

THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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This bulletin concentrates mainly on new recordings. As I said last time, the number of Alkan recordings appearing on CD is encouraging, the more so when several contain excellent performances. Before reviewing them, may I apologise to any members who made a frustrating journey to hear Kevin Bowyer on 7th June. The date given in the last Bulletin was incorrect, and should have read 7th July in Westminster Cathedral. His programme will include only a small amount of Alkan: the 10th and 11th *Prières* from Op. 64. It is usually advisable to check dates with the venue concerned, and I thank the two members who took the trouble to telephone me about this recital.

Sharp-eyed readers will have noticed the addition of three new names to our list of Vice-Presidents, and we thank them all for accepting the invitation so readily. Nicholas King has done much for the Society in playing and recording Alkan's organ works, and continues to be a most helpful contact at the Royal College of Music. Prof. Wilfrid Mellers contributed a great deal to the Centenary Festival with his opening lecture and wrote the programme notes for the memorable performance of the chamber music at the Wigmore Hall on the actual anniversary of Alkan's death. His article for "Music and Musicians" in that year is reprinted later with his kind permission. Roger Smalley has long been a keen advocate in his writings and performances, as well as in several valuable arrangements of Alkan pieces. He has recently donated two copies of his arrangement for two pianos of the Impromptu Op. 69, which will be placed in the Society library at the Guildhall School of Music. We thank him sincerely for this generous gift, posted all the way from Perth in Australia.

NEW RECORDINGS

Pride of place must go to "Charles-Valentin Alkan: A Symposium" which has been released on Symposium Records no.1062. First mentioned in the Centenary Festival programme, it contains all the items listed there (bar one) and several more besides, performed mainly by artists who took part in the Festival. Since the disc contains 77Y2 minutes of music in modern recordings, the shelving of Egon Petri's historic recording of the *Symphonie* for, we hope, future release is understandable. The contents are therefore as listed in the previous Bulletin. Also unchanged since 1988 is the price: £10 including postage in the U.K.; add £1 for Europe and £3 minimum (or £1 per disc) outside Europe. Please send your order to Symposium Records, 110 Derwent Avenue, East Barnet, Hertfordshire EN48LZ.

The recording has been very well received by those who have heard it so far, and for anyone who needs any further recommendation, there follows a survey of the items in the programme. Christine Stevenson opens the proceedings with a nimble account of the *Rondo Brilliant* Op. 4, published in c. 1833, when the composer was 20 years old. It is a very likeable piece lasting almost thirteen minutes, with some passagework which reminds me of some of the early Chopin pieces based on Polish themes. It contains some spectacular display passages which she brings off in impressive style. There follows a masterly performance of the Second *Concerto da Camera* in C sharp, Op. 10, by Anthony Goldstone. At just over 7 1/2 minutes, his timing is almost two minutes shorter than François Bou's on the Adda recording with the Ensemble 2E2M (see Bulletin 45). While speed is not everything, I tend to agree with Raymond Lewenthal's view that usually if Alkan's marked tempi seem too fast, it is the player who is too slow! Admittedly Georges Beck took exactly the opposite line in his edition of selected works. Here I certainly feel that Bou often sounds laboured in comparison with Goldstone,

whose playing has a bold sweep while still remaining expressive, whether in the fast outer sections or the slow central episode. He is particularly clear in bringing out the remarkable combination of slow and fast themes in two different time-signatures -such a typical Alkanian gesture - in the final section.

Both works are ably accompanied by the Morhange Ensemble, a very small group composing a string quartet plus double-bass. Although having fewer players than the Ensemble 2E2M, they play with full tone and the recording, made in the Purcell School, is sympathetic with surprisingly little 'edge' even in loud passages. As a final comment on speeds, Michael Ponti's recording of 1973 romps through the whole work in a minute less than Anthony Goldstone, which even for lovers of high speed perhaps diminishes the stature of the piece. Ponti also appears to use a different version of the piano part, giving some thinner textures in the opening tutti and some awkward silences in bars 24 and 25, when the other two pianists fill in with figures presumably from the arrangement for solo piano (the only edition I have).

The *Pas Redobubé* is a splendid short piece played with obvious enjoyment by a large wind band with percussion. Mark Fitz-Gerald directs the Leicestershire Schools Band in this very French 'lollipop' which came as a great surprise to me. Completely different from Alkan's piano music, it would make quite a good item on "The Innocent Ear", that excellent radio programme devised, I think, by Robert Simpson, which announced the pieces only after they had been played. (An Alkan piano work was featured in one programme, I remember.) It certainly does not outstay its welcome at 2 1/2 minutes, and I could happily hear more in the same style when needing entertainment rather than serious education.

The String Quartet fragment is certainly that, at under 20 seconds, and it would be an inventive musicologist who dared to complete the piece, which must remain a tantalising hors d'oeuvre unless someone discovers some more of it one day.

The two Hebrew songs are well sung by the Kentish Opera Singers, whether *a cappella* in *Etz chajjim hi* (or *Es haim*) or accompanied by a piano in *Halelouyah*; The 'operatic' wobbles in the soprano line are few enough not to disturb the listener. Mark Fitz-Gerald is again the conductor, as he is in the *Funeral March on the Death of a Parrot*. Here a comparison can be made again: the speed is almost exactly Alkan's at crotchet = 84, and it works very well. Méfano is half a minute slower on the Adda recording, even with both repeats omitted (a bad decision), and as I said last time, his group of four singers, however good, is not a true chorus, with no contrast possible in the two brief opening recitatives for solo singers. Lewenthal's timing, on the other hand, is nearly a minute shorter, both repeats included and the speed hitting crotchet = 100 at times. I do like Lewenthal's approach too, the bassoon glissandi and (presumably) his own basso profundo recitative dangerously near turning irony into farce, but for a straight, though not staid, performance the Symposium version is the one to recommend. The three oboists are also good, with our faithful member William Waterhouse as distinguished a bassoonist as one could wish for. The very occasional English diphthong will probably only concern our French colleagues.

We now come to the piece which Peter Hick has described as "the gem of the record", *Les regrets de la Nonnette*, which caused such heart-searching when the manuscript went on sale last year. As Dr Hick also says, "Ronald plays it most sensitively", and it proves to be the attractive piece we were promised.

Richard Shaw's notes - yet another fine feature of the new release - convincingly place the piece in the middle of Alkan's most characteristic period, not long before the publication of the minor-key Etudes and the Cello Sonata. "Vintage Alkan" indeed, a sad little piece, complete with twelve bell-strokes (instead of the usual ten!) at the end. Until the piece is published, we can be very content with this beautiful performance which would be hard to better.

Nicholas King's performances of organ pieces, the eight *Petits Préludes sur les huit gammes du plain-chant* and that tribute to Bach's F major Toccata, the *Grand Prelude* in F, Op. 66 No.1 (not in E as on the CD cover), are the only items which have appeared previously, on the Symposium cassette no.1059. The recordings suffer from a rather high level of background noise, but the performances are good. Kevin Bowyer (in the *Petits Préludes*) and John Wells (in his own edition of the F major)

benefit from quieter venues and more fastidious editing, but Nicholas King compares very well, and it is good to hear him on the more convenient format of the CD.

There is still more! Thomas Wakefield takes on the challenging transcription of the first movement of Beethoven's C minor Concerto, with Alkan's cadenza, and gives a really exciting performance. It was evidently recorded in long 'takes', or perhaps even in a single session. as Ronald Smith always prefers to do, and is remarkably error-free, with only the occasional over-emphasised chord or minor blemish. Some of the textures are very characteristic of Alkan, recalling his own *Concerto* for solo piano, and his solutions to the problem of combining solo part and orchestra are as ingenious as Liszt's transcriptions of the Symphonies. The cadenza itself occupies some six of the total nineteen minutes, and is almost exactly twice as long as Beethoven's. Anyone who has not read Roger Smalley's account of the cadenza in "Music and Musicians" of May 1972 (reprinted in Bulletin 35), or Ronald Smith's in *Alkan Vol. 2: The Music*, is due for a shock or two with Alkan's cheeky quotations from another Beethoven work - almost a musical pun, if there were such a thing - and I will not spoil things by giving any more details.

The other two items are Alkan's faithful and 'un-romanticised' transcription of the well-known G minor *Siciliano* from Bach's flute sonata in E flat (BWV 1031), sensitively played by Penny Loosemore, and the *Bombardo-Carillon*, played as a piano duet by Anthony Goldstone and Caroline Clemmow. The latter work might appeal to lovers of the minimal school of composition - 'relentless' could be a more polite description -but the performance itself is very satisfactory. Perhaps if it had really been played by four feet - a double-tracked Kevin Bowyer? - it would have been a more impressive finale. Unfortunately the restoration of a *pédalier*, and finding the virtuosi with the necessary pedal dexterity to do it justice, is still a dream for the future.

In conclusion, I should state that I have no connection with Symposium Records. All the same, the Society owes the company a great debt of gratitude for their enterprise in producing this CD, and all their other Alkan recordings, and I do hope that you will support them by ordering the disc in large numbers - not just for yourself, but for friends and relations too. There is enough variety in the album to make it a very appealing introduction to Alkan. Only the issue on CD by EMI of Ronald Smith's *digital* (!) recording of the 25 short pieces would give a rival choice of a first experience of his music.

