



PIANO
CLASSICS

ALKAN

COMPLETE PIANO
MUSIC VOL.6

ALKAN

CHARACTER PIECES
& GROTESQUES

MARK VINER

CHARLES-VALENTIN ALKAN 1813-1888

CHARACTER PIECES & GROTESQUERIES

1	Petit conte	4'02	Ma chère liberté et Ma chère servitude, deux petites pièces, Op.60	
2	Pour Monsieur Gurkhaus*	1'11		
	Jean qui pleure et Jean qui rit, due fughe da camera		11 No.1 Ma chère liberté!.. 4'10	
			12 No.2 Ma chère servitude!.. 4'58	
3	No.1 Jean qui pleure	3'22	13 Quasi-Caccia, caprice, Op.53	5'30
4	No.2 Jean qui rit*	4'41		
5	Toccatina, Op.75	1'48	14 Le chemin de fer, étude, Op.27	5'02
6	Désir, fantaisie	4'02	Trois petites fantaisies, Op.41	
7	Capriccio alla-soldatesca, Op.50	6'47	15 No.1 Assez gravement 5'04	
			16 No.2 Andantino 5'33	
8	Le tambour bat aux champs, esquisse, Op.50bis	4'03	17 No.3 Presto 6'09	
			* first recordings	
9	Fantasticheria	3'47		
10	Chapeau bas!, 2 ^{de} fantasticheria	8'01		

Mark Viner *piano*

Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888)

Perhaps the most enigmatic figure in the history of music as a whole, let alone the nineteenth century, Charles-Valentin Alkan remains one of the most intriguing and alluring names among the pantheon of pianist-composers.

Born in Paris on the 30th of November 1813, he was the second of six children of a prodigiously musical family. At the age of six he was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire where he studied under Joseph Zimmerman (1785-1853) and won a number of prizes including first prize for solfège in 1821, first prize for piano in 1824, first prize for harmony in 1827 and first prize for organ in 1834. It was not long before he began to establish himself as one of France's leading pianists, making frequent public appearances, including two visits to England in 1834 and 1835, whilst profiting from the extraordinary artistic milieu of 1830s Paris. While initial rivalry with Franz Liszt (1811-1886) developed into a friendly camaraderie, he forged a close friendship with Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849). In 1837, at the height of his fame, he moved to the fashionable Square d'Orléans where, in 1842, Chopin became his next-door neighbour. Activity was interrupted by the birth of his illegitimate son, Eraïm-Miriam Delaborde (1839-1913) and it was not until 1844 that he returned to the concert platform. A further setback came in 1848. Following Zimmerman's retirement as head of piano at the Conservatoire, it was generally expected that Alkan, his erstwhile pupil, would succeed him. Instead, a far lesser candidate, Antoine Marmontel (1816-1898), was elected due to political favouritism – it was a position he was to hold for the next twenty-four years. The death of Chopin in 1849 was perhaps the final blow. Giving but two last concerts in 1853, he withdrew into reclusion for some twenty years. It was during this period that much of his finest music was composed



while he busied himself with translating the entire Bible from its original languages into French. Compositional activity gradually ceased, his last published work appearing in 1876, and in 1873 he made a Phoenix-like return to the concert platform when he established a series of Six Petits Concerts de Musique Classique whose programmes centred largely around the classics. This activity gradually came to an end, and he entered an even greater period of seclusion until his death on the 29th of March, 1888 – an event which generated such convoluted rumour that, until relatively recently, it was widely accepted that he was killed by a falling bookcase.¹

As a pianist, he must have been in possession of an

almost frightening command of the instrument, and it was reputed that he was the only pianist before whom Liszt felt ill-at-ease for perform. The latter reportedly remarked to the Danish pianist, Frits Hartvigson (1841-1919), that Alkan possessed the finest technique he had ever seen yet preferred the life of a recluse.² His compositional output is extensive and comprises some of the most extraordinary music ever conceived for the piano. His mighty *Douze Etudes dans tous les tons mineurs*, Op.39 (1857)³ – the epic sequel to the *Douze Etudes dans tous les tons majeurs*, Op.35 (1848) [PCL10127] – is the fullest embodiment of his creative powers. This monumental set of studies runs to 277 pages and comprises some of Alkan's finest music including a Symphony and Concerto for solo piano and a magnificent set of variations on an original theme, *Le festin d'Esopé*. Other major works include the *Trois Grandes Etudes pour les deux mains séparées et réunies*, (1840), the *Grande Sonate*, Op.33 (1847) [PCL10209], the *Sonatine*, Op.61 (1861) and the 48 *Motifs ou Esquisses*, Op.63 (1861).

