



THE ALKAN SOCIETY

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Editor's notes

Members were very kind in their reception of Bulletin 61 but true to the rigorous intellectual discipline of C.-V. Morhange the lynx-eyed were not slow to indicate various egregious blunders I had committed. Let us therefore start straightaway with:

ERRATA from Bulletin 61

p.12, line 29 – read '*instituteur*'

p.14, line 15 – There was no Moscow edition of 'Le Festin' in 1963, only the edition of 1989 referred to in line 44.

p. 14, line 49 – should read 'his 5th Piano Concerto of 1874'.

Amongst the contents of the present issue you will find the remainder of the talk given to the Society in February on 'Alkan and his Jewish Roots'(pp. 211), which contains the recently discovered earliest critical assessment of Alkan (at the age of six!). Also:

- Advance notice of a piano recital by Katharina Wolpe (September 9th), to feature Alkan
- A mini-Alkan season in Cambridge on November 7th-8th
- An article by Ken Smith on the origins of Kendrick Partington's transcription of Alkan's 'Le Festin d'Esopé' for organ, and reviews of its première.

The next issue of the Bulletin will contain a review of Steven Osborne's Wigmore Hall piano recital on June 14th containing book IV of Alkan's 'Esquisses', and of his recent recording of the complete set for Hyperion. We also intend to reprint for members' reference Bernard van Dieren's pioneering comments on Alkan from his 1935 book, 'Down among the Dead Men'.

Lastly, let me repeat a comment from last time. The Bulletin can only be as lively as the Society's members – so please feel free to contribute your opinions, be they full-scale essays or brief queries; they will all be greeted warmly.

- *Editor (e-mail: info@alkansociety.org)*

Alkan and his Jewish Roots (Part 2 – Alkan and Judaism)

The following is the final part of a talk given by David Conway at the Alkan Society meeting of February 25th at University College London; the first part was published in Bulletin 61. The talk was illustrated with musical excerpts (as indicated in the text). The musicians were Richard Shaw (piano), Claudia Conway (soprano) and Maria Zachariadou (cello).

One character who chose the name Alkan in 1808 [as a consequence of the Napoleonic legislation demanding that all subjects had surnames] lived in the tiny village of Launstroff on the border with what was then the Kingdom of Westphalia, the German state founded by Napoleon. He was previously known as Cerf Lion (in French) or Herz Leib (in German) and lived from about 1750 to 1815 – broadly then a contemporary of Marix Morhange.

Let us follow this German Alkan a little. Firstly let me point out that all the other Alcans I have mentioned above in connection with the *serment civile* and the law of 1807, spelt their names with a ‘c’ as one would expect in French. Herz Leib Alkan, who chose to use a ‘k’ as one would expect in German, emphasised this Germanic preference by moving to Dillingen in Westphalia, where his family settled and produced over the next century a great quantity of musicians. These included Herz Leib’s son Jakob, a shopkeeper and klesmer-musician; Jakob’s grandson the composer Siegfried Alkan (1853-1927), who published a quantity of vocal music; Jakob’s great-grandchildren the pianists Robert and Oskar Alkan; and Robert’s son Robert Brand.¹ The heritage may show some signs – if we can demonstrate a plausible connection - of the musical ‘gene’ which appears to have run at least through Alkan Morhange, his son Alkan the composer, and his natural son Élie Delaborde.

So a plausible reconstruction might run as follows. Members of the Jewish family which associates itself with the name Alcon/Alkan participate in the general westward drift of Jewish populations in the seventeenth century, reaching the Rhineland, the furthest they can legally penetrate, some time between 1650 and 1750. Herz Leib of Launstroff is a member of this family. In the same area of Alsace, perhaps in the village whose name he was to adopt as a surname, born around 1750, lives the man we know as Marix Morhange. Some time in the late 1760s or 1770s, a call goes up from the Paris community for a *melamed* [teacher] – it is a long tradition for outlying Jewish communities to consult parent communities in such matters - and Marix gets the job. But a *melamed* needs to be married - and so a marriage is arranged with a relative – a cousin, or maybe even a sister – of Herz Leib. Settled in Paris, in 1780 the couple have a son to whom they give the civic name, in honour of his mother’s family, Alkan. This is the father of ‘our’ Alkan. Perhaps his mother was able to impart to him her family’s musical skills. I can advance not a shred of evidence for this, but I will bet it is not far from the truth.

Alkan Morhange married Julie Abraham of Mousigny – again almost certainly an arranged marriage – in 1810. Now that Jews were Frenchmen, their children could be given truly French names, Céleste, Charles-Valentin (born in 1813), Ernest, Maxime, Napoléon and Gustave. In the cases of Charles-Valentin and Napoléon, at least, these names appear to have been in fact chosen by using the names of neighbours who witnessed the birth, as recorded in the *acte de naissance*.

One of the less obvious consequences of the French Revolution is that it enabled Jews from poor, orthodox backgrounds, such as the Alkan children and the opera composer Fromental Halévy (b. 1799), to pursue musical careers by studying at the Paris Conservatoire. In this, the world’s first

¹ For all this information about the Dillingen Alkans, by the way, I am indebted to the work of Robert Brand’s son, Gregor. See his website www.angelfire.com/art/gregorbrand

secular national institution for musical training, students were admitted on the straightforward basis of examination. Like all French citizens, the young Halévy and Alkan were thus entitled to the benefits of this institution without compromising any religious tenets. Previously, the only entries to the profession of *musique savante* had been via the support of the Church, the aristocracy or family connections, all of which for obvious reasons excluded Jews. I might add that this training in a state institution also gave the opportunity for Alkan and Halévy (and their co-religionists) to feel French; no Jews in other European states had such opportunities of identifying with their country.

Incidentally I recently discovered in the Archives Nationales in Paris the record, so far unnoticed by researchers, of Alkan's entry to the solfège (singing exercises) class at the Conservatoire. It reads as follows:

Le nommé Alkan (Valentin) âgé de six ans ½ , présenté par Mr. son père, et Mr. Méric. Mr. son père Regleur de Papier de Musique. Cet enfant a une jolie petite voix et en est déjà à la moitié du solfège de Rodolphe. Vieille Rue de Temple no. 67, vis-à-vis la Rue des Francs-Bourgeois.

[Alkan (Valentin) aged 6 ½ , presented by his father and by M. Méric. His father a music-paper ruler. This child has a pretty little voice and is already halfway through Rodolphe's solfège. No. 67 Vieille Rue de Temple, opposite Rue des Francs-Bourgeois.]

Later on there is a similarly previously unnoticed record of his entry into the piano class.

Le nommé Alkan (Morhange) Valentin âgé de 7 ans. Cet enfant a des dispositions étonnantes – il a joué la 3e. sonate de Nicolai (en fa) bien d'aplomb.

[Valentin Alkan (Morhange) aged 7. This child has astonishing ability – he played the 3rd sonata of Nicolai (in F) with great aplomb.]