I am also delighted to report the arrival, after an arduous journey by sea from Australia, of a consignment of Stephanie McCallum's recording of the *Concerto* and the 5th book of *Chants*, the latter being a world premiere recording. As we always expected, Stephanie plays the music superbly, drawing on her thorough technique as well as the benefit of her time as a student with Ronald Smith himself. Her performance of the Concerto is, however, no carbon copy of the master's recording. Choosing speeds as close to Alkan's frightening metronome marks as one could wish, she knocks a minute off the length of the outer movements and one-and-a-half from the Adagio -and Ronald Smith never seemed exactly a slouch in the opening *Allegro molto!* (Have you noticed how the technology on a CD-player can make one obsessed with time? Gone are the hours spent with stop-watch in hand: you can scan a recording without even listening to it. ..) Fidelity to the score, as well as her obvious sympathy with the music, is indeed the outstanding feature of this performance. Every dynamic mark, every *stretto* or *stringendo*, is duly observed and absorbed into a convincing account of the work. If a passage is repeated with some notes rewritten with an extra 'tail', she takes notice and brings out the extra line. Alkan's 60 crotchets to the minute in the slow movement leave less room for the deeply-felt expression we know from Ronald Smith's record, but Stephanie brings a refreshing approach to the piece, much in the same way as some of the period-instrument orchestras have changed our long-established ideas of how Beethoven can be played.

Turning to the 5th book of *Chants*, few could be better qualified than Stephanie to make the first recording: she played the set at an early meeting of the Society, and gave the first known public performance in London in 1982. I consider the suite to be one of Alkan's most inspired works, and she brings out its many beauties most convincingly, whether in the restrained mood of *La voix de l'instrument* - always one of John White's favourite pieces -or in the high-speed passages of the *Allegro vivace* and *Scherzo-Coro*. A particularly interesting feature is Alkan's recall of earlier movements before the final *Barcarolle*, rather more affectionately than Beethoven's rejection of his in the Ninth Symphony. Altogether this is a fine reading, which soon convinces one of the quality of all

the pieces, even when at first they seem to have slightly odd moments (and there is never any shortage of those in Alkan).

The recording itself is a little dry compared with Ronald Smith's, made in the Wigmore Hall, which still sounds very fine on the LP, but is otherwise very satisfactory. I only noticed one obvious tape-splice (or the digital equivalent) in moving from a loud to a soft section. at the start of the B minor passage which bears the final *Tutti* marking towards the end of the finale. An excellent programme note by Peter McCallum. the co-producer of the recording, makes it a real family affair.

Copies of Stephanie's recording can be ordered from Brian Doyle on the new order form. We now await with impatience her next Alkan CD of all the major-key Etudes, due to be released on *Tall Poppies* Records (not *Puppies*. as in a previous Bulletin!). For those who like to keep their discography up-to-date, the *Concerto* and *Chants* are on MBS Records, number MBS 24 CD.

Meanwhile "Classic CD" has a doubly pleasing article in its June 1992 edition (issue no.26) which recognises the very special talents of Marc-André Hamelin and his love of out-of-the-way repertoire, as well as including the last movement of *his* new recording of the Concerto on Music & Arts CD724. The disc is to be distributed in this country by Harmonia Mundi, who have no copies as yet; we shall obtain some as soon as they do. Therefore we have not included this item on the new order form. Regular readers will know how impressed I was with this Canadian musician when I heard him play the work in Husum three years ago. The last movement is certainly a very tempting advertisement for his account of the whole work. His timing is almost exactly the same as Stephanie McCallum's, but his performance brings out even more the transcendental virtuosity of the writing, perhaps at the expense of the broader structure of the movement. He has the technique to move into a higher gear for the *Un tantino poco più mosso*, in spite of having started the preceding section at a cracking pace (which does detract slightly from the 'orchestral' aspect shown so well in Ronald Smith's performance). Did Alkan ever dream that one day someone capable of playing every note in this fiendish score with such apparent ease would come along? His superb gesture of a black-note glissando in the penultimate bar is but one typical touch in an inspired and spontaneous-sounding performance. One can even forgive the occasional use of "32-foot" pitch, the use of a lower octave not sanctioned by the score, such is the sweep of Hamelin's conception of the piece. and simply let oneself be caught up in the general excitement.

The note in "Classic CD" says that the set of Op. 39 Etudes is "never performed whole". I can name one pianist who played all twelve. and lectured about them. in one day at Bristol University in February 1977 - though they were not played in one continuous recital. No prizes for guessing his name!

At the risk of annoying members who already regret missing Hamelin's live performance at St John's in January, I can quote from two other reviews of that recital. David Murray of the Financial Times was one of the few critics to notice Hamelin's two Wigmore Hall recitals, with Sophie Rolland, of the Beethoven cello music (recordings of which were recently broadcast in four programmes on Radio 3), saying at the time that he eagerly awaited a solo recital. He described the account of Schumann's *Carnaval* as "rich and satisfying, marked out with bold contrasts, interpretatively on sound, cultivated lines. His fingers were more than equal to all Schumann's demands (his 'Paganini' was uncommonly brilliant), and he also scaled down beautifully for the small, intimate confessions." Of the Alkan, "he demonstrated what kind of virtuoso he is. It is a rare kind indeed: viz. the kind for whom Alkan's mounting, torrential challenges are so completely, even comfortably in hand that he can give his full attention to expounding the *music* - lyrically, structurally, intellectually -as if it were just as serious as Beethoven. Nothing sounded "grotesque": rampant and slightly mad, yes, but cogent enough to justify its monstrous scale. After such a performance, a swift collapse in the green-room would be natural. In fact Hamelin plunged at once, superbly, into encores of the same order, like Godowsky's left-hand version of Chopin's E-flat minor Etude. Extraordinary."

Cyril Ehrlich, in the April edition of the Musical Times, compares the kind of risks taken by Maria Joao Pires in a Mozart concerto with Hamelin's approach. He "takes risks of another kind, hurling Alkan's preposterous 'concerto without orchestra' with a velocity and warmth which almost vanquished the unwelcoming winter space of St John's Smith Square. This young Canadian has

mastered the essential nonchalance of true virtuosity, delivering Godowsky transcriptions of Chopin studies -for left hand alone, and seemingly for eight hands -with a Bolet-like impassivity , A nicely characterised Schumann *Carnaval* also suggested more diverse qualities of musicianship." Members of the Society may disagree with one of the above adjectives!

"Classic CD" had made a rather unpromising start to its coverage of Alkan in its April 1992 issue, reviewing another new CD by Huseyin Sermet on Valois V4659 (available in Salisbury and I presume elsewhere in Britain). This recording stems from the Lyon Biennale which I mentioned in the last Bulletin, as do two other discs of music for two pianos by Reynaldo Hahn (played by Sermet again and Kun Woo Paik) and chamber music by Saint-Saëns. It was recorded at the Lyon Conservatoire. Sermet is a Turkish pianist who studied at the Paris Conservatoire with, among others, Nadia Boulanger and Olivier Messiaen. He also regularly plays in a duo with Maria Joao Pires. Robert Maycock was none too impressed with the Alkan disc, finding his "imagery relentlessly mundane, even when the sounds and textures are original, often because his harmonic sense is either obvious or contrived". The problem is easily identified in the choice of pieces: *Preludes* Nos. 1-9, 12, 13 and 16, six *Esquisses*, the Op. 65 *Barcarolle* and the *Toccata*, Op. 75. Most of the chosen Preludes are slow pieces, painfully slow in this performance (No.1 takes over three minutes for twenty bars, giving crotchet = 25), and for me, not among Alkan's best. Sermet also tends to exaggerate some expression marks, completely ignores others and makes up several of his own for no obvious reason. In the better pieces like *Chanson de la folle* (no. 8) (good introductory speed, but the melody begins in a completely different, faster, tempo) or *J'étais endormie* ...(no.13) he cannot be put in the same class as any of the other available performances. The CD cover unhelpfully does not give details of either the *Préludes* or the *Esquisses*, and the insert gives only the numbers of the *Préludes*. In fact the *Esquisses* are *Le Staccatissimo* (no.2), *Increpatio* (no.10), *Les Soupirs* (no.11), *Morituri te salutant* (no.21), *Le premier billet doux* (no.46) and *Schezetto* (no.47): the very same selection, apart from *Le legatissimo* (which surely belongs as a pair with the preceding *Staccatissimo*), as on Alan Weiss's CD of the *Grande Sonate* (Fidelio 8839). In spite of a good article by Brigitte François-Sappey, the editor of the French Alkan symposium and prime mover in the many Alkan performances in France last year, this is not an issue which need trouble any but the most avid collector. Sermet has a fluent technique in the few pieces which demand it, but in the *Toccata*, for example, he sounds breathless and uncontrolled compared with Ronald Smith or Alan Weiss, although taking only one and five seconds fewer respectively than those two players. His final leap from the extremes of the keyboard on to middle C is so quick that I almost suspect a third hand (foot? pencil in the mouth? editorial splice?) coming to help.

The complete recordings of the Preludes by Laurent Martin on Marco Polo or Olli Mustonen on Decca, depending on whether you believe the English or French reviews, remain the ones to recommend. It is to be hoped that Laurent Martin's recording of the complete *Esquisses*, first foretold in the July 1989, Bulletin of the French Alkan Society , will not be too long arriving. Surely these pieces display a much *more* varied style and an altogether higher level of invention, and a complete recording would be particularly welcome. Fortunately, most of them are playable by pianists of a more modest technique and I cannot imagine that the so far unrecorded numbers remain completely unheard.