Petit conte

Petit conte dates from one of Alkan's most fertile creative periods and, so perfectly wrought in all its minute details, is one of his most masterful shorter pieces. Published without an opus number by Richault in 1859, its title might best be translated as 'Little tale'. Raymond Lewenthal (1923-1988) astutely notes that, "It is quite magical the way Alkan is able in this piece to achieve a Once-Upon-a-Time atmosphere. But this is never-never land *remembered*, the blissful *sans-souci* of childhood re-seen through the maze of a highly sophisticated mind."; later describing it as, "an enormously refined and intricate little *recherche du temps perdu*."⁴ Ronald Smith (1922-2004), in his

pioneering two-volume work on Alkan and his music, describes it as, “one of the composer’s most enchanting miniatures, sounding as though it sprang into life being complete in every one of its perfect details.”, making the astute observation that, “The wonderfully economic piano writing throughout is born of a mastery whose consciousness has long been forgotten.”⁵ In the key of E flat major and marked *andantino*, it opens with a simple cradle song poised over a rocking 6/8 accompaniment, born of an innocence and child-like naïvety inflected with but the subtlest tinges of regret. Its simple song stated, the writing changes hands when the left enters in the relative minor as the right adopts the accompaniment. A deft modulation to A flat major signals a change of heart as the hands resume their original roles when, all at once, a second, sprightlier theme enters; its gentle syncopations and cadential semiquaver flourishes lending a sense of anticipation. The dialogue switches hands before the semiquavers fan out and take on a life of their own, mounting to a *pochissimo crescendo* before subsiding to a gentle warble. A brief revisitation of our syncopated theme emerges high in the treble, taking on a darker tone in the minor before the gentle warble of semiquavers flutters down a further octave when the opening theme enters, quite obliviously, in the key of E major – a semitone above the home key. In a moment of self-consciousness, it seems to realise its mistake and, with a few readjustments, settles into the home key proper, when a counter melody in the treble joins in felicitous union. The parts change places, the warbling semiquaver accompaniment now in the treble while a brief canon unfolds below. By now the semiquavers can no longer contain their enthusiasm and, marked *svelto* – (svelte), bubble up in triplets of approval over the cradle-like accompaniment of the opening. The warbling semiquavers resume, underpinning the syncopated theme high in the treble while the rocking

left hand accompaniment sidesteps chromatically, comprising fleeting interpolations of the theme. The bubbling triplets resume their flight for a final time and, with a flutter of silvery wings, dissipate into the ether before a fragile wisp of the opening theme emerges and settles tiptoe on a bare mediant note, beckoning us into the twilight.

Pour Monsieur Gurkhaus

The *MS* entitled simply *Pour Monsieur Gurkhaus* and marked *vite* – (quick), is held in the Pierpoint Morgan Library in New York and consists of a single leaf of some 24 bars across four staves scored freehand. Dated the 5th November 1863, it is nothing less than a clever little canonic exercise in the key of G major which happily loops back on itself *ad infinitum*. While the writing is suggestive of the pedal piano, the instrumentation remains unspecified. As such, it has been included here in this survey of the composer’s complete solo piano music and, given its lack of a formal ending, is presented threefold for good measure, making a full stop on the tonic note for the final time.

Jean qui pleure et Jean qui rit, due fughe da camera

No.1 Jean qui pleure

No.2 Jean qui rit

Jean qui pleure et Jean qui rit, due fughe da camera were published without *opus* number by Richault in 1840. It is the first of many examples which bear witness to Alkan’s lifelong preoccupation with opposites; others including *Ma chère liberté et Ma chère servitude, deux petites pièces*, Op.60 (1859), also presented on this disk, *Héraclite et Démocrite*, the thirty-ninth number from the *48 Motifs*, Op.63 (1861), *Neige et lave* – (Snow and lava), the first of the *4^e Recueil de chants*, Op.67 (1876) and many others besides. The title of

this work (Jean who weeps and Jean who laughs) is almost certainly drawn from a poem entitled *Jean qui pleure et qui rit* (1772) by François-Marie Arouet Voltaire (1694-1778); a title which itself may have been responsible for a similar idiom in the French language. In his poem, Voltaire evokes the versatility of the human condition where he goes, with great ease, from a state of depression in the morning to making merry in the evening. Whatever the genesis of these two titles, we can be almost certain that Alkan knew Voltaire's work – the last stanza makes mention of the two Greek pre-Socratic 'weeping and laughing' philosophers, Heraclitus and Democritus; a pair he personified in music some twenty-one years later when he came to pen the aforementioned *esquisse* – a circumstance too extraordinary to be coincidental. The ascription of 'da camera' is significant here – it not only suggests that the work may date from some years earlier (the only other instances where the term is applied is with the *1^{er} Concerto da camera*, Op.10 (1836) and the *2^e Concerto da camera* (1834)) – but may also give an indication as to their conception. While the term was originally used to differentiate between music which was for the chamber – 'da camera', from music which was intended for the church – 'da chiesa', it could be argued that this distinction became more figurative over time. As such, these fugues may have initially been conceived as a work for chamber