These entries are remarkable, not least because very few of the other entrants merit any comments other than the names and professions of their parent and their addresses. The infant prodigy Alkan was clearly something out of the ordinary and these are the first critical evaluations we have of his musicianship. We also learn from these a previously unknown address for the Morhange family (like the other known addresses, it is in the Marais district), a previously unknown profession for Alkan Morhange and the only other evidence, apart from Gustave's birth certificate, so far as I know, for the existence of Marix. It is a rather touching and typical instance of Jewish family pride, perhaps, that led to the child's exceptional presentation by both father and grandfather.

Note the Conservatoire record already gives our hero's name as simply Valentin Alkan, (and the later record of his brother Napoléon in 1826 calls him '*Alkan 3^{me}*') showing that the eventual formal adoption 'Alkan' as a surname was not, as has been claimed, a 'highly symbolic' expression of Alkan's Judaism. It was simply a habit of convenience because, as already explained, the name 'Morhange', despite the law of 1807, meant nothing special to the family in itself.

The rise of the Conservatoire enabled a commercial opportunity for the school run by Alkan Morhange. We can quote from one of Charles-Valentin's fellow pupils, later his professional rival, Antoine Marmontel:

(Alkan's) father, a hard-working and intelligent man, ran in 1833, when I knew him, a small boarding-school in the Rue des Blancs-Manteaux. Young children, the majority Jewish, received there an elementary musical education and also learned the first rudiments of French grammar....I can still see this house of M. Alkan père, this

patriarchal environment where the talent of Valentin Alkan was formed, and where his hard-working youth developed. I spent several months there as a boarder [...] in company with a group of children who came to take lessons in solfège and receive elementary musical education. It was like a preparatory school, a junior annexe of the Conservatoire.

This account, brief as it is, is highly suggestive of the social development of Jews in Paris in the twenty-five years since their emancipation: a school run by a Jew teaches music and French grammar – at a time when more Parisian Jews spoke Yiddish than spoke French –; but, moreover, the quality of its music tuition also attracts non-Jews aiming at the Conservatoire.

What in practical terms did Judaism mean to Alkan?

We have some suggestive evidence of Alkan as a participant in Jewish communal celebrations; the fact that he apparently took care to prepare his own food may suggest that he kept Jewish dietary laws. Certainly the Paris Consistoire (the Jewish communal governing body) took note of him as a distinguished co-religionist and had dealings with him on some notable occasions. In 1844 he was a member of the panel which assessed the skills of the proposed new *hazan* (cantor), Samuel Naumbourg, who proved to be an excellent choice. Circumstantial evidence that Alkan was at least an occasional attendee at the synagogue comes from the Consistoire's invitation to him on this occasion, suggesting that he join the congregation for the festival of *Shevuos* (Pentecost) in order to hear Naumbourg in action. Later Naumbourg would ask Alkan to contribute to his three-volume compendium of Jewish musical liturgy, (published between 1850 and 1857) for which Alkan composed two short and rather anodyne choral works. During the late 1850s Alkan sat briefly on a committee considering revision of the musical liturgy.

Most notable was the affair of organist at the main Paris synagogue, the Consistorial Temple. In 1851/52 the Temple was rebuilt, to include, for the first time, a fixed organ. With this in mind the Consistoire set about recruiting its first official organist in 1851. The name of Alkan was proposed and unanimously endorsed by the committee concerned, which included Halévy, who around this time became himself a member of the Consistoire board. Alkan accepted, and then within a few days resigned, citing at length, in a letter which has sadly been lost, artistic considerations. Halévy and the Consistoire President, who were deputed to talk Alkan round, failed in their task.

This incident has often been used as an example of Alkan's eccentricity and reclusiveness, and indeed there are many other events in his life, - including his legendary death from a falling bookcase whilst reaching for a volume of his beloved Talmud – which contribute to this image. Gérard Ganvert, who has prepared the most extensive consideration to date of Alkan as a Jew, concludes that the 'position of Alkan becomes less enigmatic [...] given that his misanthropic character can explain [his] changes of mind and missed opportunities [...]'.

However I venture to state that a further inquiry into the nature of Alkan as a Jew may give some additional clues to the many riddles which are attached to his career, and may enable us to substitute perhaps 'eccentric', which he undoubtedly was, for the too-often applied epithet 'misanthropic', which I think considerably overstates the case. Alkan did not after all live like a hermit, although he may understandably have taken the trouble to protect himself from unwelcome callers (as in the well-known story related by Professor Niecks, who asked Alkan's concierge when the great man was likely to be in, to which the well-trained concierge replied 'Never'). He had his pupils, he visited the Erard piano showrooms where a studio was reserved for him and in the 1870s began his series there of '*Petits Concerts*' of classical music.

For example, consider Alkan's first mysterious withdrawal from the public in the years 1838-1844, that is the period of the birth and early childhood of his son Delaborde. Whilst his

associates and contemporaries such as Liszt, Chopin and Berlioz had no problem vaunting their romantic affairs in public, such an attitude would have been quite contrary to Jewish family traditions – and we know the Alkan family was close – and hence perhaps to Alkan's own sentiments. (The identity of Delaborde's mother remains uncertain, although Alkan's great-nephew, Cyril Ray, boldly advanced George Sand as a candidate). We may note that Alkan's return to the public eye came about at around the same time as he took on Delaborde officially as a pupil at the age of 5, thus maybe subconsciously to Alkan 'normalising' and ratifying their relationship through the medium which was to him (and to Delaborde after him) supremely important. Not, however, that Alkan was in any way a prude – Chopin writes to his family in 1847

'This evening instead of getting all dressed up [...] I went with Alkan to the Vaudeville to see Arnal [...] As usual, Arnal is very funny. [...] He tells the audience how he was desperate to pee in a train but couldn't get to a toilet before they stopped at Orléans. There wasn't a single vulgar word in what he said, but everyone understood and split their sides laughing'.

Alkan's background and beliefs will also have coloured his relationship with the Consistoire. Until the seventeenth century Jewish belief, in whatever country, was always more or less identical; one God, one fixed and immutable set of laws given by God to Moses (which might however be subject to various interpretations by the Rabbis), a history set out in the Old Testament, a Messiah who was awaited. This uniformity, or I might say somnolence, was profoundly shaken, throughout European Jewry, firstly by the astonishing career of the false Messiah Sabbatai Zvi, and then again by the new ways of thinking encouraged by increasing contact with the Gentile world consequent on the Enlightenment and the opening of Europe's ghettos by the Napoleon's conquering armies.

Some Jews came to believe that the way forward was by baptism – either because, like Felix Mendelssohn's father Abraham, they felt that the beliefs and customs of the Jews had become irrelevant and that Christianity was an appropriate social norm, or for more venal reasons like the poet Heinrich Heine who mockingly described it as a 'meal ticket' to European society. Others sought to reform the religion to bring it up to date; amongst the leaders in these ideas were the Berlin magnate Judah Herz Beer, father of the composer Meyerbeer, and Fromental Halévy's father Élie, who as editor of the Paris Jewish newspaper '*L'israélite français*' in the years 1817-18 adopted the masthead '*Tiens au pays et conserve ta foi*' ('cleave to your country and keep your faith'). The sons of both of these carried forward the ideals of their fathers.