The insert of Sermet's CD promises an imminent recording of the Cello Sonata with Christoph Henkel, which was performed at the same festival. That may show the pianist in a better light. However, with any luck the Nimbus set of the complete chamber music played by Ronald Smith and friends will soon be available, more of which later.

The June 1992 issue of "CD Review" contains a well-considered and sympathetic review of Pierre Réach's recording of the *Grande Sonate* and *Sonatine*, written by our member Martin Anderson, who lives in Paris. The issue of this disc is quite "old news", but now that I have been able to hear it, as well as Alan's Weiss's recorded performance of the *Sonate*, a few points are worth mentioning. Mr Anderson has quite a lot to say about the works themselves, since many readers of the journal will not be familiar with them, and I need not quote extensively from that section. He concludes: "If you don't know Alkan's music and fancy a ride on one of the wildest backs in the history of the piano, you really should investigate this music." He rightly points out that although Réach is "already no stranger to

Alkan", he "steps squarely onto the path beaten by Ronald Smith: the coupling is exactly that of one of Smith's EMI recordings (CDM 7 69421 2) and although Réach's performances are more than acceptable, my money's still on Smith." He also prefers the sound of Ronald Smith's recording and if, in his opinion, Réach has "marginally the surer technique, it is Smith who captures the eldritch character of the music more atmospherically; indeed, that sense of fingers stretched to their limit is as much a part of the music as is the heart-in-mouth feeling you get on a Ferris wheel. Try it."

I was present at Ronald's first London performance of the complete *Grande Sonate* in 1974 - a typical huge programme including the Bach-Busoni Chaconne and Beethoven's "Appassionata", as well as an illustrated mini-lecture on the Alkan work - and have known his recording for a long time. However, I am also familiar with Réach's first recording of the work on LP. In the final analysis it is mostly a matter of taste. Putting aside artistic prejudices as far as possible, for one is bound to favour Ronald Smith for so many reasons, I can make a few reasonably objective points about the three recordings available on CD. A comparison of the total timings of the first movement is misleading because Réach omits both repeats and Weiss omits the longer second repeat. Allowing for that, Weiss and Smith both set a cracking pace in the outer sections, with Smith bringing out the fierce cross-accent more clearly. But Weiss's trio section is much slower, taking "timidement" to imply a slower pace, in which case logic should demand an acceleration in the more confident passages. He also makes a *ritardando* before the unexpected B flat major chord in the first section, removing some of its impact,

Smith's "Quasi-Faust" is by a long way the quickest of those available, at two minutes shorter than Réach and three shorter than Weiss, mainly because he does not allow himself to slow up to make expressive points too obviously. (Raymond Lewenthal's early LP of the movement was faster by a further two minutes! However, that is such a vivid performance that one can even forgive the occasional 'fudges' in the most difficult passages, as sanctioned in his edition of the piece.) The movement has too much material to make detailed comparisons at any sensible length. I would just point out one misreading by Réach which occurs on both his recordings: he plays seven upward octave leaps on D sharp above the dominant pedal just before the final two pages, rather than the six written, followed by the glorious culminating tenth up to F sharp, as played by all the other pianists. This seems irritating and tautological; does he have a different edition?

The third movement carries fewer complex points of interpretation, but again Réach appears to have misread the score on the third page: where the context obviously implies that the three quavers for the right hand on several third beats are triplets (the left hand has a quaver and a quaver rest underneath them), he plays them as whole quavers, turning a 3-4 bar into 7-8. There are other rhythmic contradictions elsewhere. At least he has slowed down the hyperactive children from his first recording: the double-note passages were impressive but hardly appropriate to Alkan's gentle depiction of "les enfants" (sic), especially as he took the trouble to write "en mesure".

Some reviewers found Ronald Smith's magisterial slow tempo for "Prométhée enchaîné" excessively so when the LP first appeared, and I had to check twice to verify that he really does take 4 1/2 minutes longer than Réach and 3 1/2 longer than Weiss. My personal view is that it is magnificent, but others may prefer a more flowing tempo. *Chacun à son goût!*

Returning to Martin Anderson's review of Réach's disc, he describes the *Sonatine* as "one of Alkan's weirder works, written fourteen years after the *Grande Sonate*, less foreboding in scale, perhaps, though nonetheless the doughtiest Sonatina you are ever likely to come across, combining a hedgehog prickliness with bulldog muscularity. Like the *Sonate*, it really has to be heard to be believed." He makes no specific comment about the performance of the shorter work, and there is less scope for controversy here. Réach gives an account which remains faithful to the score, with only a few minor errors - some rests ignored at the start of the first movement, the occasional misreading of an accidental. His speed is close to Alkan's in the first movement; the second is a little slower (though *Allegramente* at *minim* = 84 is arguably too fast even for a purist). His Scherzo-Minuetto is very accurate at his safer tempo and works well: he smooths out some contrasts and omits the second repeat, as well as suddenly increasing the speed for the closing chords for no special reason. His finale is again slower than Alkan's marked speed, but still fast enough to be effective; however, the lemmings seem to be having second thoughts in the closing bars (see Wilfrid Mellers' article later). If

you like his 'rendition' of the Sonata, there is certainly nothing in the Sonatine to dissuade you from buying the disc.

Of the other available recordings of the Sonatine, Ronald Smith's remains my personal favourite: brisk speeds, all repeats taken and his usual insight into the music, Daniel Capelietti on the Belgian label Rene Gailly (CD87 007) takes longer than anyone else for the work, even with the omission of both long repeat sections: with them, I calculated that he would have taken about 22 minutes against Ronald Smith's 17 ½. Bernard Ringeissen's transfer of his analogue recording based on Georges Beck's edition is still available at what one presumably calls a low price these days (£7.99 in my local shop for a 50-minute disc), on Harmonia Mundi HMA 190927. It is a performance which I quite like: he has the slowest second movement and the finale is at a very comfortable speed, complete with large ritardando at the end. The sound on LP was a little blurred and congested; I have not heard the CD transfer. Our French colleagues liked Raymond Lewenthal's Sonatine the best, but his recording is no longer available. He was very quick at 16 minutes, though he omitted all the repeats in the first and third movements. Since Alkan took the trouble to write first- and second-time bars in the opening Allegro vivace, that is a pity. The LP did limit the length of recordings, of course - the modulation on my copy is so heavy that there is pre-echo of many loud chords, and not only at the start of pieces. But Lewenthal was a unique pianist whose performances were always exciting, if sometimes controversial, and he got close to the spirit of Alkan. It would be marvellous if his two LP's were reissued as a tribute to his fine work in reviving so much Romantic piano music. Only he and Ronald Smith bothered to take any notice of Alkan's new notation in the reprise of the Scherzo, where a dotted quaver-semiquaver figure is picked out from otherwise identical notes (as in similar passages in Stephanie McCallum's *Concerto*). Since their speeds are the quickest, it obviously can be done by a conscientious player, Lewenthal and Smith are also the only players who observe Alkan's *fp* marking in the opening chords (really bare fourths) of the finale.

It remains to mention a couple of other CD issues. French EMI has taken the puzzling decision to reissue Ronald Smith's *Grande Sonate* with a different coupling. EMI Classics CDM 7 64280 2 also contains the first three and the twelfth minor-key Etudes (*Comme le vent*, *Rythme molossique*, *Scherzo diabolico* and *Le Festin d'Esope*), the *Song of the Mad Woman* from the Preludes and *Allegro barbaro* from the major-key Etudes. The record is available in this country; I saw it in the Festival Hall shop recently. For anyone beginning an Alkan collection, it is good value at mid-price for over 77 minutes. (Members can order it from Brian Doyle using the new order form.) However, its appearance only stresses the need to reissue the complete Op. 39 - the *Ouverture*, *Concerto* and *Symphonie* remain in the vaults. One disappointing feature is the very brief booklet: Ronald Smith's excellent essay from the LP has gone, and is replaced by a two-page article by Jean Roy; interesting in its own way (it draws on the recent French book) but lacking any detail about the works themselves.

Martin Anderson, in a letter to CD Review in the same edition that carries his review, mentioned another historic recording, on RCNBMG Classics, which he would like to see available again: John Ogdon's "staggering account of this blistering pianistic monument", namely the *Concerto*. He continues: "it contains playing that really will make your ears bulge, coupled with an understanding of the music that will win many Alkan converts."

There remains one CD newly in the British catalogues for the attention mainly of the discographers. "Geir Henning Braaten in Recital" on Victoria VCD 19002 contains one Alkan piece, *Le Festin d'Esope*, among a miscellany which also has the Bach-Liszt Prelude and Fugue in A minor, Beethoven's Sonata no. 21 (the *Waldstein*, Op. 53) and *In the Evening* by the 20th century Italian/Norwegian composer Antonio Bibalo. The Alkan piece is reportedly played very well. I thank Bård Dahle, our enthusiastic member in Ørsta, Norway, for first telling me about this release. Braaten played the *Festin* as the final item in a recital on his tour in Japan last year and used the G minor *Barcarolle* from op. 65 as an encore. Apparently he was also planning to perform the *Concerto*. Last September he was one of several Norwegian musicians taking part in the "Norwegian Victoria Music Festival" in St John's, Smith Square. Whether he played any Alkan then I cannot say; did any hoarders in the Society file their copy of the publicity leaflet?