ensemble condensed within the two-stave straitjacket of piano scoring. This postulation would, indeed, make sense in light of Smith's observation that the first fugue would transfer perfectly to the medium of string quartet, not to mention the preposterous demands imposed upon the pianist in the second. The first fugue is in the key of E minor and, in many ways, anticipates the grave passion instilled in the *25 Préludes dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs*, Op.31 (1847). The second is in C major and the subject is drawn from the *brindisi, Fin ch'han dal vino* from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera, *Don Giovanni* (1788). The density of the writing, however, together with the welter of fiddly pianism *viz.* double trills abounding hither and thither, not to mention stretches denied to even the broadest palms, ensures it can sail at but a fraction of the tempo at which we are accustomed to hearing Mozart's original. However, there is no metronome mark, no tempo indication, nor, like the first fugue for that matter, any dynamic markings save for the closing two pages where it gives up being a fugue and settles, instead, for a madcap two-part invention in octaves, the virtuosic windup of which comprises a top C⁸ which didn't exist on pianos until some forty years later. All this seems to point to a theoretical approach where the work might be better admired at a safe distance on paper rather than in practice and puts one in mind of a wry counterpoint teacher, with ever an ace up his sleeve, gleefully snubbing the established conventions of counterpoint while taking little heed of human frailty. In this respect, it suddenly makes perfect, yet bizarre sense, yet there can be little wonder that this recording is the first to be made.

Toccatina, Op.75

The *Toccatina*, Op.75 can be counted among Alkan's finest shorter pieces for the piano. It was initially published without *opus* number by Richault in around 1872 and was only later ascribed as Op.75 in subsequent issues, yet the reasons for this remain obscure. As such, it has long been assumed to be his last work, given its high *opus* number.⁶ However, given that many of his later works were published earlier or later than their *opus* numbers suggest, together with the lack of an announcement of publication in the *Bibliographie universelle de la France*, this is impossible to ascertain. Smith writes, "Now for the last time he spins his relentless semiquavers, but with a difference. Held in a sinister, expressionless *pianissimo* for over a hundred bars they flicker with the eerie potential of a tomb bomb ticking over."⁷ Lewenthal, in his usual way with words has it as, "Alkan's *Toccatina* is a magical dance of sprites and elves; how droll is the tiny middle section in A flat where a malevolent pixie thumps away at two buttercup tympani with indomitable persistence!"⁸ It is marked *quasi-prestissimo* and, like so many of its brethren, is in the key of C minor. From the outset, a mercurial stream of semiquavers marked *p, et sans nuances aucunes* – (p and without any nuances whatsoever), comprising all manner of harmonic twists and turns, is held in check by stern left-hand gestures. The middle section ensues and offers some playful respite with its helter-skelter figurations over obsessive timpani strokes. A more lyrical theme in dotted rhythms enters as the tuning of the lower timpani slips down a tone, enriching the harmony with flattened sevenths, yet our malevolent pixie, as Lewenthal has it, remains unfazed as the writing flexes and contracts before the reprise ensues. A sudden *forte* entry of both hands, with the left hand in inversion leads to a chromatic diminished

descent before a contrary motion sequence followed by two *fortissimo* chords hurls us into silence. A furtive fragment of the theme ensues and hesitates, before a final tearing *fortissimo* scale lands headfirst on a middle C.

Désir, fantaisie

The little fantasy entitled *Désir* – (Desire) was published without *opus* number by the Bureau central de musique in 1844 and is one of Alkan's more homely miniatures. In the key of A flat major, an expansive theme unfolds underpinned by pulsating chords marked *doux et tendre* – (soft and gentle). A more insistent theme then enters, a semitone above the home key, in G major, no sooner than to be placated by a response in B major. The earnest entreaties of the former return, inflected by some harmonic piquancies as the music is marked *caressant* – (caressing). The cooler response of the B major theme returns and modulates to the dominant of the home key where a dominant pedal point chimes dolefully, clad with gnawing minor ninths before giving way to the reprise, comprising a varied reiteration of the opening theme, before drifting earthwards for a resigned, yet enigmatic close.

Capriccio alla-soldatesca, Op.50

The *Capriccio alla-soldatesca*, Op.50 was published by Richault in 1859 with a dedication to Louis Napoléon Lannes, Duc de Montebello (1801-1874). The first edition is complete with a stanza of poetry in French, paraphrasing Joseph Christian von Zedlitz's (1790-1862) poem, *Die nächtliche Heerschau* – (The night parade) (1829), which runs in translation, as follows:

*Drums, clarions, leaving the grave, go back and forth;
Resounding in all directions... — "Arise, old squadrons,
Whether held in scorching ground or snow!
Caesar inspects our ranks, and we march forth!" —⁹*

For some unaccountable reason, these lines have been struck off subsequent reissues of the work and we'd do well to restore them where possible as they go far in offering an explanation as to what this music is all about. While they bear no direct parallel with any part of Zedlitz's poem, we can only surmise that Alkan obtained a translation of the latter from Ferdinand Hiller (1811-1885) and chose to paraphrase it himself with the above verses. In 1858 we witness him writing to the Hiller, "[...] tell me, also, I pray, a word about *Titl*,¹⁰ and on a work he has composed on the poetry of *Zedlitz* entitled: *the night parade*".¹¹ Zedlitz's poem is a macabre and thinly veiled commentary on the disastrous military campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) in which the narrator imagines the nightmare scenario of Napoleon returning from the dead and summoning his troops, famed for their fanatical devotion, from their graves to avenge their emperor in one final call-to-arms. At the stroke of midnight, the drummer rises and, with fleshless arms, beats his drum to rouse his fallen comrades as, one by one, they rise: those frozen in ice and snow, those who lie where the earth is too hot, those who lie buried under the mud of the Nile and those under the Arabian sand – all references to the various Napoleonic wars. The trumpeter then emerges, and then a cavalcade and their dead riders, brandishing their weapons; their white skulls gleaming in the moonlight. At last, the commander emerges from his grave. Wearing a little hat and simple dress together with a small sword, he surveys his troops and whispers the single word, "France" and the password, "Saint Helena" –