These new ideas were also affected, for French Jews, by dramatic demographic changes. As Paris grew, and the numbers and proportion of French Jewry in Paris increased dramatically, the centres of gravity for French Jewry moved sharply away from Metz, and to a lesser extent Bordeaux, to the capital. The Paris Consistoire, led by members of the leading and wealthy families, set the pace for French Jewry as a whole. Moreover by the 1840s the balance on the National Consistoire had changed from the originally conceived three rabbis and two lay members, to one rabbi and nine or ten lay members. Inevitably then the forces of modernisation took the upper hand in the direction of the development of French Judaism, although radicalism was also eschewed, the lay leaders being by nature of their positions in society conservative in many respects.

The use of an organ was a crucial argument in the modernization process. The rabbis who had compiled the Talmud in the fourth and fifth centuries had, as I have mentioned, forbidden the use of musical instruments in the synagogue. Moreover, the playing of an instrument on the Sabbath constituted work, and that was forbidden by Mosaic Law. The modernizers were however more moved by issues of prestige and respect than divine law; how could the Gentile perception of the Jewish service ever improve on that expressed by, for example, Charles Burney, if the

congregation were not compelled to be orderly and to sing in time and in tune? Organs and choirs would put the synagogue service on a footing of respectability comparable with the Church.

The nature of the close relationship between synagogue and state, which after 1830 even extended to rabbis' salaries being paid by the Government, meant that the worldly outlook would continue to prevail within French Jewish institutions. When Fromental Halévy became a member of the Consistoire in 1845, the newspaper '*Archives Israélites*' commented:

“It would no doubt be difficult to place among the administrators of the sect a man who is more honourable in character, more distinguished in talent, and more independent in his position”,

whilst noting blandly that

“The current members of our consistories [...] shine more through their position and the services they have rendered than through their religious studies and their knowledge of the sacred works”.

Everything we know about Alkan suggests that this artificial secularised Judaism was not the sort in which he was interested. He is the man, after all, who had a thorough knowledge of both Hebrew and Aramaic (not to mention Greek); who expressed a wish to 'set the entire Bible to music'; who left at his death many 'volumes of works in Hebrew', as well as 'thirty-eight volumes of Jewish works, finely bound'; who requested in his will that the inscription on his tomb should be in the old Jewish tradition no more than his name and dates; who left detailed legacies to Jewish charities and in the hope of establishing a prize for biblical cantatas at the Conservatoire. Not least he is the man who throughout the titles to his music scattered biblical epigraphs, references to prayers and psalms, and indeed inscribed part of his lost orchestral symphony, according to the witness of the critic and his former pupil Léon Kreutzer, with the Hebrew words '*Vayomer Elohim y'hi or - vayehi or*' – 'And the Lord said, let there be light - and there was light'. If Alkan was indeed, according to my conjecture, from a line of Jewish teachers, an heir to the traditions of Metz, then his attachment to the spirit and lore of Judaism would have been far from the temporising attitudes of a secularly-oriented Consistoire and the burgeoning bourgeois community it represented.

Alkan's individualistic view of Judaism is also suggested by his satirical comments, in a letter to Hiller, on Liszt taking holy orders in 1865.

'For my part, if I were to become a Rabbi, I should not accept the commands of the synagogue, but I would wear the habit in a quite independent spirit....'

Alkan's retreat from society in the last forty years of his life may therefore have been at least as much philosophical as misanthropic. Certainly the final years of the 1840s had been disastrous for his public career – his defeat for professorship at the Conservatoire by the inferior, but more politically astute, Marmontel; the early death of his friend Chopin marking the end of a great era of the virtuoso; and the decline of Paris as a concert centre after the revolution of 1848. Let us remember that Liszt also chose after 1848 to quit the career of a social lion in Paris for that of a musical guru in the quiet court of Weimar.

The evidence is that Alkan got the message of his era; he did not withdraw in order to spite the world, but (in his mind at least) to enrich it, not only with his continuing compositions, which continued to be published throughout the 1850s and 1860s, but with his biblical studies which, apart from his references to it in his correspondence, are now all lost to us. A single fragment perhaps remains; the piano piece '*Super flumina Babylonis*', op. 52, is preceded by a French translation of Psalm 137 of which it is a paraphrase. François Luguenot tells me that this

translation does not accord with any known published version; the strong possibility is therefore that it is from the hand of the master.

Alkan's continuing interest in Christianity, as evidenced by his translation of the New Testament and in much of his music, could therefore be seen as evidence of a mind intellectually committed to the synthesis of its worlds of music and religious philosophy. Not surprisingly this aspect of his activities has caught the attention of commentators such as the Dominican, Jacques Arnould; but we also need to bear in mind Alkan's comment to Hiller as he began translation of the New Testament, in a quintessentially Jewish humorous paradox: 'It seems to me you have to be Jewish to understand it'.

Now let us turn to the knotty question of the Jewishness of Alkan's music. Ever since, in 1850, Wagner's friend Theodor Uhlig, claimed to detect in certain music '*ein hebraisches Kunstgeschmack*', 'a Hebraic art-taste', thereby precipitating Wagner's notorious article 'Jewry in Music', it has been almost impossible to address issues of this sort in a dispassionate manner. What Uhlig, and Wagner (at least at first) meant to attack was what they saw as the vapid showiness of Parisian grand opera as exemplified in the music of Meyerbeer. The phenomenal popular and financial success of such music rubbed additional salt into the wound, no doubt, prompting Wagner to make the connection between this extravagant style and what he saw as Jewish commercialism.

Alkan's musical opinion was not perhaps very different. He was indeed commissioned by Meyerbeer's publisher, Brandus (also Jewish) to make an arrangement for four hands of the overture to Meyerbeer's '*Le Prophète*' which was published in 1850 (and incidentally remains the only way to hear this music, which was deleted from the opera score by the composer). But Alkan was no Wagnerian either – as he wrote to Hiller in 1860, "What brutality! What ignoble materialism!...Wagner is not a musician, it is a disease!" Alkan's sardonic and satiric blast '*L'Opéra*', from the 1830s – which was approved by another critic of Meyerbeer, Robert Schumann - leaves us in no doubt of his opinions.

(L'Opéra, op. 74 no. 12)

As an example of the way in which Jewish ideas can be seen to affect different aspects of Alkan's music, let us look at no. 15 of the op. 31 *Préludes*, which is prefaced by a quotation from the Song of Songs, Chapter 5, verse 2: 'I sleep, but my heart waketh'.