It has been an enjoyable task comparing these recordings, and I have probably gone into more detail than I needed. My excuse is the pure novelty of actually having enough choices of recording of certain

works. Whoever thought that one day Alkan would be a candidate for "Building a Library" on "Record Review"?

DISCOGRAPHY

Bård Dahle has kindly pointed out an error which was introduced into an amendment in Bulletin 42. The list of Op. 72 Preludes in Nicholas King's recording for Symposium should read nos. 1-5, 7, 9-11 (not 9 and 11). He also asked about *Les omnibus* variations op. 2 which was mentioned in Bulletin 40 but does not appear in the discography. I can confirm that Nakamura's Vol. I does not contain this item: another mode of transport is included (*Le chemin d'Éfer*, Op. 27) but not that one!

I have also been asked to clarify a correction published in Bulletin 44 about the piano roll recordings on the Symposium cassette no.1002. Under Op. 31 on page 6 should appear no.6 - *Ancient melody of the synagogue* - played by Egon Petri on the Welte-Mignon roll B520. recorded using a Rogers-Welte reproducing piano.

I am well aware that a new edition of the Discography would be very desirable. If I eventually produce one it will have to be completely retyped, as the IBM discs used by Charles Hailstone are not compatible with the computers to which I have access: we can emulate the PC, but I think that our drives are for differently formatted discs. Any member who is losing patience is welcome to offer help. or even to have a copy of the discs if he or she is able to use them for an update.

LIBRARY

For reasons of space rather than time, a list of the items in the Society Library in the Guildhall School of Music has been held over until a future Bulletin. Now that we have some more funds, we should be able to add a few missing items to the collection. Unfortunately a few pieces of music remain out of print; we have some of them as photocopies and hope that the rest may be republished one day. Thanks to the activities of the two Alkan Societies, much more is available now than was the case a few years ago, for which we must be grateful. Peter Hick has expressed a particular hope to see the *Petit Conte* in print, because it is such a charming piece ("...that Raymond Lewenthal referred to as a 'never-never land remembered'") and accessible to players of modest technique. It continues to be listed on the back page of Billaudot's edition and perhaps if enough members ask for it. the publishers could be persuaded of its worth.

OTHER NEWS

The Russian pianist, Nikolai Demidenko, has been winning very good reviews for his recitals and his discs of the 2nd and 3rd Medtner piano concertos and some Bach/Busoni transcriptions. One of the Concertos was broadcast on "Record Review" a while ago. and a recent sampler disc with the April "Classic CO" (issue no.24) carried the Bach/Busoni Toccata in C (BWV 564); both were very impressive. He was interviewed for the "Gramophone". by Bryce Morrison and mentioned an interest in Alkan. "I play very little French music, but I adore Alkan's 'Quasi-Faust' from the *Quatre Ages* Sonata." Peter Hick sent a copy of a poster for a recital given by Demidenko in Jersey Opera House "For One Night Only" on March 8th; unfortunately his visit did not coincide with the event. It is a programme strictly for the huge virtuoso: as well as 'Quasi-Faust' it contains the Alban Berg and Liszt Sonatas, Chopin's Polonaise-Fantaisie and Schumann's C major Fantasy. I wonder if he could be persuaded to take up the whole Alkan sonata?

British members will know that Ronald Smith's pupil, Frederick Kempf, not only won the piano section of the BBC 'Young Musician of the Year' competition but also won the final with an astonishing performance of Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. The broadcasts of excerpts from the semi-final rounds were extremely irritating, cutting rapidly from very brief sections of pieces to fatuous interviews with the competitors and back again. Since the series is already the most-watched classical music programme on TV, surely the producers did not need to vulgarise it in this way. However, Frederick was heard playing part of Alkan's E major octave Etude in his recital, and it was also used in the closing credits sequence.

The interval in the final concerto round was taken up with another intrusive item (in this writer's opinion), a competition for young designers to produce clothes for the four contestants. The bassoonist made an apt comment by refusing to wear her new dress, preferring one in which she felt more at ease.

Fortunately, Frederick's outfit looked reasonably comfortable, and conventional apart from the polo-neck shirt (a style favoured in any case by Ashkenazy); he also wore it in the European competition. Turning to the music itself, my misgivings remain about the validity of comparing four different instruments to find an overall winner. The bassoon and tuba are at a distinct disadvantage with their limited choice of repertoire, for a start. However, both players did give very good performances of the Weber and Edward Gregson concertos respectively, and could well have won in earlier competitions. The cellist gave a good account of himself in the first Shostakovich concerto, but it is an extremely difficult piece, written for Rostropovich, and perhaps not the best choice in a competition for young players. There was no doubt in my mind that Frederick's performance deserved to carry the day: he has an awesome talent and at 14 was by far the youngest finalist.

The Eurovision sequel for national winners took place in Brussels at the beginning of June. Set in the Cirque Royale, it looked as if one cameraman had done his training in the circus: vertiginous swooping camera shots during the music gave the viewer a white-knuckle ride much more scary than Martin Anderson's Ferris wheel. Nothing like it had been seen since TVS's atrocious coverage of the Prince of Wales's "Symphony for the Spire" in Salisbury. It was presented by an effervescent young lady with the improbable, but I suppose appropriate, name of "Soda". The judges included Noel Lee and Aldo Ciccolini (whose playing of some Alkan in France was mentioned last time). The competitors were allowed only nine minutes in their concerto performance and we were not shown the eliminating round which reduced their number from sixteen to eight. Again one of the youngest performers, Frederick did appear in the final round and gave a fine performance of Variation 18 (the "big tune") to the end. He impressed me by his willingness to take risks, while maintaining impressive accuracy in some extremely difficult leaps and passage-work. Humphrey Burton, obligingly providing a simultaneous translation of Soda's introductions which denied Europhiles any chance of practising their French, obviously thought that he had a good chance of doing well. In the end the winner was Bartłomiej Nizioł of Poland, a winner of several other competitions, who gave an accurate but, to my mind, rather careful and prosaic performance of the last movement of Brahms's violin concerto. Second came a harmonica player, Antonio Serrano from Spain, who gave a delightful account of the Malcolm Arnold concerto, written for Larry Adler (who, in a nice piece of inverted snobbery, prefers to call the instrument a mouth-organ). Burton thought that he deserved it for his sheer *chutzpah* in competing with the instrument at all, but there was no doubt about his musicianship. Third place went to "local girl" Marie Hallynck, whose extrovert personality and fine playing in the Shostakovich first cello concerto impressed audience and judges alike.

So although the British supporters may have been disappointed with the result, Frederick can feel very satisfied with his performance; there is clearly a great career in prospect. I have to admit that one of the musical highlights for me in this programme of "bleeding chunks" was the interlude given by the young-at-heart Stéphane Grappelli, who still plays wonderful jazz on his violin at the age of 84; he was accompanied by a double-bass and an initially inaudible acoustic guitar in a gentle and polished 'set' of 'standards' from the repertoire.

Ronald Smith might well have felt a certain annoyance that most of the commentary in the broadcasts from the British competition concentrated on Frederick's present teacher at the Royal Academy of Music, completely ignoring the person who had taught him until a year ago. It is good to see an article about Ronald in the *Music Journal* of the Incorporated Society of Musicians which redresses the balance. His contemporary at the R.A.M., Stella Lilley, recalls many of Ronald's pupils over the last thirty years, including Christopher Seaman, Cornelius Cardew, Bryce Morrison, Nicholas King, Andrew Haigh, Howard Williams and Stephen Barlow -and she has "watched Freddie Kempf's development from the very beginning". Asked how he handles a six-year-old potential 'Horowitz', Ronald says: "I devise games that ensure a relaxed and fearless mastery of the entire keyboard. A specially-designed pedal is a stop-gap. One starts by training the fingers and gradually working back until one discovers, as soon as the feet reach the ground, that playing comes from the toes via a relaxed body to a flexible wrist. Technical work must never become automatic. Various types of technical exercises, such as octaves, must always be creative. As soon as a true talent emerges, the incentive, stimulus and experience of public performances must be arranged, so that rapport with an audience becomes habitual." There is much more about 'Freddie', including the fact that he had ten concertos, from Mozart to Shostakovich, in his repertoire by the time he was 13. He was joint winner

of the first Mozart competition at 10. Recent achievements included a highly-praised *Paganini Rhapsody* in Bath last November and an A.R.C.M. with honours -and 93% -in December. Ronald concludes: "There is nothing like teaching for focusing the mind, but I have to limit it -*chi dorme tardi non piglia pesci!* "

The article leads on to mentioning Ronald as the first pianist to record for Nimbus in their 550-seat concert hall, returning there on 6th May to complete the set of Alkan chamber and solo works on two compact discs. I think that a misunderstanding led me to give that day as the release date of the discs, and I apologise to any members who have tried unsuccessfully to buy them. They will be released in September, and Brian Doyle will obtain sets for sale to members then.

The Musical Times, in its *Medley* column of June 1992, has a short item about Frederick Kempf which also states that "this remarkable talent had been nurtured by Ronald Smith, who has coached others now enjoying international careers", mentioning Stephen Hough, William Fong and Stephanie McCallum. (As was mentioned on TV, Frederick is distantly related to the German pianist, the late Wilhelm Kempff; his mother is Japanese.)

