



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

(Registered Charity number 276199)

<http://www.alkansociety.org>

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Bicentenary thoughts

Preparations for celebratory events to mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of Alkan proceed apace across Europe and your Society is, naturally, amongst the foremost promoters of these. New recordings have been issued and are forthcoming; and new publications as well. We may hope that 2013, apart from a host of individual events, will also provoke reflection on Alkan as a significant figure in the musical history of the nineteenth century, rather than the figure in the gallery of musical eccentrics as which he is still too often characterised. The significant number of new recordings of recent years has not yet been matched with an equivalent depth of research and analysis, save from a few dedicated souls on either side of the Channel, and the consequence is that Alkan is too easily seen as an isolated phenomenon, with his music coming from, and leading to, nowhere. There are so many angles which still await investigation: the relationship of his music to the composers of the French Napoleonic period from Gossec to Reicha; the influence of his pedaller and organ music to French organ music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the implications of Alkan's extraordinary variety of versions of musical form, both the gigantic and the minute; and indeed many basic details of Alkan's life and circle of acquaintances.

It is fascinating that new and revelatory information can still be discovered. Who knows what other materials may still be sleeping in archives across Europe? This Bulletin contains two translations into English of vital documents to the study of Alkan's life and times; the article on Alkan by his contemporary Alexandre de Bertha, and the first there of Alkan's extraordinary letters to Santiago de Masarnau.

If 2013 can also see reintegration of Alkan into the musical mainstream of which he was at the heart in the 1840s, and which he continued to develop with extraordinary depth and prescience in his subsequent compositions, then the bicentenary celebrations will serve a great purpose not only for the man himself but for music as a whole. Our first event of 2013 – a joint celebration with the Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner Societies (see pps. 2 and 19-20) – is, we hope, a herald of such a revaluation.

2013 Events – An Alkan Calendar

Already a host of events has been prepared for Alkan's bicentenary year. The listing we give below is based on information we have to hand, but do watch the Society's website which we will keep regularly updated with additional information, (including any changes!) The website contains hyperlinks to most events giving more details, including locations.

January 2013

Thursday 24 January . The Forge Music and Arts Venue, 3-7 Delancey Street, Camden Town, London NW1 7NL. Recital and dinner of the **Liszt Society**, in conjunction with the Alkan, Berlioz and Wagner Societies. Helena Dix (soprano) and Ben Woodward (piano): Mark Viner (piano). Music to include Wagner, Liszt, Thalberg, Chopin and **Alkan: op.39 no.12 'Le Festin d'Esopo'**. **See programme and application form on last two pages of this Bulletin.**

February 2013

Saturday 2 February 2013 Salle Lucie Aubrac, Montmorency, France - Françoise Gnéri (viola) and Claire Désert (piano) play music by Onslow, Gouvy and **Alkan: Sonate de concert** (viola transcription).

Tuesday February 12 2013. City of London Music Society, Bishopsgate Institute, 230 Bishopsgate, London EC2 at 13.05. Piano Recital by Leslie Howard to include **Alkan Symphonie op. 39 4-7.**

March 2013

Tuesday 5 March 2013 Cardiff University Concert Hall at 19.00 Piano Recital by Kenneth Hamilton (The Eric Hodges Lecture Recital) to include Chopin, Liszt and **Alkan: Le Festin d'Esopo op. 39/12.**

Wednesday 6 March 2013. Christchurch, Bexleyheath. Piano recital by Aleksandr Szram, to include music by **Alkan**, Chopin and Liszt.

Sunday 24 March 2013. Théâtre de Clermont-L'Hérault, France. Trio Talweg play T. Gouvy: Piano Trio no. 5 and **Alkan: Piano Trio op. 30.**

April 2013

Wednesday 3 April 2013 Oratorio San Filippo Neri, Bologna, Italy; Sunday 21 April 2013 Auditorium Noureev, Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois, France; and Tuesday 23 April 2013 Palazzetto Bru Zane, Venice, Italy at 20.00. Trio Talweg play T. Gouvy: Piano Trio no. 5 and **Alkan: Piano Trio op. 30.**

Sunday 7 April 2013 Chapelle des Rédemptoristes, Châteauroux, France; Saturday 13 April 2013 Fondazione Siotto, Cagliari, Italy. Billy Eidi (piano) plays preludes by Heller, Fauré and **Alkan.**

Friday 12 April 2013. St. Barnabas Church, Ealing. Piano recital by Aleksandr Szram, to include music by **Alkan**, Chopin and Liszt.

Friday 19 April 2013 Théâtre de Lisieux, Lisieux , France and Sunday 21 April 2013 Pôle culturel du Marsan, Saint-Pierre-du-Monte, France: Piano recital by Pascal Amoyel to include Liszt, Grieg and **Alkan: Grande Sonate 'Les Quatre Âges' op. 33.**

Sunday 21 April 2013, Istituto Liszt, Bologna, Italy. Costantino Mastroprimiano (piano) plays Liszt: Piano Sonata and **Alkan: Grande Sonate 'Les Quatre Âges' op. 33.**

Sunday 28 April 2013 Espace Ligéria, Montlouis, France. Françoise Gnéri (viola) and Claire Désert (piano) play music by Onslow, Gouvy and **Alkan: Sonate de concert** (viola transcription).

May 2013

Wednesday 1 May 2013. Steinway, 44 Marylebone Lane, London W1. Piano Recital by Leslie Howard and Mark Viner, to include music of **Alkan**. **Event supported by the Alkan Society**, jointly with the Liszt Society

May 2013 (tbd) Kumho Asiana Cultural Foundation, Seoul, South Korea; Thursday 9 May 2013 Auditorium Cziffra, La Chaise-Dieu, France; Friday 31 May 2013 Church of Saint-Lambert, Quebec, Canada. Billy Eidi (piano) plays preludes by Heller, Fauré and **Alkan**.

Friday 10 May 2013. University of Hertfordshire, as part of 'Mayfest'. Piano recital by Jonathan Powell to include John White (Sonata no. 8, extracts) and **Alkan Concerto op. 39/ 8-10**. **Event supported by the Alkan Society**.

Sunday 12 May 2013. Eastbourne Arts Centre. Piano recital by Aleksandr Szram, to include music by **Alkan**, Chopin and Liszt.

Saturday 18th May 2013. Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. Piano recital by Jonathan Powell to include Michael Finnissy 'Alkan-Paganini' and **Alkan Concerto op. 39/ 8-10**. **Event supported by the Alkan Society**

Tuesday 21 May 2013 Conservatoire à rayonnement régional de Paris, Paris, France; Saturday 25 May 2013 Palazzetto Bru Zane, Venice, Italy at 20.00. Françoise Gnéri (viola) and Claire Désert (piano) play music by Onslow, Gouvy and **Alkan: Sonate de concert** (viola transcription).

Friday 24 May 2013. Oxford, Jacqueline du Pré Music Building. Piano recital by Jonathan Powell to include Sorabji, Busoni, and **Alkan Concerto op. 39/ 8-10**. **Event supported by the Alkan Society**.

Sunday 26 May 2013 . Brighton, Sussex - Music of Our Time Festival. Piano recital by Jonathan Powell to include Finnissy, Smith and **Alkan Concerto op. 39/ 8-10**. **Event supported by the Alkan Society**.

Tuesday 29 May 2013 . London - details tba. Piano recital by Jonathan Powell to include Finnissy, White and **Alkan Concerto op. 39/ 8-10**. **Event supported by the Alkan Society**.