The book of the Song of Songs has always been highly prized in the Jewish mystical tradition, which interprets it as dealing with the love between God and the children of Israel. It is one of the very few books of the Old Testament apart from the Pentateuch which is treated at length in the rabbinical commentary known as the Midrash. The midrashic exposition of this verse is one which must have been known to Alkan, and which he could well have applied to himself:

Said the community of Israel before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Sovereign of the Universe! I am asleep in the neglect of religious observance, but my heart is awake for the performance of charity; I am asleep in respect of righteous deeds, but my heart is awake in the desire to do them; [...] I am asleep in respect of the Temple, but my heart is awake for the synagogue and the house of study; I am asleep in respect of the end, but my heart is awake for the redemption'.

Moreover Alkan characterises this piece in a manner reminiscent of *gematriyah*, a Jewish mystical technique that seizes upon correspondences between words from their numerical equivalence (letters in the Hebrew alphabet also signifying numbers); the quotation coming from chapter 5 verse 2, each bar of the music consists of two groups of five quavers.

(Prélude op. 31 no. 13)

I have no doubt that other pieces by Alkan conceal less obvious Jewish connotations. But if we set aside the obvious references in the titles and the tedious task – and dubious result – of seeking melodic parallels; that is, if we seek beneath the strictly superficial levels – what is there in Alkan's music which we can particularly denote as Jewish?

The simple answer which I would suggest is, in some ways, perhaps disappointing – and that is, virtually everything about it. But that does not mean that we can pinpoint a rhythm here, a harmony there. Charles Rosen has written a most perceptive essay on musical influence, in which he grades the process of affect. He outlines a scale of influence running from plagiarism at the crudest level, through borrowing, quotation, transformation, to inspiration, at the most subtle. Drawing the boundary lines between each category, he suggests, is no easy process, especially at the top end:

When the transformation is an almost total one, evidence for identity is erased in a work which now appears completely original. The source is likely to seem irrelevant to the critic, because it is not clear by what method he can reach it, ***although in this case the source is in fact more relevant for criticism than any other. The most important form of influence is that which provokes the most original and personal work.*** [my emphasis].

It is perhaps not unfitting, given our subject's personality, that an apparently paradoxical statement such as this can be, as it seems to me, the most accurate way of suggesting how Alkan's profound personal commitment to his religion pervades virtually all of his mature output. No less, of course, and in the same way, does his sensibility of the French musical and concert traditions pervade it, and of course the music of the composers he adored and often arranged, Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. It may indeed be the case that Alkan's German-Jewish background made him more open to the German musical tradition of which he was, in the opinion of Alexandre de Bertha, one of the sole proponents in France in the 1870s via the '*Petits Concerts*'.

We may say that Alkan is a great French composer, in the way that Conrad is a great English writer, because it is their sense of a parallel culture and their interest in its inter-relationship with their own social and artistic context that renders, in each case, their genius as rich, rewarding and unique.

I take as example the theme of Alkan's 'Aesop's Feast'. The feast referred to is itself of metaphorical significance here; Aesop, is required by his master 'to provide a banquet first from the choicest and then from the basest of all foods. On both occasions Aesop brought forth to his master's table the same delicacy, an ox-tongue [...]'. Debate has raged over whether the theme chosen by Alkan was Jewish in nature or whether it is an echo of the Minuet of Mozart's G minor symphony, which he had transcribed for piano. Surely the point is that it is unequivocally both.

(Theme of op. 39 no. 12, 'Le Festin d'Aesop')

Let us end with some pieces in which Alkan's Jewishness is indisputably evident.

Firstly, four unpublished pieces which exist in manuscript in the Conservatoire of Geneva, and of which we believe these are the first British performances. They were all four written for a pupil of Alkan's, Mlle. Zina de Mansouroff, whom he had apparently 'inherited' from Chopin. I must thank M. Luguenot and M. Tchamkerten of the Geneva Conservatoire for making copies of the manuscript available to me. The first three pieces are entitled collectively '3 anciennes mélodies juives' and are straightforward settings of traditional tunes; the fourth is rather different in conception.

The pieces are dated 1855, when Alkan was 42 and Mlle. de Mansouroff was 25. Alas we have no further information about this relationship. As Mlle. De Mansouroff was certainly not Jewish (being a maid of honour at the court of the Empress at St. Petersburg) it must remain a mystery why Alkan undertook to provide her with these pieces. There is no parallel elsewhere in his output of such gifts or of such transcriptions.

The scores themselves, although only a few pages, have much of interest apart from the music. They firstly indicate that Alkan wrote Hebrew script elegantly and confidently, in the style indeed of a 'sofer' or scribe. Secondly, Alkan gives instructions on Hebrew pronunciation which make it clear that he spoke Hebrew in the German/Polish accent which was common even in the time of my grandfather, but has virtually vanished today.

Alkan seems to have written these pieces specifically to give an illustration of Jewish liturgical traditions. His note on the cover page explains 'The words of the ritual which are common to all the feasts of the year are sung to different melodies; melodies which are gay or sad, more or less, according to the nature of the feast'.

The first piece, for example, 'Adon Olom', which originated in 12th century Spain and became incorporated in the synagogue service in the fourteenth century, is chanted day in, day out throughout the year, but to a great diversity of melodies. Alkan writes that the tune he has set is one used specifically for the Jewish New Year. He sets two of the ten lines of the hymn; the other couplets would repeat the same tune. This tune was a favourite of Rabbi Jacob Levi Mollin of Mainz, (d. 1427), known as Maharil, who was one of the first codifiers of the Ashkenazic liturgy, and who referred to its 'lovely and long drawn-out melody'. Despite its lyric qualities, the tune's earliest manifestations seem to be in a German satirical song 'Das Papstaustreiben' ('Expelling the Pope').

The second *mélodie* is the prayer 'Terakhayim b'tsiyon', subtitled by Alkan in French 'Consolation and Hope of Return'. The choice of this piece indicates that Alkan's knowledge of the liturgy was substantial. The prayer, the text of which is drawn from a variety of biblical sources, is said only on the evening of the Fast of the Ninth of Av, which commemorates and mourns the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem. The melody is one traditional for this fast day. It is more generally associated with the prayer 'Eli Tziyon', and can be traced back to medieval Spain, and even further, to a Gregorian chant in the liturgy of St. James of Santiago de Compostella. From the 15th century onwards, it crops up in German Christian hymns. Eric Werner points out its similarities to the famous ancient Spanish melody, 'La folia', famously set by Correlli and others.

The third piece, entitled in Hebrew 'B'tses yisroel mimitsroyim', ('When Israel went out of Egypt': Psalm 114) is scored for pédalier alone. The melody is also a borrowing from folk-tune, a 'contrafact' as this practice is known in Church music. The tune was in fact collected by the composer Benedetto Marcello from the German Jews of Venice and set as part of his '*Estro poetico-armonico*' of 1724-6. Alkan knew Marcello's work – he transcribed Marcello's setting of Psalm 18 for piano solo – so it is a moot point whether he gathered the tune from Marcello, or from the synagogue, or both. Allowing for word repetition in a traditional Jewish style, the tune fits the first four verses of the psalm in Hebrew, so after playing it as Alkan left it, we are taking the liberty of restoring the words to it.