Ronald was on great form in his recital for the R.A.M. Club previewed in the last Bulletin. The writer and critic Bryce Morrison, a pupil of Ronald as we saw above, gave an affectionate and wide-ranging introduction about Ronald as a teacher, musician and indefatigable campaigner for Alkan in particular. He made a special mention of the centenary recital of the chamber music in the Wigmore Hall, as one of the most memorable concerts in a career full of outstanding occasions. Ronald's programme contained the late C minor sonata by Schubert, the second book of Chopin Etudes (Op. 25) and some Alkan 'novelties' which he introduced in his usual erudite and witty manner. He played the *Chant* in E major from the 1st suite of Op. 38, the *Chanson de la folle* and the E major Etude. The last-mentioned went like lightning and was a brilliant tour de force. He made reference, in the most tactful way, to the ignorance of Alkan even in such a distinguished academy: indeed, my neighbour in the audience, who had just retired from teaching piano in the Junior section, knew nothing about him. A delighted audience will have no excuse now. The audience not being content with that lengthy programme - played without an interval to leave time for the ticket-holders' supper -our young 70-year-old casually added two encores: a terrific performance of Liszt's second Hungarian Rhapsody, complete with cadenza (a piece so well known, he suggested. that it had probably not been heard there for years), and Alkan's wonderful G flat major Prelude, "J'étais endormie, mais mon cœur veillait". Does the "Cantique des Cantiques 5 = 2" in the sub- heading to the score refer to the rhythm or the Biblical quotation (Song of Songs. chapter 5, verse 2)?

Two small points follow on from the above: firstly. it is good to report that a piece by Alkan does at last , appear in the Grade 5 syllabus of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. The 23rd 'Esquisse. *L'homme aux sabots*' (*The man in clogs*), is an alternative third piece, published in the Board's *More Romantic Pieces for Piano*; Book 3. This is real progress! The other point is to mention Brigitte François-Sappey's intriguing observation in the French book on Alkan (and her notes to Huseyin Sermet's CD) that Messiaen used the title "Je dors, mais mon cœur veille" for the 19th of his *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*, as well as presenting the same set of chords as Alkan's in his "Louange à l'Eternité de Jésus" in his *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. She says that these, as well as a liking for religious themes, are examples of "many (fortuitous?) encounters between these two musicians-cum-theologians".

Concerning the French book, I failed last time to give the most obvious details that were needed about it: its full title is **Charles-Valentin Alkan**, sous la direction de Brigitte François-Sappey: published by (Arthème) Fayard at FF150. Its international number (ISBN) is 2.213.02779.X.

Ronald's erstwhile pupil, **William Fang**, whose achievements were detailed in Bulletin 44. gave a lunchtime recital in the 1992 Brighton Festival on 4th May, which included Le Festin d'Esopé. The rest of his programme was Mozart's B flat Sonata (K. 333) and Ravel's Gaspard de la Nuit. The programme mentions that William was born in America in 1964, his time with Ronald Smith and at Chetham's School, and his second prize in the 1988 Alkan centenary competition, as well as his win in last year's Brighton Philharmonic competition.

Our member **Peter Feuchtwanger** has sent two leaflets concerning masterclasses in which he is teaching. The first was in Feuchtwangen from 11- 18 June this year. I am sorry that the Bulletin is too late to give advance warning of this "5 Internationaler Meisterkurs für Klavier", but information about the sixth such course, which is evidently for advanced players, could be obtained from Stadtverwaltung Feuchtwangen, Hindenburgstrasse 5/7, Postfach 12 57, D-8805 Feuchtwangen, Germany: telephone (0)9852 /90422. Mr Feuchtwanger will also be taking masterclasses in Sion, Switzerland, from 27th July to 8th August. This is a large summer school covering most instruments. The deadline for applications was 10th May - my apologies again - but information about future courses could be had from Académie de Musique de Sion, Case Postale 954, CH-1951 Sion, Switzerland; telephone (0)27-226652, Fax (0)27- 234662.

A new member, Roger Bickerton, has sent me an extract from the Radio Times of August 18th, 1948, which shows a broadcast on the Third Programme of "Alkan's Concerto for solo piano, played by Ronald Smith. Last of four programmes of piano works by Alkan." Do any archivists have details of the other three programmes? The timing of that broadcast is 35 minutes, which raises a few interesting questions! - but I will not speculate here. Perhaps our President can remember the details.

Bruce Adams, a member since last year, spent a period on active duty with the U.S. Air Force Reserve during the Gulf War, living for four months in a tent in Saudi Arabia. It is good to know that he survived the experience unscathed. He took along some Alkan tapes to exchange with other servicemen's favourite music on their portable players, which must have been a unique way to spread the word!

Many members will know of **Jack Gibbons**, who played Alkan works for the Society in its early days, including a highly-praised performance of the Concerto. He won the Newport International Piano Competition, and also enjoyed (?) a brief wider fame when he suffered an attack of amnesia after an accident and turned up utterly lost many miles from his home. Jack has been making a particular speciality of Gershwin's music recently, drawing praise from musicians on both sides of the Atlantic. He will be giving an all-Gershwin recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on Friday 3rd July at 7.45 p.m. The programme includes twelve of Gershwin's improvisations which Jack has transcribed from the original recordings: three of these, as well as his own arrangement of the Cuban Overture, will be receiving their first London performances.

Subscriptions: Not a reminder for once, but a tip from an American member to any who are encountering excessive bank charges in paying their subscriptions in sterling. He found that Thomas Cook Currency Services Inc. would exchange U.S. dollars for a ten-pound note for a commission of \$3.50. While I ought not to encourage people to send cash by post, it might be a useful saving in some cases. The Société Alkan has had to refuse Eurocheques because it cost so much to bank them. Such is progress towards a single European market. It might be worth reminding you that the current subscription lasts until December 1992 because we changed the financial year at the last annual general meeting.

Having written about the composer Méreaux a year ago, I have now found that his name appears on the back cover of my older editions of Alkan, as part of the *Études progressives des maîtres du piano* edited by Isidore Philipp, the co-editor with Alkan's son Delaborde of the Alkan edition, of course. One list mentions his *Étude de sixtes*, Op. 63, No.32 under "très difficile" and his *Étude en doubles notes*, Op 63, No.4, under "Grande difficulté". Another has the complete set of his *Grandes études*, 60 *caprice*,. Op. 63, in five books.

HUSUM- Raritäten der Klaviermusik 1992

No summer Bulletin would be complete without a preview of your Secretary's holiday. Yet another superb and varied programme has been devised for the sixth series in this festival whose reputation grows every year. The artists include Bernard Ringeissen, whose Alkan recordings have already been mentioned, in a mainly French programme including a piece by Gabriel Pierné (1863-1937) and the notoriously difficult *Étude en forme de valse* by Saint-Saëns. Igor Shukov returns with another programme of Tchaikovsky and Skryabin. Marie-Catherine Girod also includes French music: Chausson, Fauré and Maurice Emmanuel (1862-1938) as well as the Russian Arthur Lourie (1892-1966). Kolja Lessing, the violinist of the Trio Alkan, made a great impression as a pianist last year,

and his programme includes three living pupils of Franz Schreker: Ignace Strasfogel (b. 1909 in Warsaw), Berthold Goldschmidt (b. 1903) and Grete von Zieritz (b. 1899). (Ernst Krenek, who died recently, was another composition student of Schreker at the Berliner Musikhochschule.) Mr Strasfogel was present for Lessing's recital last year, when his arrangement of Schreker's Chamber Symphony and his own Rondo- Variations of 1988/89 were played, giving a special authenticity to the occasion. Daniel Berman and Marc-André Hamelin represent the transatlantic interest: Berman's programme includes Earl Wilde's Fantasy on Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" and some Tausig arrangements of Bach and Johann Strauss. It was Berman who first suggested Hamelin as a late replacement in the second festival, and he created such a sensation that this will be his fourth visit; no doubt the tickets will be in great demand. Compared with the Sorabji and Rzewski in his recital two years ago, most of the names have quite a familiar ring this time: Medtner, Donizetti-Liszt, Rossini-Liszt, and two Etudes by Hamelin himself. There is also the 3rd Sonata by the Russian-Canadian composer Sophie-Carmen Eckhardt-Gramatte (1902- 74), who made a remarkable debut at the age of 11, playing the violin in the *Kreutzer* Sonata and piano in the *Appassionata*. Her concerto debut under Stokowski was again on both instruments. Hamelin has recorded all six of her sonatas on two CDs for the British company, Altarus.

Last year's festival was the usual success, with Hamish Milne being entrusted with the final recital. He was on great form in the long F minor sonata by his particular speciality, Medtner, and in Busoni's fine transcription of Liszt's organ work, the Fantasy and Fugue on "Ad nos", Boris Bloch changed his programme, as usual, but showed virtuosity of the highest order in all he played, notably a suite from Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet" and Liszt's fantasy on Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*.

Of more interest at this stage is the fact that a CD of highlights from the 1989 series has found its way into our catalogues. It opens with Ronald Smith's favourite short encore (see above), the other Alkan works in his programme being too long for a single record with ten other pianists represented. It is very much a miscellany which gives a good idea of the aims of the festival, and has a good essay by the director and founder, Peter Froundjian, who also plays two of the items. The sound is rather too bright, having been recorded on very close microphones placed right inside the piano and enhanced in the studio (it is an analogue master tape), but the performances are of an astonishingly high standard; audience noise is almost non-existent. The CD is on Danacord DACOCD 349.