the latter being, of course, where Napoleon died in exile. There can be little doubt that the poem resonated with Alkan at a time which was increasingly fraught: the threat of war with Germany in the midst of Napoleon III's Italian Campaign was ever at the back of people's minds and this powerful and disturbing piece of musical satire illustrates, in no small way, Alkan's own state of mind.

Described by Sorabji as "a remarkable piece of brilliant grotesque, caricatural and mocking, with an extraordinary cadence",¹² it is in the key of A minor and marked *allegro*. The drummer rouses his fallen comrades with muted drum flams marked *fantasticamente* – (fantastically); next the trumpeter emerges, *quasi-trombata* – (as if trumpeted) and the troops are marshalled to their feet. A mournful episode marked *quasi-gemito* – (as if moaning) ensues and is cut short by the squadron's forward march marked *crânement* – (swaggeringly); the excitement mounts before the music of the opening returns and is suddenly cut short by a cavalcade of ghostly hooves, marked *tumultuoso* – (tumultuous) and *quasi-cavalcata* – (as if a cavalcade). The galloping mounts to fever pitch when all is held to ransom over a rumbling pedal point; a military bugle marked *chiaro* – (clear) signals the regiment to stand to attention and, in a moment of hushed anticipation, a huge swell ushers in the arrival of the antihero of this dystopia: huge, fat, proud and unspeakably vulgar, he makes his presence known in a salvo of C major chords, marked *Quasi-Conquistatore* – (as if a conqueror); swollen with military pomp and flushed with the ecstasy of triumph, a chorus of fanfares regale him in his fatuous little tune before the *quasi-gemito* theme from before enters, rebuked by guttural eruptions. A more resolute reiteration of our antihero's theme suddenly enters and dissipates before a final, ghostly apparition of the same in the guise of drums and piccolos; the hands placed at the extreme ends of the

keyboard in an arresting and singular example of mock *musique-militaire*. The opening music returns, marked *più nubiloso* – (cloudier), and begins to fracture and dissipate, before petering out when a final, haunting plagal cadence, marked *religiosamente* – (religiously), draws to piece to its chilling conclusion.

Le tambour bat aux champs, esquisse, Op.50bis

The companion piece to the *Capriccio alla-soldatesca*, Op.50, entitled *Le tambour bat aux champs, esquisse*, Op.50bis, was almost certainly composed at the same time as the former and, in many ways, is a masterpiece. Bernard van Dieren (1887-1936) describes it as, “[...] a short, perfectly shaped, impressionistic picture for piano [...] I seriously doubt whether there is another short composition which in an equally simple form conveys so overwhelming a mood of concentrated tragedy. As a ‘piece for piano’ it has alone, quite apart from its implications, a singular charm. No one, has he the most primitive appreciation of musical beauties, can fail to be touched by it, and yet there lies in these unadorned phrases a depth of imagery, an incandescence of sentiment, and a universality of meaning which remind one of the most intense lines of Poe or Blake. More astonishing still, this scorching Salvator Rosa-cum-Delacroix piece is executed with a Mozartian precision and grace that few composers attain.”¹³ Its title, which might best be translated as ‘The drum beats in the fields’, conjures an image not wholly divorced from the macabre visions of Zedlitz’s poem which inspired Op.50. Yet while the musical narrative seems, to an extent, programmatic, the language and punctuation is terser. In the key of B minor and marked *andante*, the entire work is underpinned, from the outset, by a relentless *ostinato* of drum flams as a noble theme in double notes emerges, dignified and laconic. All at once, a skirmish ensues, scattering the battalion. The

drummer resumes his patrol no sooner than to be cut short by a lumbering dirge in E minor with a grinding chromatic accompaniment. An appearance in G major, marked *con poco più di suono* – (with a little more sound) does little to lighten the mood when a sudden brandishing of arms calls the soldiers to attention and the drummer resumes his implacable march. Ever advancing, the music intensifies before a fragment of the skirmish ensues, followed by a brief refrain of the dirge, now in the home key. All at once a shrieking call-to-arms signals the attack as the drummer raps out his implacable *ostinato* over a diminished harmony and the battalion charges, arching to a grand, yet tragic climax. No sooner than it ensues, its forces are spent and it cuts off, without warning, to soft chords rapping out the selfsame *ostinato* in the tonic major, now marked *senz’arpeg.* – (without arpeggiating), suggesting that the battalion has been significantly reduced in number. A bugle player’s melancholy call is heard in the distance as flags sway at half-mast in the gunpowder-laden air and the drumbeats gradually peter out amid the groans of the dying, the final strokes barely detectable, before silence falls over the battlefield.