July 2013

Tuesday 9 July 2013 Château Mercier, Switzerland; Saturday 27 July 2013 Church of Saint-Pierre-de-Cormeilles, Normandy, France. Trio Talweg play T. Gouvy: Piano Trio no. 5 and **Alkan: Piano Trio op. 30**.

July 2013 (date tba) Nancy, France. Billy Eidi (piano) plays preludes by Heller, Fauré and **Alkan**.

August 2013

Sunday 18 August 2013 Massif des Bauges, France; Thursday 22 August 2013 Conservatoire à rayonnement régional de Lille, Lille, France. Piano recital by Pascal Amoyel to include Liszt, Grieg and **Alkan: Grande Sonate 'Les Quatre Âges' op. 33**.

Sunday 11 August 2013 Church of Durbuy, Belgium. Trio Talweg play T. Gouvy: Piano Trio no. 5 and **Alkan: Piano Trio op. 30**.

October 2013

October 2013 (date tba). Cardiff University. Piano recital by Jonathan Powell to include Finnissy, Liszt, and **Alkan Concerto op. 39/ 8-10**. **Event supported by the Alkan Society**

Sunday 6 October 2013. Congress Hall, Levoca, Slovakia at 15.00. Concert by Igor Karško (violin), Jozef Lupták (cello) and Nora Skuta (piano): **Alkan: Grand duo concertante op. 21 (violin and piano): Trio, op. 30: Sonate de Concert, op. 47 (cello and**

piano) as part of 2013 'Indian Summer in Levoca' Festival. **Event supported by the Alkan Society.**

Monday 7 October 2013. Congress Hall, Levoca, Slovakia at 15.00. Piano recital by Thomas Kamieniak to include Poulenc, Wagner/Liszt and **Alkan: Le Festin d'Esopé op. 39/12; L'incendie au village voisin op.35/9; Minuetto alla tedesca op.46; Etude for the left hand op. 76/1. Event supported by the Alkan Society.**

Monday 21 October 2013. Ravello Concert Society, Via Raffaello, Ravello, Italy. Piano recital by Mario Angiolelli, to include music by Verdi/Liszt, Wagner, and **Alkan: Rondo Chromatique op. 12**

November 2013

Thursday 21 November- Saturday 23rd November 2013, Paris. **International Colloquium: 'Charles-Valentin Alkan, le piano visionnaire.'**

- 21 November: Bibliothèque Nationale Française : 'Sources, réception et postérité.'
- 22 November: Conservatoire: 'Connaissance, analyse et interpretation.'
- 23 November: Musée de la Musique: 'Facture instrumentale et répertoire.'

Monday 25 November 2013. St. Michael's, Cornhill, London. Organ recital by Nicholas King of music by **Alkan.** Details tba.

Thursday 28 November 2013. St. James's Church, Piccadilly, London. **Afternoon and evening concerts of music by Alkan, details tba. Event promoted by the Alkan Society.**

Saturday 30 November 2013. Bachus Conservatory, Austin, Texas. **Charles-Valentin Alkan 200th Birthday Concert.**

Look out for updates on the Alkan Society website!

Alkan/Paganini – Letter to the Editor

We have received the following thought-provoking letter from member Robert Warwick:

Dear Alkan Society,

I was thinking the other day about Ronald Smith's comment about the opening theme of Le Festin d'Esopé that it was, "One of those maddening tunes one seems to have known all one's life but cannot identify." Raymond Lewenthal hedges his bets by describing the famous theme as Hasidic in character if not in origin, and Smith believes that Alkan's theme may have sprung to life as a synthesis of a traditional Hasidic melody and the minuet from Mozart's G minor symphony. I've always agreed with both men, but I've always felt there was more to it than that. Could Alkan's famous masterpiece have been inspired by Nicolo Paganini?

I don't believe that Alkan was immune to the extraordinary power and magic of Paganini's artistic personality and virtuosic violin music, after all, his most important early compositions were titled "Caprices ou Etudes". There is allusion to violin writing in Alkan's first and second studies op. 76, particularly variation 3 of the right hand study which Ronald Smith thinks resembles a bold, pianistic amplification of violin figuration, in which "one can almost catch the swish of Paganini's bow". William Eddie also writes of Alkan's fascination with "Paganini-like devilish tremolando effects in op. 76 no. 1.

Paganini wrote 24 Caprices, the last of which of course is his most famous composition, a theme and variations in A minor. Alkan's 24th Etude, (you have to include his major key studies to complete the cycle), is also a theme and variations.

Paganini's piece is in 2/4 with an opening theme that consists of a four bar repeat, (i.e. eight bars), and then an eight bar development of the theme itself marked *p*. Is it just coincidence then, that Alkan's piece is in 2/4, lasts eight bars and is also marked *p*? Furthermore the music of both these wonderful themes has another element in common, namely the repeated group of four semi-quavers, which help to give the music its infectious and memorable bounce.

The development of every one of Paganini's variations lasts eight bars and every one of Alkan's variations, (except the extended 25th), lasts exactly eight bars. You can play both themes together simultaneously, (providing you transpose one of them!), and they'll fit comfortably together.

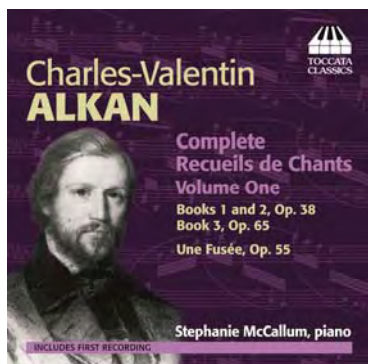
Why did Alkan write 25 variations then? Maybe this was his *hommage* to the great opus 1 publication of the 24 violin Caprices, each variation, a little Caprice in itself. The 25th variation, a great chordal apotheosis, concludes the musical journey in the home key, in a way that his 25th Prelude also does,

Le Festin d'Paganini? Another mystery!

Best wishes,

Robert Warwick

New Recordings, New Books - and Amazon



Alkan recordings of 2012 have included Vincenzo Maltempo's CD of the Grande sonate op. 33 and the Symphonie from op. 39, and Ed Cohen's recital disc including Le Festin d'Esopo op. 39/12. Your Society has been particularly delighted to support the forthcoming recordings by Stephanie McCallum which will include all five books of Alkan's 'Chants', together with a number of lesser-known and unrecorded works. The first volume of these will be released in the UK by Toccata Classics (target date April 2013), and will include the first three books of Chants together with the op. 55 'Un Fusée'.

We also understand that a new book on Alkan from Brigitte François-Sappey is to be published in France early in 2013.

We remind all members that all recordings and books about Alkan in print – and indeed any other books, recordings or goods - can be purchased from amazon.co.uk via the Society web-site. Our links from the website have now been upgraded and can be found on the front page and on the Alkan Society shop page. You can also purchase many recordings with a single click direct from the website discography. We encourage everyone to make all their Amazon purchases via these links- it doesn't cost you anything additional, but the Society gets some commission from Amazon which helps support our activities.

Levoča Festival October 4-8 2013

This year's Indian Summer in Levoča Festival in Slovakia, of which the Society has kindly agreed to be a patron, will feature as mentioned above Alkan's 'complete chamber music' as well as some of his less-heard piano music. We also hope to provide a hearing for Alkan's settings of synagogue songs and some other rarities. The nearby city of Kosice is 2013 European Capital of Culture so the Festival will be taking place in a lively context. We shall be glad to give further information to any who wish to come along. Others taking part in the Festival include the violist Maxim Rysanov, the Kapralova Quartet of Prague and the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra. The Festival's website is at www.lblfestival.eu, and enquiries can be sent by e-mail to info@lblfestival.eu.

