movement and finale. It looks forward to the kind of complex, several movements in one form that you get in Schoenberg's 1st string quartet or 1st Chamber Symphony, which are always pointed out as

early examples of this coalescing of several different formal structures into one overall form. Already in the 1860's you get Alkan doing the same sort of thing. Another fascinating aspect about the whole work is that although you get these different characteristics - 1st movement, scherzo, slow movement, the basic tempo remains the same - 63. But by applying that number to different basic units he achieves different speeds of movement in different parts of the piece. In the slow section the harmonisation is quite extraordinary and in fact throughout the piece the harmonisation is remarkable. There is not a commonplace bar in the whole work, every bar is sparkling with invention." Roger and Cathy then played the Impromptu which was probably receiving its first performance in this country, although they have played it in Australia and recorded it for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, who have broadcast it.

The performance concluded one of our most interesting and successful meetings. We are very grateful to Roger and Cathy for all their hard work and for giving their services free to the Society.

REPORT OF THE MARCH MEETING: An illustrated lecture on Alkan's Chamber works by Harold Truscott at the Guildhall School of Music on March 10th. 15 members were present. (The following is a summary of Mr. Truscott's talk).

Mr. Truscott began his talk by commenting on the connection between Alkan and Schubert. "Alkan certainly knew and admired Schubert's music and included some in his "Petit Concerts". Both composers could be expansive at times but on the other hand they could be as terse as Beethoven. There are also similarities in their virtuoso piano writing. This aspect of Alkan's work was of course very important. Schubert, who was not a virtuoso himself, was at times capable of writing virtuoso piano music especially towards the end of a work. Only in one of Schubert's piano works do we find virtuoso piano writing throughout and his is in this "Wanderer Fantasy". In the scherzo and Finale especially there is a virtuosity comparable to Alkan's"; (Mr. Truscott then played a recording of the Scherzo from Schubert's Wanderer Fantasy followed by an excerpt from Alkan's Scherzo Diabolico in which the similarity of some of the writing was evident). He then went on to point out another link between the two composers. "Both composers often used ideas of which were not particularly original, although a work could still be a masterpiece even if the ideas were not original. The last movement of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony is an example. Beethoven often based his works more upon rhythm than upon theme, especially in development. Schubert and Alkan, in their different ways, often showed a similar dependence."

"Alkan's earlier compositions are very much of their period. The Introduction and Rondo op.4 for piano with string accompaniment, written in his mid-teens is an example. It begins with a slow introduction becoming more virtuoso in character. The Rondo begins with a march-like theme typical of the period. It is virtuoso music without the thought that makes the virtuosity a necessity. The next composition that Alkan wrote for piano and other instruments are the two Concerti da Camera op.10. These works give some idea of how Alkan was going to develop as a composer."

This brings us to the Chamber music. The Duo for violin and piano op. 21 was probably published in 1840. Mr. Truscott pointed out the influence of Schumann in the first movement. He then drew our attention to the mixture of styles found in the work, especially the first movement. "Before the development of the genuine sonata for two instruments it was common practise for composers to write works for piano with accompaniment, usually violin or flute. The extra parts were often not musically necessary but were added in order to sell more music. The practise carried on into the 19th C. The curious aspect of Alkan's Duo is that parts of it fit into this category and parts are a genuine work for two instruments. The piano has the dominant part and the violin sometimes has difficulty in maintaining its status. Alkan calls the work a Grand Duo Concertant and the piano writing brings out the concerto aspect of the work but it should apply to the violin as well."

Mr. Truscott had no such reservations about the Trio for piano, violin and cello op.30 which he described as amongst the finest of the 19thC. It is a genuine chamber work in which the string instruments have an equal say and the piano is not allowed to dominate. It is the most classical of Alkan's works. The most surprising aspect is its conciseness. The first movement can give the impression that it is over before it has begun. But it is not like Schubert's Wanderer Fantasy or Bruch's Violin Concerto in G minor where the first movement is cut short for structural purposes. The movement is complete. Regarding the Scherzo, he pointed out the resemblance between it and the second phrase of the scherzo of Beethoven's 5th Symphony. "Whether it is coincidence or that the phrase stuck in Alkan's mind and he used it without realising it, we shall never know,

but its treatment is pure Alkan. The trio brings to mind Schubert in its feeling and expression. The slow movement is remarkable. It consists of two separate contrasting strands, one on the strings and the other on the piano, which alternate and then come closer and closer, and finally join together in the climax. The finale is a moto perpetuum movement in sonata form.