An all-digital recording of the 1990 festival was made (DACOCD 379) and has a more pleasing sound from microphones placed a little further back. The items vary more in length, the longest being an intense performance of Janacek's Sonata "I.X.1905" by Benedikt Koehlen. Godowsky is represented in four items, including a second example of a Chopin Etude arrangement from Marc-Andre Hamelin (his thunderous "Winter Wind" is on the first CD), this time a cheeky Mazurka version of the E minor from Op. 25. This disc ought to find its way into the British catalogue eventually, though miscellaneous recitals of this kind are notoriously difficult to classify and index, as any shop assistant knows. I expect that volume 3 of the series will be on sale in Husum this year.

One other CD with strong Husum connections which is well worth your attention is the selection of works by the great pianist Ignaz Friedman, played by Peter Froundjian on Etcetera KTC 1117 and produced by the same team as the Husum discs. Most of Friedman's music is unknown now, apart from the occasional Strauss waltz arrangement (one appears on Janice Weber's disc "Wine, Weber und Strauss"). Of the original works on Mr Froundjian's disc, the Paganini variations are particularly impressive, making an interesting sequel to Brahms's two sets; a group of six Mazurkas are also full of character. The transcriptions and arrangements of songs, Viennese dances and early music recall a romantic style which is out of fashion today but has a charm of its own~ all it takes is an open mind in the listener. There is also an arrangement of the second movement of Mahler's 3rd symphony.

A final point on non-Alkanian matters is that we have begun to exchange bulletins with the Sigismund Thalberg Society in America, at the suggestion of our honorary member, Frank Lioni. Our fondly remembered discographer, Charles Hailstone, was also a member, and their membership list has several well-known names on it. The Society is not only concerned with the music of "Old Arpeggio", as Liszt's great rival was known because of the "three-handed" effect in many of his pieces, but with all composers of the period, and has encouraged the publication of many new editions of long-

unavailable music. If anyone is keen to investigate a wider range of music from that rich period, the Coordinator of the society is Daniel L. Hitchcock, P.O. Box 47032, Wichita, Kansas 67201, U.S.A.

ALKAN'S ALCHEMY, by Wilfrid Mellers

The following article first appeared in "Music and Musicians" in 1988, and is reprinted by kind permission of Prof. Mellers. Sections did appear in the centenary programmes for the Wigmore Hall and the South Bank, but this brings them all together. It should be, in any case, a useful introduction for some of our newer members. I have corrected a few spellings (and hope I have not introduced other mistakes), but otherwise have left the original untouched. Notes are by the editor of this Bulletin.

Charles Valentin Morhange ('dit Alkan') would have been a hundred¹ had he survived until this year. As a musical prodigy at the Paris Conservatory he won first prize for solfège at the age of seven, first prize for piano at the age of ten, and first prize for harmony at thirteen. He was an accomplished violinist before reaching his teens, and before he was out of them was recognised as one of the supreme piano virtuosi in a period richly endowed with them - the only one, indeed, whom Liszt confessed to being scared of. At the onset of what could have been legendary fame, however, Alkan withdrew, seemingly for tortuous psychological reasons, from public life. Though he continued to compose for his instrument music daunting alike in technical difficulty and imaginative rebarbateness, his hermeticism not surprisingly led to neglect. For a long time the academic fraternity treated Alkan with a frosty disdain spawned of fear and ignorance. Now at last, the increasing dissemination and recording of Alkan's music has induced a thaw, persuading us that the distinguished musicians who made such high claims for him - Liszt, von Bulow, Busoni, Petri, as well as peripheral if brilliant eccentrics such as van Dieren and Sorabji - were live on the mark. Clearly, Alkan was no feather-brained keyboard exhibitionist; if he composed with too unbridled a fecundity, he seldom leaves us long without a sudden scalp-prickling and emerges, in toto, as a powerfully professional composer of formidable skills.

He is a superb contrapuntist in classical baroque tradition; is an heir to Haydn in command of symphonic argument; and more directly shares Beethoven's large-scale 'morphological' approach to form, as well as his partiality for gritty textures and for the abrupt punch-line or sudden reversal. Among his immediate contemporaries he is closest to Berlioz, who also 'does coolly the things that are most fiery'. It may be this fusion of aristocratic French poise with Jewish cabbalistic fervour that defines Alkan's savour - simultaneously wry and visionary, laconic and luxurious, mystical and Mephistophelean.

Today the Alkan revival owes most to a few pianists distinguished, as were Busoni and Petri, by an intellectual toughness commensurate with their prodigious technique: notably to the American Raymond Lewenthal and our own Ronald Smith, who completed his fine two-volume study of Alkan's strange life and stranger work just in time for the centenary. In coining the phrase 'a subversive conservationist' Smith neatly assessed Alkan's ambiguous status: which is encapsulated in the fact that perhaps the weirdest of his works should be fundamentally a classical sonata, albeit one as 'Babylonian' as were Berlioz's more monumental works. Alkan composed his *Grande Sonate* describing the four ages of man in his thirty-fourth year, predating the Liszt sonata by four years. The scherzo comes first, in D major, followed by an intricate twenty-five minute² sonata allegro in D sharp minor; the third movement is in G major, the finale in G sharp minor, 'extrêmement lent'. The implications of this odd key scheme are profoundly explored, as are the Lisztian metamorphoses of themes between Faust and the Devil. The gigantic sonata movement, which is about growing up from hedonistic youth to painfully Faustian maturity, climaxes in what Smith calls 'exorcism by fugue', involving six parts in invertible counterpoint plus three extra voices and three doublings³ - all

¹ One hundred and fifty.

² An overestimate: recorded performances vary from just under eleven to just under sixteen minutes. Unusually for Alkan, the score of the Sonata bears no metronome marks, making it harder to predict timings.

³ Ronald Smith gives six parts, two extra voices and three doublings: eleven parts in all (Alkan, *The Music*, p.75). Raymond Lewenthal modestly finds only nine parts (introduction to his Schirmer album of selected pieces). One possible calculation

negotiable by ten fingers, at least if you're Alkan or Ronald Smith. Throughout, the music justifies its Beethoven references to Faust, Atlas and Prometheus, for it exists at a level of apocalyptic imagination that at least recalls the Hammerklavier Sonata, and reduces Liszt to a pygmy. Nor does Alkan necessarily require vast dimensions for such effects, they characterize, hardly less tellingly, the later and deceptively titled *Sonatine* which, lasting a mere sixteen minutes¹, is electrical in agility yet classically taut in texture - at least until the final cataclysm which Smith likens, in one of his precisely revelatory metaphors, to a mass-precipitation of lemmings over a cliff.

Alkan's best known work is his opus 39, a set of *Etudes* in all the minor keys, by now established as a masterpiece, even within the conservatory curriculum. They incorporate a *Symphony* in four movements in 'progressive' tonalities declining down the cycle of fifths; authentic piano writing manages to sound convincingly orchestral in both Beethovenian and Berliozian terms. The even vaster *Concerto* in three movements, also in progressive tonality, is wizard-like, emulating on a single keyboard both the piano soloist and his accompanying 'orchestra', and even illusorily suggesting their interlacing. What's remarkable about these literally breath-taking works is not only the originality of the conception but also the irresistible momentum of their design. They demand more of the listener, as well as the performer, than does the dazzling variation-set, *Le Festin d'Esope*, with which Alkan rounds off the opus; yet that 'effective' work proves to have its own scary monumentality, for its veerings and tackings between crazy comedy and fearful frenzy climax in a coda that Alkan² justifiably labels 'granitic'. Perhaps Alkan's abrupt juxtapositions of mood and his recurrent slips on banana skins are related to the imperial irreality of the Parisian world outside the recluse's study; that royal fanfares should be metrically (and hilariously) punctuated by yapping dogs and nipping fleas anticipates Mahler's parodies of militarism.

In addition to these large-scale works Alkan produced a multiplicity of small pieces for piano. Many may look superficially like banal salon pieces, and perhaps a few are such. More frequently, however, they are fraught -lyrically, harmonically, and of course pianistically - with Alkan's necromancy, and may be strikingly prophetic - now of Bartok's famous *Allegro barbaro*, said to have been by, but both less barbarous and less disciplined than, Alkan's Lydian mode piece with the same title; or of Faure, in the modal linearity and dreamy textures of the *Barcarolles* and *Nocturnes*; or of Debussy, in the sensuously static harmonies of *Les Soupirs*. Such pieces tend to view impressionist illusion 'through a glass darkly'; and there's often an uneasy creepiness in ostensibly brisk pieces, such as the Prokofiev-like, metallic *Marchen*³ of the *Trois petites Fantaisies*, which are fantastic certainly, but rigorously controlled and not at all *petites*. Sometimes Alkan's flavour is strictly speaking incomparable; the aphoristic tone-poems that are the two pieces of his opus 50 - *Capriccio alla soldatesca* and *Le tambour bat aux champs* -have been related to martial episodes in the symphonic Mahler and Shostakovich but this comes nowhere near the icily fiery tragi-comedy of Alkan's deconstruction of the military myth. Similarly we may say that the sinister-Iudicrous tone-clusters in *Les Diablotins* look backwards to Scarlatti's *acciaccaturas* (which were however bowdlerized out of any editions likely to have been available to Alkan) and forwards to Ives and Henry Cowell. Yet what, really, do they anticipate but themselves? These pieces are 'news that stays news' - most of all in the wondrous *Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer*, wherein the mad woman wails her disconsolate folk-like lament high in soprano register, while the ocean sighs surlily in the bottom reach of the keyboard.