Alkaniana

Alkan-Masarnau – début de la correspondance

In Bulletin 82 we wrote about the extraordinary cache of letters between Alkan and his friend Santiago de Masarnau, preserved in the Sanjurjo Collection at the Spanish National Historical Archives. (The originals can be viewed on the internet at the PARES website <http://pares.ncu.es>). We refer readers to that article for the background to the friendship of Alkan and Masarnau and for Masarnau's extraordinary career. (The Bulletin may be downloaded from the Alkan Society website).

These 41 letters, covering forty years, transform Alkan's biography. All after the first are written in the intimate 'tu' form for 'you', whereas all other Alkan letters we have use the form 'vous'. Moreover, particularly in the early letters, they speak with an unparalleled openness of Alkan's feelings and emotions. We give here the first English translations of the first three letters, in which nos. II and III more than demonstrate these extraordinary qualities. It should be stressed that these translations are a 'first attempt'; Alkan writes very freely, often without capital letters to mark the start of sentences, and is clearly frequently carried away by the force of his emotions in his wordings and syntax. We do not know the identity of the woman he mourns or the friend who betrayed him in letter III, but they clearly brought to a head a profound emotional breakdown. It is difficult to know exactly how to interpret Alkan's feelings towards Masarnau himself. I have translated throughout 'amitié' as 'friendship', and 'amour' and the verb 'aimer' as 'love'. It may be pointed out that, even in despair, the letters show touches of Alkan's eccentric humour.

It would have been impossible to create these attempts at translation without the transliteration and outline comments of François Luguenot, who has done a superb job of cracking Alkan's often (to this writer) illegible handwriting. All the contents of the letters (underlinings, brackets etc.) are those of Alkan himself; editorial insertions and clarifications are in square brackets. I am also very grateful to Julian Haxby for elucidations of French style and idioms, especially in the very fraught letter III.

As these are not intended to be definitive scholarly renderings, I have kept notes, which are based on the comments of M. Luguenot, to a minimum. An early scholarly edition of these letters (and indeed of all Alkan's correspondence) is urgently required; we believe one is in sight for 2014, and greatly hope that this is the case.

DC

I

[Paris, January 31 1834]

To Masarnau [in Paris]

My dear Masarnau,

M. Zimmerman has requested me to ask you if you would play something with me on the 13th of next month, 'Thursday at 8', and I thought that was possible given what you said me. – If you're still, as I hope, of the same disposition, let me know; or rather tell me which piece for 4 hands or two pianos you choose. I would be very grateful –

Ever yours,

C:V: Alkan

I'll be at home Sunday night and Monday night.

Note: This letter probably refers to a recital at the house of Zimmerman (the piano professor at the Conservatoire), reviewed in the contemporary journal *Le pianiste*.

II

Paris, September 1 1834 To Masarnau in Madrid

How grateful I am, my good Masarnau, that you wrote to me on your arrival at Perpignan. I thank you all the more as you must have been exhausted by the journey, and that "alas for mankind" when the physique is low, morale also suffers a bit. So I must believe all the more in the fine friendship of which you speak. --- I don't want to dispute here as to which one of us likes the other better, for I like that no more than to argue about who will pay the bill at a café; but I will tell you only that by nature I feel inclined to love, first, those who love me, then those who have talent, and finally good folk. So it's up to you to judge whether I should feel inclined towards you - give me the pleasure for the moment of setting your modesty aside - and if I should be proud and happy to be loved by you – that's enough chatting about friendship for the moment. we can always get back to it, as for me at least it's most interesting.

I intended to wait for your news from Madrid before writing to you, but as the father of your two young people told me he could bring you my news, I readily accepted his offer. Moreover he promised me this morning to remind you of me. I venture to believe that this would have been unnecessary, but it's all the same. It makes one more time that you will hear my name vibrate in your ears and that gives me pleasure. – As for me, I don't know by what anatomical miracle I have no need for that sort of thing, for my heart has responsibility for that function, and it's not a little full. I think it is the best part of my poor being, for it led me to love you the first time I saw you.

----Well! here I am once again automatically covering the same tracks as before. Forgive me, unlike you I do not have 50 open roads before me. I have only my piano or my heart, my heart or my piano. So the dry style of this letter, and of those which follow, won't surprise you; for I hope, if it please God and Santiago, that the fewer letters the better – for when there will be no more, I shall be able to shake your hand, hear you speak and see you at last--

They are really nice charming people, the two students that you gave me, they are both goodness personified. It makes me feel a bit awkward sometimes because I'm used to finding with all my pupils, if not different opinions to mine, at least some demands to fulfil – but with these two: "what you want is what we want" – they really couldn't be more obedient.

I see little of the mother, I hear little of the father, but, as far as I can judge, in French, they seem to be pleasant enough, and that's all I can ask. I must say, to my own, I have not missed a single lesson. I take pride in this, but the credit is all due to them alone. If they had bored me I'd have already let them down 36 times. I thank you once again for having cast your eyes upon me to replace you. It is a task well beyond my strength, but they probably have enough sense to know that ordinary piano teachers are not Masarnaus, and they tolerate me, at least so far----

When there's a corner of your letter left over and you've told me all you are willing to about your friendship, then tell me a bit about your country and its beauties. I may be ignorant but on the other hand I have a great desire to learn and I won't miss a lesson. - But think that for that your pen will have to be tired of telling me 'I love you'.

Listen, sir, that must be the subject of the fugue you write to me, always - or at least some fragments. ---- I perceive that this is the moment to say goodbye; this irks me – I hope you won't say the same. But it's not my fault, you know that I like to put many notes in a piece of music, and consequently many words in a letter. - I only ask you to decipher this scribble as you did my caprices, and I'll be happy, if one can ever be so down here, especially when away from one's friends-----

C: V: Alkan

Notes: The 'two students' are presumably the Piñeiro children; Alkan writes more of the family in letter III. The 'caprices' to which Alkan refers would be opp. 12 and 13 (referred to also in letter III) – the op. 16 set was to be dedicated to Masarnau. This is the first mention of these works.

III

Paris, January 3 1835 To Masarnau in Madrid

Is this is a letter I'm writing to you? or rather just my thoughts that I throw on a piece of paper and send to your address? I leave you to judge that, but the fact is that I would find it impossible to write now in a different style and I've chosen to confide my troubles to you.

I am at the most miserable period of life, where one quits the age of poetry and begins to lose one's illusions one by one. No one could have been more credulous than I. But alas! for that reason no one could have doubted more than I will one day. In one year of time I have learned more about the world than anyone normally learns in ten. But why did I want to look at everything through a microscope, or rather why was all around me laid bare before my eyes? I see around me only egoism, selfishness, infatuation instead of friendship, yes infatuation.