Next came the Cello Sonata op.47 and Mr. Truscott concentrated on the problem of metronome indications of tempo. The Cello Sonata is the only one of the three chamber works to have them. Alkan's fast tempos can often seem impossibly fast and so a more convenient tempo, for the player not the music, is adopted. All of the three performances that Mr. Truscott used to illustrate his talk, adopted different tempos than those indicated by Alkan. Alkan's tempo for the first movement is 160 crotchets per minute. We then heard excerpts from the three performances which adopted tempos of 110, 126 and 120-140. The tempo differences in the two middle movements were much more serious. The second movement is marked Allegretto, a light scherzo like movement in 6/8 time with a metronome tempo of 80 dotted crotchets. The three performances give 46, 42 and 62 which means that two are very nearly half the speed Alkan indicated. The slow movement is in 12/8 with four triplets to the bar instead of the two in the second movement. The similarity of the rhythm does not matter if Alkan's tempos are adopted, but the three performances give the impression of two slow movements and not the contrast of a scherzo followed by a slow movement which was Alkan's intention.

We then heard a recording of the slow movement of the cello sonata which brought to a close a very stimulating and interesting evening. Mr. Truscott showed great insight and understanding of Alkan's music and his wide ranging knowledge of music was evident throughout.

RONALD SMITH: Our President will be recording Alkan's Trois Grandes Etudes op. 76 and the Trois Scherzi op. 16 next year for E.M.I. His recording of Beethoven's Pathetique, Moonlight and Appassionata Sonatas is planned for release in June on Nimbus records. He gave a lecture on Alkan to the Brai Brith Music Festival Society on March 4th as a prelude to his all-Alkan recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on Wednesday July 9th. A reminder that he will also be giving a recital at the Q.E. Hall on Thursday October 2nd when he plans to include the Trois Scherzi op 16. There are plans for Ronald to repeat his all-Alkan recital at the Canterbury Festival. The provisional date is September 30th.

His second volume on Alkan, which deals with the music, is now back at the printers for the final polish. All the music examples have now been chosen and Charles Hailstone has completed and up-to-date discography for inclusion in the book.

ALKAN ORGAN RECITAL: The organist John Wells is including some of Alkan's organ works in a recital on Monday 30th June at 7.30 p.m. at the Church of our Lady and English Martyrs, Hill Road, Cambridge.

The organ was designed by Charles Villiers Stanford in 1890. The recital will also include works by Mendelssohn, Bloch and Berlinski.

HUGH MACDONALD: Professor Macdonald, a Vice-President of the Society, has kindly agreed to give a talk to the Society on May 19th on composers deaths, including Alkan's, which is shrouded in mystery. He has given the talk in the U.S.A. and France, but this will be the first time in this country. Professor Macdonald is Professor of Music in the University of Glasgow. He is General Editor of the New Berlioz Edition and has written a book on this composer for the Master Musician Series (1982). He wrote the article on Alkan for the latest Grove's Dictionary of Music. He broadcasts regularly for Music Weekly on Radio 3. Most recently he gave a talk on Mozart's Divertimento for String Trio in E flat K.563.

ALKAN IN ISRAEL: Early this year the Classical Music Radio Station in Israel broadcast an hour long programme on Alkan. This is the first time there has been a programme on Alkan in Israel and the producers are planning more Alkan broadcasts in 1988. Our Honorary member in Israel, Dr. Alkan, who assisted with the programme, has kindly agreed to give a talk to the Society about the programme on July 10th (see Forthcoming Meetings).

STEPHANIE McCALLUM: Stephanie gave another performance of Alkan's Trois Grande Etudes op.76 in Australia on February 28th to a large audience and received enthusiastic notices. She also gave an interview to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on Alkan during which she played part of the Right Hand Study and the whole of the Third Study op. 76.

BRITTA SCHILLING: Dr. Schilling, one of our West German members, has written an article on Alkan for the April edition of the German music magazine 'Concerto'.

NEW MEMBERS

Christopher Dance, Ewell, Surrey
Charles Keauffling, Zimbabwe
Philip Wrestler, London SE1

William Diver, London NW1
Miss J. Nunn, Camberley, Surrey

SUBSCRIPTIONS

£5.00 for London and overseas members (payable in Sterling)
£3 for members out-of-London and students
(both these rates cover husband and wife membership)

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS:

Monday May 19th at 7.00 p.m.- Coffee at 6.30 p.m. at the Library of the City of London School, Victoria Embankment, EC4 at the northern end of Blackfriars Bridge. Parking in the school playground - entrance Northern End of John Carpenter Street. Nearest underground - Blackfriars. An illustrated talk on 'Composers Deaths' by Professor Hugh Macdonald.

Thursday July 10th at 7.00 p.m. at the Abbey Community Centre, 29 Marsham Street, London SW1 in the Workroom (not the Music Room). The Annual General Meeting followed by a talk by Dr. Alkan on the recent broadcast on Alkan in Israel.