Fantasticheria

Meaning daydream or reverie, *Fantasticheria* was published without *opus* number by Richault in 1867. In the key of B minor and marked *allegro assai*, the piece is in rondo form, the subject consisting of an obsessive canon which chases its tail. An episode then ensues, based on an *ostinato* derived from the latter and is soon laden with crawling dissonances, all wrought from an utterly logical means. The canon returns, the left hand now bolstered up with octaves, its short-lived entry now giving way to a second episode of interlocking octaves in G major, modulating through a host of keys before

ushering in a more jocund theme in C major. Taking on a darker tone in the minor, it mounts to a *crescendo* and the canon resumes, a third voice now having entered the fray. Its crowded textures seeming to fight for room, the subject is suddenly inverted when it abandons its role as a canon, the focus contracts and, with galloping octaves, obsesses over a fragment of the canon subject. A fulgurating stream of semiquavers soars skyward and launches into a series of impassioned reiterations of the latter, first in the right hand then in the left. All at once, the tempo increases and the episode heard at the outset suddenly enters, burning with rage, and launches into a frantic sequence of the previous fragment, now inverted and even further condensed, bounding about with increasing desperation. At the close, a massive scale soars headlong to a shrieking chordal statement of the canon in the home key but is boldly rebuked by three pairs of unison chords. In an act of singleminded defiance, the opening notes of the canon are now hammered out in massive unison chords at a blazing *fortississimo*, rounding the piece off with a resounding crash in the tonic major.

Chapeau bas!, 2^{da} fantasticheria

The second *fantasticheria*, entitled *Chapeau bas!* – (Hats off!), was also published by Richault without *opus* number and appeared in 1872. Like the other *fantasticheria*, it is in loose rondo form, the subject being a sort of march. In the key of F sharp minor and marked *amplement* – (amply), the opening section, foursquare, dour and single-minded, parades an armoury of double octaves, chattering thirds and obsessive rhythms presenting the theme, its inversion and a succession of interrelated ideas which make no attempt to hide their angular contours. A second section, in B minor then ensues, its hesitant demeanour lending a sense of contrast as it modulates

to A major. A sudden wrench up a semitone ushers in a series of fanfares before a *scherzando* episode of staccato thirds in C major chatters over an obstinate tonic pedal note. The second section resumes and dons a staccato accompaniment before the latter takes the role of those chattering thirds, now safely ensconced in the key of B minor, the theme chasing its tail in canon beneath before adopting an *ostinato* tonic pedal note and eventually joining the right hand in chains of double thirds. All at once the opening theme enters and, with a few small variants, runs its course. Before the repeat is taken, however, it is cut short and a third section ensues, in the major where a scintillating stream of right hand semiquavers is kept in check by an obstinate left hand *ostinato*; the writing and harmonic language just occasionally revealing a flash of his erstwhile next-door neighbour. A hushed reprise, marked *pieghevolmente* – (pliantly), comprises more cantabile gestures, its gossamer-like textures leading to a contrary motion scale, *senza cresc.*, when the theme of the second section is shrieked out in giant chords at the extremities of the keyboard. Tempered by a second entry in its former guise it peters out and, with a humorous *esitando* – (hesitating) gesture, the fragment with which the work opened slams the door *sfrontatamente* – (brazenly).

Ma chère liberté et Ma chère servitude, deux petites pièces, Op.60

No.1 Ma chère liberté!..

No.2 Ma chère servitude!..

The two little pieces entitled *Ma chère liberté!..* and *Ma chère servitude!..* are yet another example of a work which attests Alkan's penchant for opposites. They were published independently of one another as Op.60 by Richault in 1859. *Ma chère liberté!..*, in the key of F sharp major and marked *focosamente*

ma sostenuto molto, opens with an impassioned paeon in repeated chords, its mildly exotic harmonic scheme perfumed with pungent sevenths. A *quasi-scherzando* middle section in the distant key of G major suddenly ensues and its jaunty gait, gambols and frolics lay claim to these pages as some of Alkan's most eccentric. All at once the motion gets stuck in a rut and falters before yielding to the opening theme, its breathless palpitations later fanned out with fluttering broken octaves. A heady descent leads to earnest entreaties of the theme before taking flight on wings of fancy with a rhapsodic, quasi-improvisatory close – a rare bird, indeed, *chez* Alkan. Before he lets us get too comfortable, however, he signs off with a customary flourish. *Ma chère servitude!...*, on the other hand is, as its title suggests, quite a different piece. In the key of A minor and marked *poco lento*, a sparse, haunting melody in thirds, underpinned by a rocking-chair accompaniment, provides the main theme and is yet another example of Alkan's uncanny ability to cast a yesteryear atmosphere. A series of modulations then ensue, aspiring to a less earthbound plain, when a lament in the dominant minor enters, its theme presented and subsequently reiterated in canon and imitation, the dialogue becoming terser. The ensuing reprise witnesses a curious dovetailing of the accompaniment before the sudden entry of the erstwhile lament, now resplendent in the tonic major and marked *con amore* – (with love). It arches to a brief climax and subsides to a final, poignant declamation of the theme in the subdominant minor before settling back in the tonic major and, heedless of the riot of flattened sevenths and false relations which worry away at the theme, it draws to a serene close.