And who knows? maybe what you call, what you believe is, friendship towards me, is also no more than that. - I move my fingers a little faster than you would on the keyboard, and astonished by that you were curious to know me, believing me more than I am. It must be that I can inspire no more than this, since the man I most believed my friend, to whom I owe my introduction to you, although he knows me well, is much colder to me; his letters no longer breathe the touching solicitude of before, instead a sort of irony seems to dominate them. Oh! the day I will truly have cause to doubt his friendship, my feelings will suffer a heavy blow from which they will struggle to recover-----

I have a beautiful memory, it is of who is no more, perhaps that is why [it is so beautiful]. A woman loved me, but with a pure love, a disinterested love; she is dead. Is that fortunate, is it unfortunate, I ask myself? If she had lived, I might perhaps have wished to try her too sorely and there would not have been for me what I now call a beautiful memory. – Meanwhile I'm desolated, I weep. Yes, even though I sometimes forget in the whirlwind of events which surrounds me, it comes back to me later, and then it is a new force, remembrance, which arises from the smallest things, tearing my innards; inhuman desires seem to dominate my heart; I burn, I crave for something I cannot identify, I feel suspended in mid-air, wholly unable to cling either to heaven or to earth and yet she who causes my torment today suffered in her lifetime through me. I showed towards her a coldness that I did not feel, I went for a long time without seeing her, I never said farewell at her deathbed! Even though I was not to blame for this last cruelty, I would give my last drop of my blood to have embraced her at her last moment, to be sure she forgave me my indifference.

And when these torments are joined by the fear of being abandoned by one's few friends, of being not being loved as much as one deserves by those close to one, of being misled, of being shown ingratitude by the unfortunates whom one has helped, one's head splits [la tête se brise], and one begins to doubt the goodness of humanity. Not of nature, not of the Supreme Being, such an idea has never entered, and never will enter, my mind. - I told you: I have a beautiful memory - do you want me to count on two, once I approach death? Well, be my friend: not, like my friend Field, because I have written six caprices and a concerto, but my friend because there is in me something which burns to attach, and because this feeling must not decay by remaining cold as it has been now for some time.

The image shows a page of handwritten text, likely a letter. The text is written in cursive and is overlaid with a second set of text in a paler ink. The original text is darker and more legible, while the paler text is written over it, often obscuring the original words. The paler text appears to be a later addition by the same author. The text is arranged in several lines, with some words and phrases being repeated or modified in the paler ink. The handwriting is fluid and characteristic of the 19th or early 20th century. The paper shows signs of age and wear.

From Letter III, showing later lines (in paler ink) added by Alkan, written across original text. Spanish National Historical Archives, Sanjurjo Collection.

I love you, less for the incredible variety of your knowledge, than for yourself, for the goodness of your soul; which is perhaps the fruit of your unusual learning. I love you, but with a friendship that admits no sharing - a friendship which resembles constantly the fleeting love that an impassioned woman may have for you for a moment. If I write to you all the time; if I have been a year without speaking to you; you are nonetheless the image I have before me when returning to my room alone with my thoughts I seek a friend, as the image of she who has died presents itself when I seek a lover. So look inside yourself, think about it, and see if you can resolve to respond to what I ask; or else otherwise burn this letter and my earlier ones to you – if I were only to be granted a moment more of friendship.

[The following in sepia ink lengthwise on the paper, across the previous text – see illustration.]

Perhaps I could have plagued you even longer over our [illegible word – ‘réserves’ ?] if I hadn’t noticed I was running out of paper, and if I hadn’t got up from my chair to do some turns of the room. – I don’t however wish to beg your pardon for having dared for a moment to forget myself with you. I just want to ask you for a little indulgence and make you understand that, having no one to whom I can open everything, and having just had the time to write you tonight, you will be obliged to read these moments of madness that occasionally pass through my head. -

I don’t want to end this letter without mentioning your good friends the Piñeiros. They returned a while ago and I went there regularly until eight days ago they learned of the death of a family member. I am going there however tomorrow. Mr. Piñeiro was not in Paris the last time I went. I was there when the sad news was announced to Ms. Piñeiro – her grief was something terrible to see. ----- But let’s pass on to other matters. I have talked so much about sad things today that I must at least try to be jolly for a moment. But what to tell you? I have no idea, as at present I am in the process of writing three caprices which will not be jolly.

As soon as I have something new engraved I will send it to you on the condition that you will do the same. I'm also orchestrating my concerto with the intention of playing it this year in public, but it goes very slowly because I give many lessons and this greatly tires me. But this has a good side – it stops me thinking. You may find after reading this letter that it doesn't reflect this [i.e. stopping thinking] - if so, write to me quickly and I will start giving more lessons. I see that I definitively don't have any more paper. I congratulate you because I would have emptied even more of my miseries upon you [je t'aurais rompu encore plus longtemps la tête de mes misères], assuming you had the kindness to read the tale.

So farewell to him who says: dicendomi che m'ami [Italian: telling me you love me] (even if it isn't true) – I can do no more than finish this letter as you do yours for I need these words for my happiness – assuming there can be any happiness on this earth for

C: V: Alkan

Notes: For the caprices, see note to letter II. The concerto may be either of the two Concerti da camera, or perhaps a third, lost, work. ‘Field’ is the pianist Henry Ibbott Field, to whom the second Concerto da camera was dedicated, and who gave its premiere.

Ch. Valentin Alkan Sr. : A Psycho-Musical Study by A. de Bertha

The following article, translated for the Bulletin by Julian Haxby together with its notes from the bulletin of the Société Alkan no, 13 (September 1989), was originally published in the Bulletin Français de la Société Internationale de Musique, 15th February 1909, (pp. 135-

147). *Written by the Hungarian musicologist Alexandre de Bertha (Bertha Sandor in his native country), it is one of the few detailed memoirs of Alkan by a contemporary – albeit published twenty years after Alkan's death, so some of its details should perhaps be treated with care. Notable is its equivocal evaluation of Alkan's compositions. De Bertha was also a concert pianist, a composer who researched the octatonic scale, and a writer on topics relating to the history and ethnography of his country.*

It was at the beginning of 1872 that M. Elie Delaborde¹, the magnificent pianist and eminent professor at the Conservatoire, introduced me to Alkan, with an enthusiasm unfortunately rare amongst colleagues.

I had made his acquaintance the previous year in London, at the home of Walter Bache², my fellow student under Liszt, at a soirée attended by 27 pianists, including Silas³, the Dutch improviser Jacques Bauer, etc.

I was introduced to Alkan at his apartments at No. 29, rue Daru⁴; he had two in order to avoid being inconvenienced by noise from his neighbours: one on the first floor where he slept and worked, and the other above, where he had his bathroom, library and box-room.

I was told later that he originally had at his front door a peal of three bells tuned to C, E and G, which was intended to charm his visitors but which, rather, alarmed them with their din. They were no longer there in my day.

Indeed, he had many other eccentricities apart from this. When Delaborde and I paid our visit, at one o' clock in the afternoon, he was still having his breakfast, at a small, very neatly laid table set next to his piano. He told us right away that he prepared his own meals, using butter that he also bought himself from his regular grocer, in the Halles-Centrales quarter. This was because he had stomach problems and thought he would suffer indigestion if any of his food were not of the purest. And he was convinced that any paid employee was inevitably dishonest.

Although it would have seemed peculiar for any man free from want to pay attention to such concerns, we were all the more surprised to hear them coming from Alkan, whose art should have elevated him above such prosaic minutiae and whose fastidious attention to language and etiquette made him the perfect gentleman, and whose scrupulous good manners were reminiscent of the days of Louis-Philippe. I never saw him dressed in anything other than a black suit or frock-coat, with white tie and top hat, even when he went out by cab to buy food. As for his conversation, it was beyond reproach in terms of expressions and very varied in substance, because, being the son of a headmaster, he had sufficient general knowledge to

¹ Eraim Miriam, known as Delaborde (1839-1913), was probably Alkan's natural son.