The last piece is a separate, and original, setting of Psalm 42, v.2 in Latin: 'As the hart desires the waters of the spring, So my soul desires thee, O God'. Its style is composite; with a piano solo prelude and postlude reminiscent of the simple '*Prières*' of the opus 31 *Préludes*, the central sung melody has undeniably Jewish inflections. The manuscript is clearly a draft, not a finished object, like the '3 *mélodies*'.

(3 anciennes mélodies and Verset de Psaume 42 – for texts and translations, see end of article)

In 1857 Alkan published one of his few pieces of chamber music, his '*Sonate de Concert*' for cello and piano op. 47, of superb quality. Over the third movement of this work, a rhapsodic adagio, Alkan inscribed (in French) a biblical quotation: 'As dew from the Lord, as showers upon the grass, that are not looked for by man....' This verse from Micah (ch. 5, v. 6) begins with words not quoted by Alkan: 'And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples'. The message of this verse may be interpreted as attesting the importance of the Jews as carriers of God's message to other nations. I believe that Alkan saw his music, and indeed his work on the Bible, as contributing to that task.

Alkan will have been aware of course that his quotation comes from the synagogue *haftorah* (additional reading) which accompanies the Pentateuch portion '*Balak*', from the Book of Numbers. This portion tells the famous story of Balaam's talking ass – you will recall that the prophet Balaam is sent by King Balak to curse the children of Israel, but is blind to an angel barring his path. The angel is however seen by Balaam's ass; the ass is miraculously given the power of speech to rebuke Balaam for beating her because she has halted.

The text chosen by Alkan and its counterpart clearly carry important implications about messages and interpretation. We are therefore justified, in all, for thinking that this piece may carry a particular message.

As to the exact nature of that message, however, we should bear in mind Mendelssohn's dictum that the meaning of music is in fact precise in a way that words cannot be. Many writers on Alkan have commented on the spirituality of the cello melody at the start of this movement, and the comment on a CD-liner that it 'seems to be inspired by Jewish sacred music' is typical. In fact it seems to me to have little to do specifically with Jewish music, although I have no doubt it was in, or at the back of, the mind of Alkan's admirer César Franck when he wrote his famous violin sonata.

But the piano response to the theme is however very much in the spirit and style of *leyanning* (the chanting used for biblical portions in the synagogue). If you will forgive my voice, I will preface the playing of Richard and Maria with the traditional blessing before the *haftorah* and the verse quoted by Alkan to indicate this style, sung according to the traditional Ashkenazic melodies.

(blessing and Micah ch. 5, v. 6 - adagio of Cello sonata op. 47)

Alkan's last resting-place is a few yards from that of Halévy in the Jewish section of Montmartre cemetery. Their very tombs symbolise the different attitudes and life-styles of these two French-Jewish musicians; for Alkan, the modest slab of Jewish tradition, inscribed as he wished with his name and that of his sister Céleste buried with him; for Halévy a most untraditional eight-foot sculpted kiosk, topped by something even less traditional – indeed, a representation which is forbidden by Jewish law - a bust of the great man himself (all that remains of what was originally a life-size sculpture, which itself stood on a now-vanished rostrum decorated with medallions giving the name and date of each of the composer's Paris productions).

Halévy died laden with State honours; his daughter Gèneviève married, first, his pupil the composer Georges Bizet, and then, eleven years after Bizet's death, the banker Straus, reputedly a bastard of Rothschild. In Madame Straus's salon, Marcel Proust, the schoolfriend of her son Jacques Bizet, first encountered Parisian society, and later immortalised his hostess as the Duchesse de Guermantes. Meanwhile Halévy's nephew Ludovic had established a reputation as France's leading librettist, to Bizet ('Carmen') and later for Offenbach ('*La Belle Hélène*' and 'Orpheus in the Underworld'). They had all perfectly fulfilled the social vision of their ancestor Élie.

Alkan's immediate posterity was his son Delaborde who inherited his eccentricity, his virtuosity and his fondness for parrots, and died, as far as we know, without issue. But Alkan has the last laugh, with his music reaching an ever larger audience, and that of Halévy not undeservedly almost forgotten. So it seems appropriate to end this discourse with Alkan's triumphant pédalier impression of Psalm 150, a mighty 'Hallelujah':

Praise ye the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in the firmament of his power. Praise him for His mighty acts; praise Him according to His excellent greatness. Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; praise Him with the psaltery and harp. Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; praise Him with stringed instruments and organs. Praise Him upon the loud cymbals; praise Him upon the high-sounding cymbals. Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord!

(*Prélude op. 31 no. 5*)

Texts to Alkan's Songs

As no texts or translations to Alkan's songs are available in print, we provide them here for reference purposes.

Trois Anciennes Mélodies Juives

1. Adon Olom

Adon olom asher molakh
B'terem kol y'tsir nivroh
L'ays naasoh v'kheftso kol
Azai melekh sh'mo nikroh

He is Lord of the Universe, Who reigned
Before any creature was created.
When by His will all things were made,
Then as King His name was proclaimed.

2. T'rakhayim b'tsiyon

T'rakhayim b'tsiyon ka'asher omarto
Us'khonanekho ka'asher dibarto
T'makher yeshu'oh v'sosikh ge'uloh
Vesoshuv li'Yerushalayim b'rakhamim
rabim

Have mercy on Zion as Thou didst promise
And establish Her as Thou hast spoken
Hasten salvation and bring forward redemption
And return to Jerusalem with great compassion.

3. Psalm 114, vv. 1-4

B'tsays yisroel mimitsroyim
Bays Yaakov mayam lo-ayz:
Hoy'so y'hudoh l'kodsho
Yisroel mamsh'losov:
Hayom ro'oh vayonos
HaYarden yisov l'ohor:
Hehorim rokdu kh'aylim
G'vo-os kiv'nay tson

When Israel went forth out of Egypt,
The house of Jacob from a people of strange
speech,
Judah became His sanctuary,
Israel his realm.
The sea saw Him and fled;
The Jordan turned back on its course;
The mountains skipped like rams;
The hills like young sheep.

Verset de Psaume 42

Sicut cerva
Desiderat ad fontes aquarum
Sic anima mea desiderat ad te Deus
Deus meus

As the hart
Desires the waters of the spring
So my soul desires thee, O God
My God

Overheard on Radio 3

Brian Doyle caught the following exchange on Boxing Day 2002 on the BBC programme 'CD Masters'....

Rob Cowan, in his introduction to a performance of Alkan's 'Le Festin d'Esopé' played by Raymond Lewenthal, doubted whether Alkan himself could match Lewenthal's performance. After the recording was played the conversation with Jonathan Swain was as follows:

R.C- 'It must have been an absolute swine to play that, but it is such fun to listen to. Would you agree Jonathan?'

J.S. -'Well, as a piece of piano wizardry it is stunning, but as a piece of music it is pretty dire. One more repetition or variation of that daft little tune and I think I would have gone completely around the bend. But then perhaps that's the point and you sense, a little way into the piece, Alkan's own frustration with the piece, almost as if he is trying to destroy it.'