Quasi-Caccia, caprice, Op.53

Quasi-Caccia, caprice, Op.53 was published by Richault in 1859. Its title, meaning 'In the hunting manner', together with being in the key of A major, indicates that it may, as Smith has suggested, have been originally intended for the *3^e Recueil de chants*, Op.65 (1864) but outgrew its original design. It could easily have been intended for either of the previous books, for that matter, given that the *1^{er} Recueil de chants* and *2^e Recueil de chants*, both Op.38, appeared two years earlier. Marked *allegro*, the hunting party is off from the outset and, before long, the hounds are on the scent as a flurry of semiquavers suggests the fleeing prey. A lyrical episode in the subdominant ensues before the hunt becomes more frenzied and the hunting rhythm proper is stated. A brief development witnesses the fugitive scamper hither and thither beneath the undergrowth before the hunting rhythm stalks nearer. The reprise ensues when the hounds pick up the scent once more. The lyrical episode from before now enters in the tonic before the excitement mounts and the chase intensifies, comprising a madcap whole-tone passage before launching into a truly thrilling coda in the true hunting style – as galvanising to play as it is to hear. Two giant scales veer us off course and, after a brief moment of introspection, the semiquavers heard near the beginning of the piece, yet circumvented in the reprise, summarily round things off – the prey undeniable having the upper hand in its lucky escape.

Le chemin de fer, étude, Op.27

The étude, entitled *Le chemin de fer*, Op.27, has long fared as one of Alkan's better-known pieces. It enjoyed a certain vogue towards the beginning of the last century, as certain piano rolls attest, and found its way into the repertoire of Rudolph Ganz (1877-1972) and Egon Petri (1881-1962), the latter

including it in his historic four all-Alkan recitals for the B.B.C. in 1938;¹⁴ and finds favour among pianists today. Sorabji describes it as, “One of the most astonishing of all Alkan’s ‘genre’ pieces [...] an amazingly powerful piece of evocative suggestion which makes the feeble fatuities of Arthur Honegger and his ‘Pacific 231’¹⁵ appear even more feeble and ineffective by comparison with Alkan’s brilliant and masterly composition so many decades earlier.”¹⁶ It is, in all likelihood, the first example of mechanised music and this attribute alone singles it out as unique in music history. It was first published by the Bureau central de musique in 1844 as Op.27 – an *opus* number later to be ascribed to the *Marche triomphale* (1846) issued by Brandus some two years later. We can only surmise that this confusion resulted from a rivalry and/or lack of communication between the two publishers; either way, neither *opus* numbers of either these or other works were subsequently altered.¹⁷ Léon Escudier (1821-1881) is the first to mention having heard the work in La France Musicale, though while unspecified, this was in all likelihood, a private event:

*“This week, we have heard three new compositions of Alkan, the Marche héroïque,¹⁸ le Preux, étude, and le Chemin de fer, étude. Perhaps not since Weber has anything more beautiful or original been produced in music. Alkan is not only a composer one can place first rank, but he’s also a marvellous performer who dazzles you with an elegance, a facility, a passion, an unbelievable verve. One will hear this great pianist and his magnificent works this winter, and the public will welcome them all with admiration.”*¹⁹

La France Musicale goes on to review two of the above mentioned works the following February, with an article from the extravagant penmanship of a critic writing under the pseudonym, ‘Nicolo’. The passage concerning *Le chemin de fer* is worth quoting in full:

“Since the author of the two études which we are going to analyse believed he had to give them a particular name, it’s sure that there was a certain analogy between his composition and the subjects that each title depicts. We can therefore be given to believe, on opening the first book, that we are seated, not before a piano, but in some carriage ready to depart. Can you not already hear the muffled and regular chuffing of the steam engine, or if you prefer, the obstinate repetition of a unison figuration in the bass, which imitates it so well? The signal is given: all begins to shake and there you are hurled into an uninterrupted succession of semiquaver passages confined to the right hand. At this supreme moment, whoever you are, virtuosi, performers, be careful of wrong notes! The rapidity of motion could derail you, and don’t disregard the extent to which such an accident could expose you. But your skill, your long experience reassures us, and while the landscape unfolds before our eyes, or at least while the enchanting sites of the soundscape captivate our enchanted ears, we shall taste the sweetness of a soft and seductive reverie: this cantabile, which appears suddenly through a design in semiquavers, ingenuously split between the two hands, invites us so graciously to let our gaze wander from left to right, especially when the pianist is pretty, when she has white skin and slender fingers! Then, once awakened from our daydream, we shall immerse ourselves anew into the ardent whirlwind which carries us away, into the throes of passion, maybe! But what could be a happier idea than to thus forge a short novel while travelling, nothing helps pass the time better. This smorzando and rallentando indeed announce the end of our journey, and our étude.”