In the last phase of his life, as his hermeticism increased, Alkan relinquished the grandiose grand in favour of an instrument now virtually obsolete - Erard's pedal-board piano. Though this obsolescence doesn't alleviate Alkan's obscurantism, I respect the composer's - and the pianist's - integrity enough to

which gives eleven parts: there are seven entries of the main subject, the last being doubled at the octave. One countersubject is doubled in thirds or sixths, and the second half of the lowest line is in octaves. An extra chromatic line is picked out in square note-heads and includes a triple sharp. (The seventh entry is on E sharp, the dominant of A sharp major, whose key signature would have ten sharps, or perhaps four sharps and three double sharps(!). Two other triple sharps are found in the last movement of the Concerto.

¹ As seen in the reviews earlier, recorded performances take between 16 and 20 minutes.

² An obvious printing error; Mellers means Smith (see notes to LPs of Op. 39 and *A/kan* Vol. 2. p. 150).

³ Presumably Marches (not Alkan's title) or Marche (referring to the most Prokofiev-like, third, Fantaisie), rather than Märchen (folk-tales).

hazard that Ronald Smith may be justified in claiming that the compositions Alkan wrote for this instrument include some of the profoundest music for the organ keyboard since Bach; I hope the Alkan Society will encourage the publication and recording of *oeuvres choisies*. Nor is Alkan's work restricted exclusively to keyboards. His chamber works, though few in number, are not 'occasional' but substantial pieces that reveal how deeply Alkan's subversive electricity is earthed in classical tradition. The *Piano Trio* in G minor, opus 30, dates from Alkan's early maturity in 1841; wearing the mantle of the composer's trio-writing predecessors Haydn and Beethoven, it does so with a sharply personal flair that fuses - in Smith's words - 'Jewish intensity and Gallic skill'. Repeatedly what begins like an orthodox academic procedure turns into savage farce or surreal comedy, inducing a frisson of fear -as with the aborted fugue in the scherzo's trio. Still more do such startlements occur in the *Duo* for violin and piano, probably composed around 1840. This volcanically Alkanic work has a slow movement, portraying 'Enfer', that bristles with seven sharps in a C sharp major that veers to D sharp and G sharp minors. Alkan exploits the sepulchral bottom reaches of the piano as only he would dare to, the gruffly dissonant, often ungrammatical chords are hellishly tenebrous, so that the violin's '*peantive*'¹ song, chromatically undulating in 6/8, sounds vulnerable, and proves so, since it is effaced beneath the piano's tremolando whirlwind. In the frenzied finale, sadistically marked 'aussi vite que possible', thematic metamorphosis is as volatile as are the modulations, yet surprise, defeating predictability, never relapses into chaos.

The greatest of Alkan's chamber works is undoubtedly the *Sonate de Concert* for cello and piano, composed much later in 1857, and therefore contemporary with the vintage year of the piano *Etudes* opus 39. The opening sonata movement starts in almost Mendelssohnic benignity, only to release one of the most extreme, and furious, of Alkan's post-Beethovenian developments through opposition. The dense textures and logical unpredictabilities make titanic demands on the performers; who are, however, offered a little relief in the *Allegretto* (a typical Alkan diminutive), lilting in A flat major upper mediant to the first movement's E. Yet here too the players need to be on the *qui vive*, responsive to the music's whimsical vagaries, simultaneously comic and forlorn.

Comedy is banished from the slow movement, unless anything that is mysterious implies potential ironies. Inspired by a passage from the Book of Micah, the music is paradoxically serene, yet dualistic. A widely arpeggiated cello melody in C major -the four movements of the sonata tonally ascend by major thirds, as do the movements of the Hammerklavier Sonata -suggests arms outstretched in prayer, while the piano's fluttering semiquavers might be angels' wings, dispensing balm. This sublimely strange meditation seems to me one of the greatest, not merely most extraordinary, movements in nineteenth century chamber music. The cross-rhythms of the cello's pizzicato bells on middle C efface Time; which proves, inexorable, however, in the final prestissimo saltarello -a dance of death in an oddly rancid E minor, throwing up a profusion of themes in a whirligig of keys until -after a curious passage labelled *stanco* in which the ticking of time's clock seems to be momentarily running down -it blows up in a coda even more presto than the original prestissimo! This (in)conclusion 'brings the house down' -not merely in the colloquial sense in which the phrase is usually employed.

Alongside such music we find a mordant *jeu d'esprit* like the *Marcia Funebre sulla morte d'un papagallo*, brilliantly scored for four voices, three oboes and bassoon: music that looks parodistic but sounds, with its parrot-squawks and wails embraced within the most ingenious chromatic counterpoint, frightening as well as funny. Clearly such music comes from the same obsessional mind that created the adagio of the Cello Sonata and the more cabbalistic of the pieces for pedal-piano. Alkan is an uncomfortable composer who will never be part of the Establishment; none the less his integrity and charisma will surely ensure that he cannot again be dislodged from his establishment position as (in Busoni's phrase) 'one of the five greatest writers for the piano since Beethoven'; and also as the creator of a number of chamber works peculiarly 'modern' in that they spring from his ambiguous relation to the pluralistic society he lived in but was not of. His 'alienation' anticipates ours.

Although the story that at the age of seventy-four he was killed by a falling bookcase as he reached for the Talmud, bible of Hasidic occult law, has alas proved to be apocryphal, there is a sense in which it is truer than truth.

¹ The indication in the score is *plaintivement*, usually translated as *piangendo*.

The Alkan Society has published an extensive discography of the composer's work. Piano music covers seven pages - most of it played by Ronald Smith or Raymond Lewenthal, but also with contributions from Bernard Ringeissen, Michael Ponti, John Ogdon, Malcolm Binns, John Bingham, Pierre Réach and Joachim Draheim. The Piano Trio is available only in a set with trios by Alkan, Litolff, Henselt and Thalberg; the cello sonata is magisterially recorded by Yehuda Hanani and Edward Auer. Very little of the pedal-piano or organ music is available as yet.¹

Alkan's first published work -Variations op. 1, composées sur un theme de Steibelt

As previously reported, this work, once thought to have been lost, has been republished by Billaudot. A detailed analysis can wait until a more qualified musicologist turns his attention to the piece - perhaps in a future article for the Bulletin? I can just give a few impressions here. The theme, from Steibelt's *Orange* concerto, is fairly commonplace, not moving far from its home key of E. There are six variations and a coda, the whole piece occupying twenty pages. The piano writing is remarkably assured for a composer in his early teens, even if it draws on the usual repertoire of pianistic figurations current in variations of the period. One striking feature, as pointed out in the French Bulletin no.18, is the number of *a piacere* passages: cascades of small notes in free rhythm of a kind hardly ever found in later Alkan. Even in sections written with full-size noteheads, we find groupings of fast notes across the beat in prime numbers such as 7, 13 or 37: I do not think that Stockhausen himself ever used irrational ratios as high!

There are a few misprints in the score, reproduced from the original in the usual slightly reduced format, but none which cannot be corrected by anyone with a reasonable sense of logic. There are none of Alkan's idiosyncratic tempo or expression marks which we find in later works. Perhaps someone better versed in music of the period could explain to me the instruction "La grande pedale et celle du clavier", which appears three times.

Daniel Steibelt (1765-1823) is described in Harold Schonberg's "The Great Pianists" (Victor Gollancz 1964) as "the real charlatan of the late eighteenth-century pianists". He was known as the Tremolo Pianist, just as Thalberg was later known as Old Arpeggio. His wife was a virtuoso on the tambourine, not a speciality commonly seen today, and he composed several "bacchanals" for the two of them to play. (A recording of one, made by Raymond Lewenthal and a tambourinist whose name I forget, was recently broadcast on Radio 3.) He composed his *Storm* Rondo, as it is called in the book, in England, and it was "wildly successful". Schonberg's account of Steibelt, and the low opinion of him held by Tomaschek and others, is quite lengthy (and highly amusing) and I commend it to you. One very interesting achievement was that Steibelt's 8th piano concerto, which he premiered in 1820, is the only one before Busoni's with a choral finale, unless one includes Beethoven's Choral Fantasy of 1808.

Some aspects of Alkan's Esquisses, Ope 63 (1861) -Rainer Klaas

The following is based on a programme for a performance of the complete Esquisses -probably the first in Germany -by Rainer M. Klaas and others on July 7th 1988, in the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik, Dortmund, and is used with his kind permission. The thematic indices for the four volumes of pieces are enclosed on a separate sheet. If Prof. Mellers' article had an introductory function, this ought to stimulate some thought among our more "hard-core" members (!).

Sequence of tonality (small letters refer to minor keys):

C -f- D -9 -E -a -F sharp -b -A flat -c sharp -B flat -e flat
 c -F -d -G -e -A -f sharp -B -9 sharp -D flat -b flat -E flat
 C -9 -D -a -E -b -F sharp -c sharp -A flat -e flat -B flat -f
 c -G -d -A -e -B -f sharp -C sharp -9 sharp -E fl at -b flat -F
 C

¹ How things have changed in just four years!