R.C. -'Well I think that's all part of the composition. Set up this witty, silly, annoying little tune and then blow it up out of all proportion to its value, in a sense, and I think he achieves that.'

J.S. -'Well, in that case it is not a dire piece of music. I take it back.'

An 'Alkan Orgy'

From 11 p.m. on 25th May this year until 1 p.m. the next day, listeners to the American radio station WHRB (Harvard Radio Broadcasting) were treated to a non-stop 'Alkan orgy'.

To quote the WHRB website (<http://www.whrb.org/orgies/>):

Legend has it that the WHRB Orgy® tradition began over fifty-five years ago, in the Spring of 1943. At that time, it is said that one Harvard student, then a staff member of WHRB, returned to the station after a particularly difficult exam and played all of Beethoven's nine symphonies consecutively to celebrate the end of a long, hard term of studying. The idea caught on, and soon the orgy concept was expanded to include live Jazz and Rock Orgies, as well as a wide variety of recorded music.

The Orgy® tradition lives on even today at WHRB. Each January and May, during the Reading and Exam Periods of Harvard College, WHRB presents marathon-style musical programs devoted to a single composer, performer, genre, or subject. *The New York Times* calls them "idealistic and interesting," adding, "the WHRB Orgies represent a triumph of musical research, imagination, and passion."

The programme for the massive fourteen-hour Alkanfest can be found on the WHRB web-pages (link available from our website). It was preceded by a Johann Nepomuk Hummel and an Erich Kleiber orgy, and followed by orgies of Yuri Bashmet and Prince (the rock musician). Further orgies will be broadcast next January (schedules not yet available). Those with stomachs strong enough for such indulgences, and with broadband internet, can listen to WHRB on-line from their web-site.

Thanks to **Averil Kovacs** for having spotted this on the internet.

Forthcoming Events

Husum 2003

The 17th Festival of 'Rarities of Piano Music' will take place at Husum Castle, Germany on 16th-24th August. (See their site www.piano-festival-husum.de). ~~Steven Osborne will once more be playing Book IV of Alkan's 'Esquisses', as well as his own 'Improvisation on a Tune you will probably know quite well' (sic) (17th August).~~ There is some music by 'Alkanistas'; Frederik Ullén playing Sorabji (21st August) and Seta Tanyel playing Ronald Stevenson's 'Peter Grimes Fantasy' (22nd August). ~~Also the piano duo Tal and Groethuysen playing the Sonata of Alkan's Alsatian contemporary, Théodore Gouvy, (24th August), and Hamelin playing Godowsky and Szymanowski (19th August).~~ [Note: Strikethroughs were errors in printed version due to my misreading the Husum website - they relate to last year. Mea maxima culpa! I apologize. Ed]

Piano Recital by Katharina Wolpe, September 9th

Katharina Wolpe will be playing at The Warehouse, Theed Street on September 9th 2003 19.00. Theed Street is very near to Waterloo Station. From the side entrance of the station; Cross Waterloo Road - go down Sandell Street - at the end turn left into Cornwall Road; then right into Theed Street.

The programme includes Mozart's C major Sonata K.330, Mussorgsky's 'Pictures at an Exhibition'*, and a selection of Alkan: from the Préludes op. 31 nos. 13, ('*J'étais endormie mais mon coeur veillait...*'), 8 ('*La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer*'), and 25 ('*Prière*'); the Duetto from op.70 and the Barcarolle from op. 63. We are reliably informed that Miss Wolpe may be persuaded to play a further Alkan piece as an encore.

*Eliot Levin points out that at the moment it seems to be politically correct to say 'Pictures from an Exhibition'. However this makes nonsense of the notion of walking round a gallery. [*Our Chairman is quite correct: the Russian title 'Kartiny s vystavkoi' supports his interpretation. Ed.*]

Alkan in Cambridge - November 7th - 8th 2003

Alkan Society Piano Scholarship Competition 2003/4 – Friday Nov. 7th 16.30

Alkan Society Organ Recital – Saturday Nov. 8th 13.10

Ronald Smith Piano Recital – Saturday Nov. 8th 20.00

November 7th and 8th are Alkan Days in Cambridge!

The 2003/4 Alkan Society Piano Scholarship Competition will be held in the Chapel of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, at 16.30 on November 7th 2003. This year's set piece is the Barcarolle op. 65 no. 6. (see <http://www.fitz.cam.ac.uk/music/alkan.html>).

On the following day, a concert sponsored by the Alkan Society will be the first event of this year's Cambridge Music Festival, (<http://www.cammusic.co.uk/>) which lasts from 8th-26th November. Kendrick Partington will give an organ recital at St. John's College Chapel at 13.10 which will include his own transcription for organ of '*Le Festin d'Esopé*'. (See Ken Smith's article on the transcription, and Allen Buchler's review of its première, below). Other works to be played are Boëly's Fantaisie and Fugue in B Flat and the Adagio Molto of Stanford's '*Sonata Eroica*', (and maybe some extra Alkan). The recital is free, but there will be a collection. This year's Festival theme is 'French Connections', so the programme is extremely apposite.

Then that evening at 8.00 pm Ronald Smith will give a piano recital in the Fitzwilliam College Dining Hall which will include Beethoven's 'Appassionata' Sonata and music by Liszt, Chopin and Alkan (including 'Le Festin d'Esopé' and the *Allegro Barbaro*). Tickets (£10/£5) will be available from late September from the Fitzwilliam Porter's Lodge (tel: 01223 332000).

It is a sign of Alkan's continually rising standing that the Cambridge Music Festival can kick off with a mini-Alkan festival like this. We are very grateful to Society member **Dr. Ken Smith** for having made this possible by his diligent negotiation. We hope to see many of our members in Cambridge on the day, and to attract new members as well.

Web Site News

The society's web-site at www.alkansociety.org continues to attract viewers from all over the world, and from all sorts of musical backgrounds (as a glance at our on-site guest book will reveal). Furthermore, nearly all the sites we have invited to provide a hyperlink back to us have obliged. We are getting an average of 10-12 daily users during weekdays (much less at weekends, interestingly – presumably using employers' internet connections assists the budgeting of impecunious Alkanistes). The site counter shows over 1500 visitors and nearly 2,500 'hits' (as at mid-June). It is gratifying to feel that we have become a recognised cog in the enormous internet information machine.

The process of uploading our Society's Bulletins has been resumed but progress is slow. It is necessary to scan the bulletins as text to reduce the file-size, and this involves some tedious text correction and reorganization of layout – a 16-page bulletin is taking about 2 hours work to transform. As a consequence the actual look of the uploaded bulletins differs from the originals, although the pagination remains the same. It is possible also that some errors have crept in, especially as regards accents, which the OCR programme has difficulty recognizing. Please let the editor know if you spot any mistakes.

Let me urge members once again to make all their Amazon purchases through the Society's web-site – it costs you no more, and the Society gets a small commission.