Of course, what we must bear in mind, with today's desensitised twenty-first century ears, is that rail travel was a new and often dangerous thing in 1844 and, in its infancy, was beset with accidents. The noise and vibration alone, not to mention the speed, must have been fearsome for anyone at the time. Marked *vivacissimamente* – (as lively as possible) and in the key of D minor, the main section consists of the clatter and clang of tracks depicted by a relentless left hand *ostinato* while the right navigates a vertiginous swarm of semiquavers. Brief respite is afforded when a confident song in the key of B flat major springs up above the locomotive's din, soon drowned out by thrusting clusters of *acciaccature*. The journey resumes, the locomotive's whistle is heard, and a march-like episode ensues amid the metallic whir of wheel-on-track. The confident refrain resumes, now in the key of C major, but it seems the comforts of the fan and the vinaigrette are unable to assuage these passengers from their anxiety. The journey resumes and a tone of unease sets in as a series of scales goad us ever on and we are hurled into the key of E flat minor. The locomotive veers dangerously out of control full steam ahead, the threat of derailment imminent, when the clusters of *acciaccature* heard earlier regain control before the pace begins to slacken. The locomotive draws into the station platform and, with its shrill whistle and a hiss of steam, comes to a standstill.

Trois petites fantaisies, Op.41

No.1 Assez gravement

No.2 Andantino

No.3 Presto

The *Trois petites fantaisies*, Op.41 rank among Alkan's finest and consistently even sets of pieces and are unique in his catalogue for their dry humour, whimsical character, and brilliant, explosive energy. They were published together in 1859 by Richault with a cryptic dedication to 'L.' which some have postulated to be Liszt. While this is a possibility, we should bear in mind that Alkan made no effort to disguise his dedication of the *Trois Morceaux dans le genre pathétique*, Op.15 (1837) to the same some twenty-two years earlier. The first *fantaisie*, marked *Assez gravement* – (fairly seriously), is in the key of A minor, at once fervent yet cautious in its demeanour as its bristling theme stalks furtively. A second section ensues, replete with the flourish of castanets, before underpinning a more persuasive melody, which runs its course. After a few false starts, the opening section returns but is short lived. The flourishing of castanets now returns with greater obstinacy, hovering over a dominant pedal note, and builds to a climax. A suave third theme suddenly enters, the obstinate castanet-like rhythm now in the left hand and veiled in pedal. The harmonies intensify as the theme becomes increasingly desperate before suddenly cutting short when a single phrase of the opening section enters and peters out. Then ensues a closing page of sheer magic: the previous theme is now heard in the major in the guise of softly brushed chords echoed by a *quasi-vibrazione* – (as if a vibration), deep in the bass, prophetic of Debussy as Smith indeed observes,²¹ and the piece is brought to a close, suspended in a haze of enigmatic sevenths. The second *fantaisie* of the set is marked *andantino* and its shared key of G major,

together with gently tripping dotted rhythms, reveal a marked kinship with the first movement, *Allegro vivace*, of Ludwig van Beethoven's (1770-1827) Sonata, Op.31 No.1 (1803). The dotted rhythm is established at the outset, underpinning a nursery rhyme-like melody. All at once, a *perpetuum mobile* ensues, both hands two octaves apart (one of Alkan's favourite tessituras); the opening section resumes but is short-lived as a series of modulations leads to the middle section in A minor, where a plaintive melody is underpinned by the ever-present dotted rhythm, gracefully tripping along. The main theme enters, making two false starts in the bass before getting stuck as the music begins obsessing over a semiquaver fragment of the latter, proceeding to wring every last drop of life out of it when the reprise proper bursts forth in chords at a shrieking *fortissimo* and dissolves into a maelstrom of interlocking octaves. The sudden entry of the second section, now in the home key, quells any lingering anxiety before guiding us, quite serenely, to a simple coda which, with its flattened sixths and sevenths together with the ever-present dotted rhythm is as quietly endearing as it is marvellously eccentric. A *poco più lento* – (slightly slower) fragment of the theme emerges before its dotted rhythms begin to unwind, becoming ever more protracted, and the piece draws to a close. The third *fantaisie* is perhaps the most extraordinary of the three, its motoric rhythms and explosive energy checked by a tightly organised structure. Clad with bristling triplets, the main theme is thrust out over thrumming left hand repeated notes and is answered by a secondary theme in sustained treble chords, interrupted by brusque interpolations of the main theme. A second theme now bursts forth at a blaring *fortissimo* in the dominant; its jagged contours and strident articulation in complete contrast. A modulatory episode then leads to a statement of a vociferous third theme punched out by the left hand beneath shimmering right-hand figurations.

The opening theme then resumes deep in the bass, those shimmering right hand figurations now flickering oscillations, when the secondary theme ensues, before developing. The same thematic punctuations hold it in check before they themselves take on a life of their own and begin to spool out into oscillations which writhe and flicker over the third theme, now having entered in the left hand. The excitement reaches fever-pitch before being cut short by the second theme, now in the blinding light of the home key. It seems that not even the latter's iron discipline can keep things in check when, unable to escape the infectious energy, it bursts into a compound time hunting rhythm marked *même mouvement* – (same tempo), supplemented with a rare footnote from the composer.²² Before spiralling too far out of control, the main theme enters to restore order, still in the guise of compound time, its secondary theme joining forces. Their resistance is proven futile, and the second theme bursts forth for a final time in the home key, the original metre restored, when here on ensues a dizzying coda, marked *un pochettino più mosso* – (a tiny bit faster), comprising leaps which aren't for the faint of heart. A final welter of leaping octaves heralds the close and subsides when an ominous subdominant minor harmony lends a darker suggestion only to be abruptly dismissed with the blinding flash of one of Alkan's signature 'slaps' at the extremities of the keyboard.