For comparison:

25 Preludes op. 31 (1847):

C -f -D flat -f sharp -D -9 -E flat -a flat -E -a -F -b flat -
G flat -b -G -c -A flat -c sharp -A -d -B flat -e flat -B -e - C

12 major-key Etudes op. 35 (1847):

A -D -G -C -F -B flat -E flat -A flat -C sharp -G flat -B -E

12 minor-key Etudes op. 39 (1857):

a -d -g- (Symphonie:) c- f- b flat -e flat -(Concerto:) 9 sharp -c sharp -f sharp - (Ouverture:) b- (Festin d'Esope:) e

Les Mois op. 74, nos. 1-12:

No cyclic ordering of tonality .

Musical forms

Fuguettes (6), Barcarollette (12), Duettino (14), Tutti de concerto (15), Fantaisie (16), Petit prelude (17), *Liedchen* (18), Petit Marche villageoise (20), Contredanse (24), *Petit Air*, Rigaudon (27), *Petit Air dolent* (30), Minuetto (32), Toccata (36), Scherzettino (37), *Petit Air a 5 voix* (42), Nottumino-innamorato (43), Scherzetto (37). (Underlined - dances; italics - song forms)

Single voice -Polyphony -Homophony

Partially monophonic: Ressouvenir (13), Petit Air (26) Two voices: Duettino (14)

Three voices: Petit Prelude a 3 (17)

Four voices: Les Initiés -quasi Coro (5), Fuguettes (6) Quasi string quartet: Debut de Quatuor (31)

Five voices / homophonic: Petit Air a 5 voix (42)

Two themes combined: Heraclite et Democrite (39)

In the style of other composers

Bach - Fuguettes (6); Scarlatti -Duettino (14); Concerto grosso / Mendelssohn -Tutti de concerto (15); Etude, Czerny, Clementi etc. -La Poursuite (25); Haydn -Debut de Quatuor (31); Mozart -Minuetto (32); Mendelssohn -Nottumino-innamorato (43); Chopin -Le premier billet doux

Religiosity

Les cloches (4), Les Initiés (5), Ressouvenir (13), Graces (19), Morituri te salutant (21), Odi profanum vulgus et arceo (34), Les bon souhaits (38), Les Diabolins -Quasi santo / Quasi santa (45), Laus Deo (49)

"Objets trouvés"

Les cloches (4), Liedchen (18), Petite Marche villageoise (20), L'homme aux sabots (23), Musique militaire (35), Laus Deo (49)

Harmonic studies

Fuguettes (6), Fais dodo (33), Musique militaire (35), Les Enharmoniques (41), Scherzetto (47) and others

Rhythmic and metric studies

Fuguettes (6), Duettino (14), Heraclite et Democrite (39), Les Diabolins (45), Scherzetto (47), Laus Deo (49) and others

" Dry" style

2, 20, 23, 35, 36, 37, 39, 45, 47 and others

" Simple" style

1, 4, 5, 8, 13, 22, 26, 33, 34, 46, 48, 49

Pedal effects and "overhanging" final notes

1, 11, 12, 45, 48; 4, 19, 30, 43, 46

Literary references

Aristophanes (5), Suetonius (21), Horace (34), 'Héraclite et Democrite' (39)

Notes (mainly editorial)

1. Titles: A few titles in the thematic index differ from those in the score. Les Initiés (5) has a quotation from Aristophanes' 'The Frogs' instead of the title, and the indication *Quasi-Coro*. Tutti de Concerto (15) also has the sub-heading *Dans le genre ancien*. Odi profanum vulgus et arceo (I abhor and shun the common people) (34) adds *Favete linguis* (literally "Favour the tongue" - possibly "Be silent" in the context). Les bons souhaits (38) substitutes (in quotation marks) "*Le ciel vous soit toujours prospère!*" ("May heaven be always favourable to you!")

2. A couple of translations of more uncommon words:

"Fais dodo" (33) - "Go to sleep" (said by parents to young children) "Attendez-moi sous l'orme" (40) - "Wait for me under the elm."

3. Style of other composers: Duetto (14) bears the indication *Alla-D. Scarlatti* over the second section. Minuetto is headed *Alla "Vedrai carino" di Mozart* (Zerlina's aria in *Don Giovanni*).

4. Literary references: Aristophanes and Horace are mentioned above. Morituri te salutant (21), the death-cry of the Roman gladiators (Those about to die salute thee) is found in Suetonius.

Thanks to Nicholas Bray, head of Classics at Bishop Wordsworth's School, Salisbury, for his help with the classical references. He was puzzled by the juxtaposition of Heraclitus and Democritus, but Lewenthal's Alkan album gives one possible explanation - they were known as "The Dark Philosopher" and "The Laughing Philosopher".

FUTURE MEETINGS

Because of pressure of work, we have had a quiet year so far, for which I apologise. The committee is meeting at the end of this month to discuss future events. One strong possibility is a joint meeting with the Chopin Society for a recital by Bernard Ringeissen. Please be assured that you will receive adequate notice of this if at all possible, even if it needs a special 'mail-shot'! We do not need the Annual General Meeting until January because of the change in our financial year.

Finally, I would like to thank Brian Doyle and Averil Kovacs, a new member in Croydon, for their help in providing items of news and record releases. Other new members include Roger Bickerton in Harrogate. Peter Dawson in Greenwich, Harry Marriott in Leicester, David Waddell in Exeter and Dr Greeley Stahl in Hamburg; we welcome them all. A full list of new members will appear in the next Bulletin.

PETER GROVE

Supplement to Bulletin No.46: July 1992

"Matters arising:" The last Bulletin crossed in the post with the latest from the Societe Alkan, and there are a few points of comparison which could be usefully made at an early stage. First of all, there are some small corrections to ours which should be made. It was rather rash to hope that the reprinted article by Professor Mellers would have no newly introduced mistakes by the typist (who was the Editor, it must be admitted). I hardly need to say that the first footnote on page 16 had a mistake: Alkan would have been 175 years old in 1988, not 150- thank you all for not rushing to point out that "howler". There was also a word omitted from the fourth line of the second paragraph on page 15, and a misspelt name: the passage should read: "...strikingly prophetic - now of Bartok's famous *Allegro barbaro*, said to have been inspired by, but both less barbarous and less disciplined than, Alkan's Lydian mode piece with the same title". A few small errors in Mr Klaas's article on page 18 should not have distracted from its sense: the minor-key Etudes of 1857 (not 1957!) and a couple of wrong or omitted numbers of the pieces, which can be corrected by reference to the thematic index. Finally, the title of Janice Weber's CD (page 13) is "Wein, Weber und Strauss", not the mixture of languages given. I offer my apologies to all concerned.

The French Bulletin (no.20) reviewed some of the same recordings. The opinion of the Adda recording was similar to mine, though was positive enough to justify its appearance on our recent order form. M. Luguenot thought that François Bou gave a fine interpretation of the solo pieces, *Les Mois* and *Salut, cendre du pauvre!* On the other hand, he did agree that the *Concerto da camera* was less well played: the piece is not Alkan at his best, and needs an "incandescent interpretation to save this work". The *Funeral March for a Parrot* is technically correct but too slow and lacking in irony.

Of Huseyin Sermet's recording on Valois-Auvidis, given rather savage treatment in our Bulletin, it is said that it received excellent reviews in the French press. All the same, one must wait until the last few tracks to find any animated pieces, and the selection of the programme is described as "bizarre" - twelve of the twenty-five *Preludes* and six of the forty-nine *Esquisses*, plus one *Barcarolle* (from Op. 65) and the *Toccata* - and is not met with approval. The sound is good and the interpretation refined, but there are misgivings about the very slow speeds. The conclusion: fine in small doses, but lacking the true spirit of Alkan; like me, the reviewer awaits the Cello Sonata to form a clearer judgement of the pianist.

The French Bulletin also greets the new compilation of Ronald Smith's recordings containing the Grande Sonate, the "absolute reference" for that work and the six pieces extracted from the "legendary" set of three LPs, mentioning with some pride that it was EMI France which issued the CD - "a sign of the times".

Letter to the Editor:

Sir, -It was gratifying, after all the work and the many delays, to read how well our Alkan disc, 1062, was received. One detail may interest readers: Thomas Wakefield's performance of the Beethoven transcription with cadenza lasting all but 19 minutes was the one and only take. Mr Wakefield walked in, sat down, played, stood up, murmured 'I think that will do,' and walked out.

I am, Sir, Yours faithfully, Eliot B. Levin

Symposium Records

The Editor thanks Mr Levin for confirming his speculation about Mr Wakefield's remarkable performance of the piece on the CD reviewed at length in the Bulletin.

Finally, an advance warning (for once) of a forthcoming performance: on 10th September, at the British Music Information Centre, 10 Stratford Place, W1, **Julian Saphir** will be playing the *Overture* and possibly another Alkan piece. His programme also contains works by Sorabji: two movements from *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, *In the Hothouse* and *Toccata*. In the same series, on 8th September at the same venue, **Donna Amato** will give a programme entitled "Sorabji and Friends", with works in the tradition of the "grand manner" by van Dieren, Alistair Hinton (the only pupil of Sorabji, and the keeper of the Sorabji Archive), Ronald Stevenson (whose latest work is to be "Le Festin d'Alkan"), Norman Peterkin, Eric Chisholm and a world premiere of a Sorabji piece as well as two of his three Pastiches.

PETER GROVE