Transcribing 'Le Festin' for Organ

Ken Smith describes the origins of Kendrick Partington's organ transcription.

About five years ago I played Ronald Smith's 1977 recording of 'Le Festin d'Esopé' to Kendrick Partington, and I asked him if he thought it might be adapted for the organ. He had not previously heard the work but, with a few reservations, mainly concerning tempo, he thought it would sound very well on the organ. On the 1st of June this year he gave the first public performance of his transcription of the work on the Binns organ of the Albert Hall, Nottingham. The somewhat tortuous route by which the original idea was brought to this successful conclusion may be of interest to the Society.

Kendrick first suggested that I might find an enthusiastic organ scholar in Cambridge who would, perhaps, like to earn some extra cash during the vacation, by taking on the task of adapting the work for organ. I therefore approached sundry organ scholars, teachers and college music directors, and placed adverts in the Cambridge Music School, all to no avail. A fair amount of interest, even curiosity, was aroused by these efforts, but I could find no one prepared to actually do the job. After a year, I gave up the search; fortunately, Kendrick came to the rescue and decided to have a shot at it himself.

My plan at this point was to make half a dozen copies or so of the organ version and distribute these to organists who might be interested. Initially, the idea was to scan pages of the original piano score into my computer and, using a computer drawing package – with which I was very familiar – to overprint these with Kendrick’s organ instructions. The alternative was to use a proprietary music notation program, but I had no experience with such software, and that recommended by my professional musician friends (Sibelius) was very expensive. So, obtaining permission from the publishers, Billaudot, to make six copies of the piano score, I proceeded with what appeared to be the simplest and cheapest method of reproduction.

There was no room to insert an extra staff on the piano score so an elaborate scheme was devised to indicate the pedal part. Over the following year we worked our way through all 25 variations in this way and finally produced a couple of bound copies, but to say that the score lacked clarity would be a gross understatement. I had to admit that the notation in parts had more in common with cuneiform script than music! The reaction of two organists whose opinion I sought was polite but unenthusiastic. It was clear that the score would have to be written from scratch using a proper music notation program.

Before taking the plunge and purchasing ‘Sibelius’, I thought it might be worthwhile to investigate a few of the simpler and cheaper alternatives, which a search of the Internet had revealed. All the producers of this type of software make available for demonstration purposes full working copies of their programs, lacking only facilities for printing out the results of one’s endeavours. Thus it is quite possible to obtain a fair assessment of a program’s capabilities before purchase provided one acquires sufficient skill at using it.

Accordingly, I downloaded a number of programs and proceeded to gauge their merits. This proved to be a time consuming business since in each case the program had to be set up so that it ran satisfactorily, and then assessed to see whether it would handle the complexities of Alkan’s notation. Anyone familiar with this score will know that some of the variations contain quite extraordinary, not to say bizarre, configurations of notes – Variation 22 for instance with its fistfuls of grace notes within single bars spread over the full width of the page. Surprisingly, the cheapest program tested (Personal Composer 2) turned out to be the best at handling this sort of thing. In fact, I found nothing in the original piano score that could not be reproduced. This new approach had an unexpected bonus: presented effectively with a blank sheet of manuscript paper with three staves per line, Kendrick found the freedom to bring a fresh insight into what could be done with Alkan’s music in organ terms. What had hitherto been an adaptation now became a transcription.

By now we were entering on the third year of the ‘Alkan’ project, and it took another 18 months to complete a first draft of the score. Unfortunately, progress was interrupted by my having to have a hip replacement, then Kendrick had to undergo major surgery. It was not until towards the end of 2002 that we had copies for distribution. The only question remaining then was whom could we get to give the first performance of the work – in the event it was Kendrick. Below he recounts his approach to the music.

“As I began the awesome task, which was also a privilege, of transcribing Alkan’s dazzling piano score for organ, I realised at a very early stage indeed, that decisions would have to be made about notes and phrases which went beyond the compass of the organ with its five octave range as opposed to the seven octave range of the piano. For example, even the second note in the left hand cannot be played at written pitch on the organ where the lowest note is C. At the other end of the keyboard, an early example is the octave passage at the end of Variation VI, where the last three notes in the upper octave are unplayable at written pitch, since the organ keyboard ends at C. Some instruments only go as far as A or even G.

I decided that each instance of this difficulty would have to be decided on its merits and that it was not possible to make a general rule to fit all circumstances. Where an isolated note was concerned, I decided it could be played at the upper or lower octave, and where the out of range notes formed part of a phrase, the whole passage would have to be placed higher or lower so that Alkan's line would not be impaired. The second note in the left hand, I brought up an octave, and as I had already decided that these notes should be played on the organ pedals (more about that aspect later) the change is barely perceptible. As regards the octave passage already referred to, I decided to take the entire passage down to the lower octave pitch, instead of breaking back at the climax of the phrase.

Readers of these observations will readily be able to see for themselves the numerous instances of these moments when comparing the original with the organ transcription. The use of the deeper pitch of the organ pedal board pipes became a constant source of delight as I strove to realise Alkan's intentions in organ terms. An early example of this is at the end of Variation I, where the last five notes in the lower octave are unplayable at written pitch. Using a pedal sixteen foot stop was the answer here, as also for the low thirds in Variation III and so on throughout the piece. To enlarge further upon this aspect of the ability of the organ to play in several pitches at once brings me to mention that eight foot pitch is the norm, and stops of four foot sound an octave higher, two foot stops two octaves higher and, as I have already mentioned, sixteen foot stops sound an octave lower.

This feature was of immense value when dealing with chordal passages in the right hand - Variation XV is one example and even more striking is Variation XXV. Octave passages generally sound more effective when using the several pitch levels available on the organ, particularly as the facility of the piano sustaining pedal does not exist.

One feature of piano music is the ability of the performer to emphasise a melody or chord sequence in one hand while keeping the other as an accompaniment. Variation II comes to mind. Here the solution was to have the left hand on another manual with a more prominent tone. (Note - the completed organ edition contains introductory notes with suggestions of registration for this and other instances.)

Sudden *sforzandi* which Alkan enjoys so much can also be effectively realised by sudden additions of louder stops or alert use of a swell pedal - the end of Variation I is an example - and *crescendi* generally are most effective on the organ - examples in Variation II.

Alkan's directions regarding piano performance can also be realised on the organ e.g. *Dolce e legato*, *Marziale*, *Sostenuto* in the way the performer uses the touch of the organ keyboard, and when he suggests actual tone colours e.g. *scampanatino*, *trombata*, *caccia* and so on, choice of stops can give added drama to the effect. (On the organ that was used for the premiere performance, I had a Carillon stop of tubular bells to use for the *scampanatino* Variation - I think Alkan would have enjoyed that moment.)

Finally, in all this, my only intention was to produce a transcription which sounded like organ music, taking Alkan's brilliant piano score and making it live in different clothes. When I reached the FFF final chord, I hoped Alkan might have approved of what I had tried to achieve."