² Walter Bache (Birmingham 1842-London 1888), British composer and pianist, studied the piano with Stimpson, before going to Rome in 1842 to work with Liszt for three years. On his return to London in 1865, he played with E. Dannreuther an arrangement for two pianos of Liszt's symphonic poem, *Les Preludes*, which established his reputation. In 1867, he founded, with Dannreuther, an association to promote the music of Liszt and Wagner and in 1871 he launched annual orchestral concert seasons, at which he introduced such artists as Liszt and other more controversial ones. His brother Francis-Edward (1833-1858,) also a composer and pianist, wrote some 30 works, despite his premature demise.)

³ Edmond Silas, pianist and composer, born in Amsterdam in 1827, gave his first concert in Mannheim at the age of 10. He went to Paris to work with Kalkbrenner in 1842, then entered the Conservatoire, where he studied the organ with Benoist and composition with Halévy; in 1849 he won first prize for organ, beating Saint-Saëns and J. Cohen. In 1850, he settled in Great Britain, where he died in 1909. He was a friend of Berlioz: under his direction, he performed Beethoven's Triple Concerto for piano, violin and cello, Op 56. at Crystal Palace in 1852. He composed a Mass, an oratorio *Joas*, symphonies, the opera *Nitocris*, two piano concertos, pieces for piano and organ, cantatas, chamber music, etc.

⁴ The building has since been demolished.

broach any subject. And it would seem that, during the Restoration, headmasters' opinions were less advanced than today, because reactionary ideas seemed innate in him, his political idol being the Napoléon III of the days of Rouher et Morny.

But his attachment to the Second Empire was not solely political in nature. He always remembered with great fondness the friendly welcome that he received from Princess de la Moskova, at the time when he was considered a child prodigy, at the age of 13 or 14, when that great lady had him play at her musical soirées, which were virtually the only ones in Paris then. There was a dark side to those pleasant memories, however: Alkan recounted on several occasions how dismayed he had been on the evening when he heard the playing of the young Franz Liszt, whose already astonishing virtuosity overshadowed him. He wept with vexation throughout the evening and slept not a wink that night. That teenage emotional upheaval did not later prevent the two momentary rivals from enjoying a good rapport. This endured until the death of the "King of Pianists," who never failed, when in Paris, to visit the companion of his youth.

Alkan had a closer friendship with Frédéric Chopin, not only because the latter customarily resided in Paris, whereas Liszt made only fleeting appearances there, between his triumphant visits to the various European capitals, but also because Alkan felt captivated by the genius of that great Franco-Polish composer, whose memory he worshiped to his dying day.

Apart from him, I think he mentioned no other friends to me, although he had keenly frequented most of the musical celebrities of his time. Amongst the people whom he did not like, however, I must mention in particular Marmontel Sr., because of whom he was passed over for the Conservatoire, despite the fact that he fulfilled every condition for a post there, amongst the most illustrious professors.

Because of that setback, he was also deprived of the richly deserved satisfaction of being decorated, a blameworthy omission on the part of the Fine Arts administration, which at one time rewarded only officially recognised talents.

I did my utmost to remedy that injustice, by vaunting his knowledge and very distinguished artistic career wherever I thought it could be useful to that end. At the Ministry, I was told one year that that there was only one Cross to be awarded and that it had already been promised to an employee of the Conservatoire! On another occasion, I thought that I had secured the keenly desired object for Alkan, when he himself made it impossible. This is what happened.

Parisians of my generation certainly still remember Count Ferdinand de Beust, the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador, so popular both in official Republican circles and in the Saint-Germain quarter, under the first presidency of Jules Grévy (1878 to 1882). He was a very witty man, who preferred good-natured pleasantries to the formal aloofness customarily displayed by diplomats, thus offending the prudish nature of several mean-spirited persons, for whom a dull manner is essential on the part of anyone occupying such a position.

As a pure-blooded Saxon, the Comte de Beust had, apart from his political capabilities so useful in consolidating the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, a very great fondness for music. His memory was full of scraps of melody which he would spontaneously evoke whenever he sat at his piano; hence the mistaken belief that he was improvising original works. To make them musically viable he drew on my experience, at the kind recommendation of Ch. de Kuefstein, his senior adviser, the prototype of the Austrian grand seigneur, and since our collaboration proved somewhat successful, I soon became the Ambassador's favourite, to the great dismay of many jealous people and to the benefit of several of my friends.

In that capacity, I was entirely at home at the Embassy, attending not only dinners and receptions, but also meetings with visitors whom the Ambassador would receive during the day.

Early in October 1879, I thus had a fortuitous encounter there with Prince Orloff, the Russian Ambassador, whose wife was a princess Troubetzkoï⁵, a former pupil of Alkan. The Count having very kindly introduced me to that influential diplomat, I immediately resolved to approach him on the wronged artist's behalf.

- "Your Highness," said I, "permit me to say that you are probably unaware of something which indirectly concerns you."
- "And what may that be?" the Prince somewhat haughtily enquired.
- "It is that my excellent friend, Alkan, the great musician, has not been decorated!"
- "What you tell me is impossible!"
- "It is the absolute truth, Your Highness!"
- "Well, it will not remain so! I tell you that I will tomorrow ensure that this injustice is remedied!"

Having thanked him profusely in advance, I rushed out into the rue de Las Cases and hastened to Erard's⁶ to tell Alkan the good news. He seemed very pleased, but was in fact less than delighted, probably because he felt humiliated by my initiative. Be that as it may, he thwarted the sincere goodwill of the Prince, who went to his home nine times without ever being able to see him. Alkan returned his visits nine times without being able to meet him. On the final occasion, the usher informed him that there was no point in visiting in the afternoon because His Excellency always went out at two o'clock.

– "How irksome! For my part, I rest after lunch until two." Such was the astonishing reply from this incorrigible eccentric. And so his Cross of the Légion d'Honneur came to nothing.

Of course, Alkan was sorry not to have one, but how furious he would have been, had he still been alive, when this decoration was awarded to his brother, Napoléon, a professor at the Conservatoire, with whom he was at daggers drawn, for reasons that neither would ever reveal to me. Gustave, their younger brother, was on the contrary my friend's favourite, not only because of his melancholy kindness but also because of his helpfulness. He dealt with the practical arrangements for his brother's concerts: printing the programmes and issuing tickets and supervising the hall and staff during the performances. After his premature death, in 1877, I think, we saw the end of the series of "Six petits concerts" which Alkan gave annually at the former Erard premises, in a room on the ground floor. In these programmes, he introduced the extraordinary novelty of specifying the duration of the pieces: evidently as a practical means of enabling people to arrive at the desired time, or of instructing servants to collect their masters at precisely the correct hour, but it was also annoying for his audience, who were inevitably distracted by this excessively rigid list of halts, unwittingly reminiscent of railway timetables.

Apart from this preposterous detail, however, the "Petits Concerts" were of the utmost interest, both on account of the works that Alkan chose to perform and on account of the artists taking part: Alard de Vroye⁷, Mme Viardot⁸, Mme Szarvady⁹, and others. Of course

⁵ Alkan dedicated a piece to Prince Nicolas Troubetzkoï, his *Salut, cendre du pauvre!* Op. 45.

⁶ Alkan had an office there, with a pedal-piano on which he gave his concerts and his informal recitals, mainly on Mondays and Thursdays.

⁷ Delphin Alard, born 1815 died 1888, was an almost exact contemporary of Alkan. This French violinist and composer was a pupil of F.A. Habeneck and F.J. Fétis. In 1831 he joined the orchestra of the Opéra and in 1840 he replaced the renowned Baillot as the King's first violin. In 1858 Napoleon III appointed him first soloist at the Imperial Chapel. He was highly regarded by Paganini. He founded a quartet distinguished in the performance of Beethoven's quartets. He composed studies, concertos, fantasies, and a famous *School of the Violin* (Paris, 1844.)

⁸ Pauline Viardot (1821-1910,) a renowned member of the famous Garcia family and sister of the famous Malibran, was one of the foremost mezzo-sopranos of the 19th century. She also studied the piano with Liszt and harmony with Reicha. She made her debut in Rossini's *Otello* in 1839, took part

the organiser of these concerts kept the lion's share for himself, as both composer and executant. In this latter capacity, whether playing the piano or the *pédalier*, he had to struggle with a shyness that sometimes completely paralyzed him. One evening, for instance, he had to restart Bach's Toccata in F major twice, modestly apologising to his audience¹⁰.

To counter this shyness, he would give informal recitals twice a week, on Monday and Thursday afternoon, in the salon that the Erard company had made available to him since his youth. Although I took all my friends there, he still asked me to introduce him to the homes where I was received. So it was that I took him to visit Maurice Richard, the former Minister of Fine Arts, and Madame Emile Fourchy, his sister. However, Alkan would not attend soirées after 9 or 10 o'clock, which is just when most people would arrive, thus becoming more of an embarrassment than an artistic asset. He would visit my home with the same punctuality, to the extent that when he heard 10 o'clock chiming, he was liable to depart in the middle of the most interesting conversation, greatly shocking such austere persons as my poor late friend, General Hippolyte Bernard, who never forgave him for leaving him in such a manner without even bidding him farewell.

Clearly such behaviour was unlikely to help him make friends, and to keep them. During the final years of his life, he became increasingly invisible and solitary; he even considered withholding his bequest from those unquestionably entitled to it. For instance, at one time he spoke to me about bequeathing his entire assets to the State, so that the interest on it would enable him to found a new chair at the Conservatoire for the teaching of the *pédalier* (a piano equipped, like the organ, with a pedal-board.) Since I eventually deemed his decision irrevocable, I agreed one day to notify the Fine Arts administration, and specifically Baron Eugène des Chapelles, then head of the Theatres Bureau, and to arrange a meeting with him to introduce Alkan. But on the appointed day, we awaited him in vain on the rue de Valois; he failed to arrive, causing me the utmost embarrassment with M. des Chapelles. Fortunately, the latter had known me for a long time and realised that the blame lay not with me but with my old friend's strange moods. Indeed, I found him shortly afterwards at Erard's, calmly seated at his piano. By way of excuse, he told me that he had changed his mind!

Death surprised him on 30th March 1888, in a situation caused by his unusual habits. He was found lying dead in his kitchen in front of his stove, which he had probably been trying to light to cook his evening meal, having, as usual, spent the afternoon at Erard's. His burial took place according to Jewish rites, on 1st April, Easter Sunday, for which reason only four people other than family members witnessed his final journey: M. Blondel, Erard's manager; Maurin, the great violinist; M. Isidore Philipp¹¹, then a young pianist and now a professor at

in the first performances of Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* in 1849 and Gounod's *Sapho*, her career culminating in Gluck's *Orphée* in 1859. She was very close to Turgenev and Chopin, six of whose mazurkas she sang, in an arrangement for voice and piano, with his authorisation.

⁹ Willhelmine Szavady was a Hungarian pianist, born in 1834. She began her first tour at the age of 15; on her arrival in Paris in 1852 she performed Beethoven's first piano concerto, Op. 15, and won immediate acclaim. She retired for a year to mourn her mother's sudden demise. She returned to Paris in 1857, where she finally settled.

¹⁰ This memory lapse occurred on his reappearance on 15th February 1873, at the first of his annual *Six petits concerts*, and was entirely understandable, in view of his long absence from the stage. Who can forget the wonderful introductory wrong note played by V. Horowitz at his return to the Carnegie Hall on 9th May 1967, in J.S. Bach's *Toccata, adagio and fugue*, transcribed by Busoni!

¹¹ Isidore Philipp (1863-1958) was, like Bertha, of Hungarian origin. His parents settled in Paris when he was three years old. At a very early age, he entered the Conservatoire, where he studied under Mathias, before completing his studies under S. Heller, C. Saint-Saëns and T.B. Ritter. From 1893 to 1934 he was a professor at the Paris Conservatoire, where his teaching apparently favoured digital technique to the detriment of musical substance, although that did not prevent him from enjoying great renown. He is also the author of an incalculable number of collections of studies, both by his own pen and borrowed from others, often arranged by himself. He emigrated to the United States from 1941 to 1955. He also made a large number of piano transcriptions in the Romantic style, for

the Conservatoire; and myself. His demise went unnoticed, the newspapers making barely any mention of it. This was a somewhat deserved punishment, because he lived only for himself, to satisfy his own fancies, not wishing to repay the debt to society owed by everyone who, like him, possesses exceptional qualities and is thus able to act as an apostle of art.

The only excuse is that he did not do so deliberately, because one day he exclaimed to my wife: "How strange that talented people should think that they mustn't live like everyone else!"

Before discussing Alkan's merits as a musician, I must recount another of his original traits. It reveals the scale of his thirst for knowledge and his untiring aspiration to the ideal. I am permitted to mention it, though it may be somewhat flattering to me, because I was in fact merely the interpreter of my German and Hungarian masters' teachings. I communicated some of them at his weekly sessions; they interested him so much that in Autumn 1873, he asked me to come and see him regularly. We chose Saturday afternoon for that purpose and would exchange ideas about the performance of the pieces that he would play to me. After a while he became so fond of these conversations, during the course of which I would convey to him what little I had learned in Germany and Italy, that he eventually asked my permission to pay, as far his means would allow, for the time that I devoted him in this way. And so, every Saturday, he would put a 10 franc coin on the piano for me. I accepted it, because I felt that he would have misinterpreted my refusal, on account of our difference in age.

For the duration of his "Petits Concerts" I helped to compile the programmes — though he was rather authoritarian in that regard — and to perfect his interpretation. So it was that I had the opportunity to discover the huge range of his musical knowledge. He was familiar with all schools of the past, and since he had an infallible memory the innumerable pieces that he had formerly studied comprised a permanent repertoire, which was of an extraordinary variety.

And if this is an indisputable merit even today when, thanks to the complete or popular editions, the masterpieces of music are within everyone's reach, how much more so was it in the case of Alkan, who belonged to a generation which was musically far behind the times. I know something of this myself, because at the first paying concerts that I attended in Paris, in May 1864, at the Salle Pleyel, I heard a piano concerto by Cramer which at that time nobody would have dared to perform at a student concert at the Leipzig Conservatoire, and which no student at the preparatory classes of the Paris Conservatoire would be asked to study now.