Postscript

In a review of Kendrick's recital published in the Nottingham Evening Post (June 2) Peter Palmer wrote:

"French Romantic composer C-V Alkan left some amazing etudes for the piano, including one entitled *Le Festin d'Esopé*. Consisting of 25 variations on a short, catchy theme, *Aesop's Banquet* probably refers to two contrasting feasts that the Ancient Greek slaves had to serve.

But whether the variations are musical illustrations of *Aesop's Fables* is anyone's guess.

In a wonderful new organ transcription of the etude, Kendrick Partington confined himself to following Alkan's variation headings, using for example the carillon stop for the sound of bells. His playing brought out all the wit and flamboyance of the original. This version should be published for other concert organists to perform.

Sunday's soloist knows the Albert Hall organ better than most. In a programme that began with Mendelssohn, his concert united brilliance and sensitivity. A performance of the Adagio from Stanford's Sonata *Eroica* was given in memory of well-known local musician Walter Esswood, who died last month."

With regard to Peter Palmer's suggestion concerning publication, it will have been gathered from what has been written above that it is our intention to publish the work privately. Members of the Society interested in receiving a copy are invited to write to me (Dr KCA Smith, Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge CB3 0DG (e-mail: kcas@cam.ac.uk)). Copies are free, but postage is requested.

Luncheon with Aesop - A provincial interlude

The following article by Allen Buchler, reviewing Kendrick Partington's recital, is reprinted by kind permission of the Electric Review (www.electricreview.com), where it first appeared.

My value-for-money tip this week is the three-course lunch at the Albert Hall for only £7.95. I refer, of course, to the [Albert Hall, Nottingham](#).

Scarcely one week back in London, and already I felt my palate jaded, my soul full of anomie, weltschmerz, apathy, spleen, schadenfreude and other such-like foreign-type afflictions. Like enough these could be mostly attributed to the utterly worthless revival of Ambroise Thomas's ludicrous 'opera' *Hamlet* at Covent Garden. True, this was a cheapo borrowed production, but after it had died the death at Geneva where it originated, why inflict it on others? I needed a stiff dose of something *English*, away from the effete frippery and artistic sado-masochism of the capital. What better antidote than a provincial organ recital?

We tend to forget, in London, that in many parts of the country such recitals constitute a major proportion of available 'serious' live music. Organs by Willis (made in London) or Binns (produced in Leeds until 1952) were the pride and glory of many an English church and town hall and where they survive in working condition their splendour is not easily matched. It is true that audiences for such concerts these days are not enormous. Look in at a recital in Birmingham, Nottingham, or wherever, and you might see a crowd of 100 or 150 which you could easily mistake for a gathering of the local Conservative Party. In fact they are certainly largely co-terminous; middle-class almost without exception, white and mostly over sixty. But they are carrying on a noble tradition. At least since Mendelssohn barnstormed the Midlands in the 1830s, organ recitals have been the respectable way for English bourgeois out of London to indulge publicly in music.

Nottingham's Albert Hall began life as a Methodist mission. Situated opposite Pugin's Church of St. Bartholomew and adjacent to the Nottingham Playhouse, (whose courtyard contains a ravishing giant convex mirror sculpture by Anish Kapoor) little of its external architecture remains visible. Inside the lower level has been simply but pleasantly restored to provide a restaurant, bar and seating area; but the Great Hall itself is the prize, a light vaulted space, seating about 800, with one end dominated by the gigantic four-manual Binns organ donated in 1909 by the local magnate Sir Jesse Boot, its cabinet work fashioned by Boot's own shopfitters. The organ was fully restored ten years ago to its original specifications; that is, no replacement of the

pneumatic mechanisms by electronics. The bottom notes can be felt rather than heard, the stops present a vast range of colour – it is Edwardian through and through, and it sounds it. As one who in his youth used to have the run of a not dissimilar instrument which once graced Hove Town Hall, I can testify that being at the keyboard of such a monster is enough to gratify the most overweening of superiority complexes.

Fortunately our maestro for the afternoon was of that particular English breed of organist who can take such magnificence in his stride. Kendrick Partington's mild and genial exterior clearly conceals a lion, or perhaps I should better say a lion-tamer; well into his seventies, and now happily recovered after being laid-up for much of last year by illness, he proved convincingly his control of the beast.

Partington is a Nottingham man, for many years organist at St. Peter's Church, and had tailored his programme to the instrument he was playing. We began appropriately enough with Mendelssohn's Sonata no. 1 and the remainder of the programme was nicely divided between England and France. Thus we had an *adagio molto* of Stanford, evoking the desolation of the period of Verdun, and quoting an echo of 'La Marseillaise'); a fantasy and fugue by Boëly, a classicist of early-nineteenth century France who was in fact dismissed from his post as organist at the church of S. Germain l'Auxerrois in 1851 for his insistence on playing the music of Bach; and some gloriously non-authentic arrangements, including thundering pedals and trombone stops, of pieces by the eighteenth century John Stanley.

For your critic, the most interesting item was Partington's own arrangement for organ of *Le Festin d'Esopé*, an extravagant series of piano variations by my hero Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1883). The original fable relates to the command given to the slave Aesop to prepare two feasts, one prepared with the most precious of ingredients, the other with the most base. In both cases, Aesop served up variegated platters of tongue. Alkan makes his point at the start with a theme which is partly the minuet from Mozart's 40th symphony and partly a Hasidic *stampftanz*. There follows in the original a series of 25 dazzling variations which stretch both the competence of the pianist and the capacity of his instrument to the limit.

Partington embarked on his transcription at the urging of a friend, but it soon became, in his own words 'a labour of love. I was particularly concerned to use the colours of the organ to bring out Alkan's wit and his wonderful sense of colour. And I remembered what I was taught many years ago – if you're going to transcribe something, it must always sound as if it was originally written for the instrument'. And he was helped by the specification of the Binns organ itself - the carillon stop was perfect for the 10th variation, marked '*scampanatino*' (bell-like), and the trumpet stops spot-on for the '*trombata*' variation 14. Other nice touches in Partington's version included the high notes just on the threshold of hearing in variation 16 ('*preghevole*' – prayerful), and the relentless explosions of sound in variation 20 ('*impavide*' – not in my Italian dictionary, but I suppose 'fearlessly'). I have to say that the Binns mechanism did work against the performance somewhat, in that pneumatic stop-changes required breaks between the variations, damaging the flow – nonetheless, it was, as the phrase has it, 'something completely different', and quite as wacky and enjoyable as anything produced by M. Python.

I was also interested to note some signs of diversity in the audience, which included a couple of slightly-aging hippies and a heavy metal fan complete with tattoos, bandana and suitably attired girl-friend; they all clearly enjoyed every minute. I suppose a Binns organ is one of the few things that can physically drill you through like Guns 'n Roses.

All this plus the excellent aforementioned lunch and a stroll through what is left of the old town added up to a thoroughly worthwhile excursion. I must get out of London and into England more often.