Well! Amidst this extreme musical conservatism, Alkan enthusiastically explored Beethoven's last sonatas, the "advanced Beethoven" (to quote Mme Caruël de St-Martin, Alkan's favourite student, who was one of the victims of the Bazar de la Charité disaster¹²), but also the compositions of Sebastian Bach, which were at that time entirely unknown in France. In the hope of assimilating them better, a large proportion of them having been written for the organ, he devoted himself to the study of the *pédalier*, which can to some extent take the place of the former, if not in intensity and variety of timbre, then at least by offering a complete realisation of the composer's thoughts.

Of course, the fact that he was so far in advance of those around him reflected the forward-looking tendencies of Alkan's talent, which he owed exclusively to himself. But since they were isolated, little understood, and little encouraged, they had a somewhat artificial character, and this had an unfavourable influence on his execution, often making it exaggerated in both tempo and expression. It was reminiscent of those people who learn the

instance of J.S. Bach's organ works. Together with Delaborde, he supervised Costallat's edition of *Oeuvres choisies de Ch. V. Alkan* at the beginning of the century.

¹² The premises had been made available on the rue Jean Goujon in Paris for charity sales. They were destroyed on 4th May 1897 by a terrible fire, in which many people died, including a sister of the Empress Elizabeth of Austria.

grammar of a foreign language, with the intention of speaking it, and whose pronunciation perhaps conforms to the rules, but which always remains awkward and stiff. They attach importance to things that have none in practice, and on the other hand ignore the exceptions consecrated by usage and commonly employed.

For my part, I had not only the traditional ideas widespread in Germany, which could already have been useful to him, but also the observations of the new German school, which were in many cases instructive and always interesting. Recollections of the classical correctness of Moscheles¹³, Ferdinand David¹⁴ and Hauptmann¹⁵, the analytical method of Hans von Bülow¹⁶ and the lyrical flights of Liszt and Rubinstein¹⁷ were still freshly etched in my memory, and my observations, based on those of my uncontested masters, revealed to him unexpected points of view, whereby he gained an entirely new perception of the oldest pieces in his repertoire, and even his own compositions. I drew his attention to the effects achieved when one reconstructs a piece as an organic whole, having dissected it in terms of its ideas and motifs and its overall shape. While preparing his programmes, however, I paid particular attention to expression and tempos, giving him to understand that that a certain brusqueness is often appropriate in this regard, particularly in Beethoven. In the case of Bach, it is important to refrain from *crescendos* and *decrescendos*, because in these pieces, which consist of blocks of *forte* and *piano* there is room only for clear-cut contrasts.

¹³ Ignaz Moscheles (1794-1870,) Czech pianist and composer, studied under G.J. Albrechtsberger and A. Salieri. He was head of the piano class at the Leipzig Conservatoire, founded by Mendelssohn, from 1843 to his death, and contributed actively to propagating Beethoven's works. A talented composer, he was particularly appreciated by Chopin. F.J. Fétis (*Biographie universelle des musiciens et bibliographie générale de la musique*, Vol IV, Paris, Firmin-Didot, 2/1862) hailed his exceptional talent as an improviser. He taught Delaborde, Alkan's presumed natural son. As a composer, he wrote amongst other things a number of studies, whose musical interest is greater than the average of the didactic compositions of his time.

¹⁴ Ferdinand David (1810-1873,) German violinist and composer, was initially a student of L. Spohr and M. Hauptmann in Kassel, then of Mendelssohn in Leipzig. He gave the first performance of the latter's famous E minor violin concerto. When the Leipzig Conservatoire was founded in 1843, he became a violin professor there. His pupils included the famous J. Joachim. He wrote many compositions: concertos, introductions and variations, chamber music, and so forth.

¹⁵ Moritz Hauptmann, born 1792 and died 1862, was a very famous composer and theoretician, a student of L. Spohr. Like J.S. Bach, he was kantor at St. Thomas's in Leipzig and later became professor of theory at the Conservatoire in that city, where many German composers passed through his hands. He composed widely in all genres, and also wrote theoretical works.

¹⁶ Hans von Bülow was born in Dresden in 1830 and died in Cairo in 1894. As a pianist, he studied under Liszt, having worked with, amongst others, Litolff, F. Wieck -- Clara Schumann's father - and Hauptmann. In 1857 he married Cosima de Flavigny, the daughter of Liszt and Marie d'Agoult, who later left him for Wagner. He was not only a pianist, but also a conductor, composer, writer, and teacher. He had a prodigious memory and was supposedly the first to conduct major works without a score.

¹⁷ Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894,) Russian pianist and composer of Jewish origins, was one of the great celebrities of the 19th century, comparable in this respect to Liszt. He was taught by his mother and by Villoing, who organised his first European tour at the age of 11, after Liszt had expressed wonderment at his gifts. In 1858 he was appointed court pianist in St. Petersburg; in 1859 he established the Russian Musical Society, and in 1862 he founded the St. Petersburg Conservatoire, of which he became director, organising teaching along Western lines. His brother, Nicholas, did the same in Moscow. In 1867 he resigned the post to embark on a series of triumphant tours of Europe and America. In Paris in 1886, he gave a memorable series of seven historical concerts at Erard's, designed to portray the history of keyboard music (193 works by 31 composers!) He was much disputed as a composer himself, particularly by the "Mighty Handful" and their successors. Cesar Cui said that he was a Russian who composed, and not a Russian composer. He left a huge oeuvre: no fewer than 14 operas, four oratorios, six symphonies, chamber music, and a great many compositions for piano. His fifth piano Concerto in E flat, Op. 94, is dedicated to Alkan.

And whilst Alkan's musical isolation was already very unfavourable to him in terms of his playing, how much more so it became with regard to his compositions, most of which are hopelessly uneven. One feels that he has an instinctive sense of all that is lofty, that he drinks from the purest and healthiest springs of art, but that, seeing himself misunderstood, grows afraid, seems to doubt his ideal and abilities, and lapses into the worst concessions in order to secure his disconcerted public's forgiveness. He dreams of lofty deeds of Revolution and Empire, but ultimately serves in the National Guard! In his imagination, he travels the length and breadth of Europe, seeking inspiration from religious feeling and mythological tales, but is in fact more homebound than the most sedentary member of the Parisian bourgeoisie, allowing himself to be tyrannised by the petty details of routine existence!

Hence the inconsistencies of his style, sometimes learned to the point of pedantry, cautious to the point of affectation, sometimes mundane, coarse and ostentatious. Hence, on the one hand, his originality, taken to extremes in terms of the form and character of his pieces -- did he not write one for the piano that is over a hundred pages long, and another for the *pédalier* "for four feet alone"¹⁸ -- and, on the other hand, his strange habit of slavish imitation: did he not copy the first book of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* in the first book of his own *Chants*, using the same keys and the same tempos? His transcriptions for piano and *pédalier* follow those of Liszt very closely, revealing all the more clearly the fact that the idea came to him from the "King of Pianists," inasmuch as his transcriptions include those of Schubert's marches for four hands, the very melodies that Liszt chose to transcribe¹⁹.

Nevertheless there is unquestionably a style of his own. A very faint style, perhaps, and very tentatively expressed, but one that emerges from the midst of all his hesitations, all his diffidence, despite his efforts to mislead in this respect. He reveals an aspect of the Jewish soul that is unquestionably its greatest; there is something biblical about his *Prières*. His long-winded fervour is reminiscent of the outpourings of the Prophets, and when his voice swells, we seem to hear those invocations to the relentless Jehovah, who punishes the crimes of the fathers by smiting their descendants down to the seventh generation!

There was a rich vein to be mined here, because Mendelssohn is only the minstrel of Jewish sensuality and fancy and seems to think of Samson and the Philistines only in his incomparable *Popular Song* in A minor, which is, true, the fiercest war-cry imaginable²⁰.

Alkan's fear of thus revealing his real personality is unquestionably the result of his excessive politeness. It is, and has been, particularly in France, contrary to the development of any particular individual initiative. Meyerbeer concealed his race no less, not out of fear, since in his day Wagner had not yet launched his anti-Semitic campaign, but because he did not wish to stand apart. The Jewish temperament is not very marked even in Halévy's *La Juive* itself: it portrays the Jewish Passover ceremony, but its music is rather French, on the whole.

This reserve is all the more surprising on Alkan's part, inasmuch as he witnessed at close quarters the qualitatively, if not quantitatively, huge triumph enjoyed by Chopin's music,

¹⁸ This is the *Bombardo-carillon* in E flat major. We would draw attention to the anecdote about the pianist Rudolf Ganz (1877-1972,) who wanted to study this work with a student but who had to abandon the plan... because he was on insufficiently intimate terms with the lady in question!

¹⁹ It is not apparent which works Bertha is talking about here. Indeed, the transcriptions of Alkan that have come down to us, whether published or in manuscript form, never duplicate those of Liszt. The only two meeting points are the transcription of Beethoven's third piano concerto in C minor, Op. 37, which, however Liszt arranged for four hands (1878-79,) and the Hungarian composer's *Réminiscences de Don Juan de Mozart* (1841,) which can be compared to the Frenchman's *Fantaisie variations sur des motifs de Don Juan de Mozart* for four hands. Furthermore there is no trace of any transcriptions of Schubert's works by Alkan. Perhaps some have gone missing, like that of Beethoven's seventh symphony in A major, Op. 92, for eight hands, performed by Alkan, Chopin, Gutmann and Zimmermann on 3rd March 1838.

²⁰ De Bertha is referring here to the *Song without Words*, Op. 53 No. 5

which was saturated in Slavic elements. He could have taken them as a model and, taking up the harp of David, still vibrating after 3,000 years, could have brought to modern music the treasure-house of Jewish melody, recreating the musical environment in which the inextinguishable psalms once flourished. But, though able to understand that great Franco-Polish composer, Alkan was so much under his spell that he must have deemed him inimitable and been unable to perceive his real significance. Having often had the opportunity to hear him, he was attracted more by his qualities as a pianist than as a composer.

In this regard, it would have been fair for me, too, to pay him for our conversations. Replying obligingly to my many questions and playing all his immortal friend's masterpieces to me, more than once, he initiated me into most of the secrets of their execution, which were buried with him almost 60 years ago. To tell the truth, they boil down to the conclusion that one must not treat Chopin as a Romantic or a reformer but, on the contrary, as a hardened classicist who was prompted by circumstance to analyse spheres of art which had been neglected until his time. In other words, the classical manner of playing is essential to the performer of his works. Proceeding from here, one must therefore consider his embellishments, however inspired they may be, as mere decorations which could hypothetically be omitted, and in any case as having no entitlement to encroach on the actual substance of the composition. Consequently, the *rubato* that most pianists permit themselves to use when it comes to a Chopin composition, is permissible only in those places expressly specified by the author. In order to demonstrate the truth of this assertion, Alkan frequently repeated to me the following axiom, professed by Chopin himself: "The left hand must be the conductor, whose task it is to regulate and moderate any involuntary deviations by the right-hand." That genius, so prematurely wrested from Alkan's affection, was however apparently incomparable in terms of nuance, because he was not very strong and therefore achieved contrasts only by means of infinitely extended *pianos*. Whilst this permits some increase of initial sonority in Chopin's pieces, it entirely rules out its exaggerated use, with which virtuosos now assail their audiences' ears in order to stun them and to deprive them of any wish to judge the overall interpretation.

With his complete mechanism, which was however somewhat lacking in brilliance and elegance, with his knowledge -- which was misunderstood in his own time and which therefore isolated him -- and with his very well-fashioned and often very successful compositions (consider the *Saltarelle*, the *Chant* in E major, his *Etudes* and *Prières*), Alkan is the embodiment of what may be called a great talent, a great musician. What he lacks is neither invention nor the ambition to create something imperishable, but the consequent ideal and conviction. In art, as in love, one must believe in a concrete form of perfection outside which one seeks no salvation. This is of course a strict theory, but it is the only fruitful one and the only one that leads on the one hand to the production of works of strong character and style, and on the other hand to the creation of a family and home!

As I come to the end of these few reflections on Alkan, man and artist, I wonder whether they are likely to satisfy his spirit? Be that as it may, they are the sincere expression of my affectionate thoughts and of the genuine pleasure that I feel in invoking his memory. I can still see his fine face, white and pink, framed by thick silver hair and beard, and dominated by a broad forehead below which shone his piercing eyes. They do not seem to regard me angrily; they must understand that, while wishing to be truthful, it is the pious wish to provide a reminder of his name to the present generation, involuntarily forgetful and ungrateful, that has prompted me to take up my pen.

And yet it emerges from the foregoing that during his lifetime Alkan was almost alone in Paris in watching selflessly over the fire lit on the altar of art, to preserve it for those who now so greedily warm themselves at its flame, without knowing to whom they largely owe its vital radiance!

The Liszt Society Dinner and Recital
24th January 2013 at 7pm.
in conjunction with the Alkan, Wagner and Berlioz Societies



**The Forge Music and Arts Venue,
3-7 Delancey Street, Camden Town, London NW1 7NL**

The cost is £40 per head to include a two-course meal (meat, fish and vegetarian options), wine, and the recital.

Recital programme:

'Liebestod' from Tristan & Isolde – Richard Wagner	Helena Dix – soprano Ben Woodward - piano
Hexameron – Franz Liszt	Mark Viner – piano
Fantasy on Rossini's 'Moses in Egypt' – Sigismond Thalberg	
Plus works by Charles Valentin Alkan and Frederic Chopin	

Tear here -----

Reply Slip

Liszt Society Dinner and Recital – Thursday 24th January 2013 at 7pm.

Name:

Address:

I shall/shall not be bringing a guest(s) Please state number of guests if applicable-----

- I have paid by Paypal quoting payee destination address as treasurer@lisztsoc.org.uk (please delete as applicable)
- I enclose a cheque for £ payable to The Liszt Society. (please delete as applicable)

Please return by e-mail or post to:

Jim Vincent, Membership Secretary, 3 Offlands Court, Reading Road, Moulsoford OX10 9EX, UK
jim.vincent@hotmail.co.uk

PROGRAMME FOR DINNER/RECITAL 24TH JANUARY 2013 – 7PM.

‘Elsa’s Dream’ from Lohengrin **Richard Wagner**

‘Liebestod’ from Tristan and Isolde **Richard Wagner**

Soprano **Helena Dix**

Pianist **Ben Woodward**

Deux Nocturnes op.27 **Frederic Chopin**

Fantaisie-Improptu op.66 (posth) **Frederic Chopin**

'Le Festin d'Esope' op. 39 no. 12 **Charles-Valentin Alkan**

Grande Fantaisie sur l'opéra 'Moïse' de Rossini op.33 **Sigismund Thalberg**

Hexaméron **Franz Liszt, Thalberg, Pixis, Herz, Czerny & Chopin**

Pianist **Mark Viner**