© Mark Viner, London 2023

- 1 Hugh Macdonald's essay, *More on Alkan's Death*, is the final word on this subject and, while open ended, gets closest to debunking this tantalising myth. *The Musical Times*, Vol. 129, No. 1741, (March, 1988) pp.118-120
- 2 Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Man, The Music*, Volumes 1-2, Khan & Averill, (2000), (Volume 1, *The Man*) p.95
- 3 All dates given refer to first publication.
- 4 Raymond Lewenthal, notes to *Funeral March for a Papagallo and other Grotesqueries of Alkan*, CBS – 61117, (1971)
- 5 Smith, *Alkan: The Man, The Music*, Volumes 1-2, Khan & Averill, (2000), (Volume 2, *The Music*), p.170
- 6 We can safely assume, given Richault's house style of the 1870s, that the work isn't a further casualty of the arbitrary ascription of misleading *opus* numbers *viz.* opp.74 & 76 bestowed on *Les mois, 12 morceaux caractéristiques* (1838) and the *3 Grandes Etudes pour les deux mains séparées et réunies* (1840) respectively.
- 7 Smith, p.171
- 8 Lewenthal, notes to *Toccatas for piano*, Westminster – XWN 18362, (1956)
- 9 All translations made by the author.
- 10 Anton Emil Titl (1809-1882)
- 11 *Die nächtliche Heerschau*, Op.11
- 12 Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, *Around Music*, The Unicorn Press, (1933) p.215
- 13 Bernard van Dieren, *Down among the dead men*, Oxford University Press, (1933) p.14
- 14 Petri programmed the work in his fourth recital of the series, between *Le tambour bat aux champs*, Op.50bis and *Le festin d'Esopé*, Op.39 No.12.
- 15 Arthur Honegger's *Pacific 231, mouvement symphonique no.1* (1923)
- 16 Sorabji, p.216
- 17 A similar instance concerns the *Variations-Fantaisie sur deux motifs de Don Juan* issued by the Bureau central de musique and the *Marche funèbre* issued by Brandus in 1844 and 1846 respectively.
- 18 The work referred to here is the *Marche triomphale*, Op.27 (1846).
- 19 Léon Escudier, *Petite chronique musicale*, La France Musicale, 20th October 1844, 7th year, no.42, p.300
- 20 'Nicolò', *Le Chemin de fer; étude; le Preux, étude de concert: par M. C. V. ALKAN*, La France Musicale, 9th February 1845, 8th year, no.6, p.45
- 21 Smith, p.160
- 22 This reads: *C'est à dire: Mesure pour Mesure, mais non pas Temps pour Temps* – (i.e.: Bar for Bar, but not Beat for Beat).

MARK VINER

Described by International Piano Magazine as “one of the most gifted pianists of his generation”, Mark Viner is steadily gaining a reputation as one of Britain's leading concert pianists; his unique blend of individual artistry combined with his bold exploration of the byways of the piano literature garnering international renown.

Born in 1989, he began playing at the age of 11 before being awarded a scholarship two years later to enter the Purcell School of Music where he studied with Tessa Nicholson for the next five years. Another scholarship took him to the Royal College of Music where he studied with Niel Immelman for the next six years, graduating with first class honours in a Bachelor of Music degree in 2011 and a distinction in Master of Performance 2013; the same year which afforded him the honour to perform before HM the King.

After winning 1st prize at the Alkan-Zimmerman International Piano Competition in Athens, Greece in 2012, his career has brought him across much of Europe as well as North and South America. While festival invitations include appearances the Raritäten der Klaviermusik, Husum in Germany, the Cheltenham Music Festival and Harrogate Music Festival in the United Kingdom and the Festival Chopiniana in Argentina, radio broadcasts include recitals and interviews aired on Deutschlandfunk together with frequent appearances on BBC Radio 3. His acclaimed Wigmore Hall début recital in 2018 confirmed his reputation as one of today's indisputable torchbearers of the Romantic Revival.

He is particularly renowned for his album recordings on the Piano Classics label which include music by Alkan, Blumenfeld, Chaminade, Liszt and Thalberg, all of which have garnered exceptional international critical acclaim.

His most important project to date is a survey of the complete piano music of Alkan; the first of its kind and which is expected to run to some 18 albums in length. Aside from a busy schedule of concerts and teaching, he is also a published composer and writer and his advocacy for the music of Alkan led to his election as Chairman of the Alkan Society in 2014.

" [...] a supple, virtuosic player who seems to turn every technical challenge into a musical asset, excelling in repertoire that few others have touched."
— International Piano Magazine

" [...] clearly he's got about three hands [...] incredibly impressive playing"
— BBC Radio 3 (Record Review)

" from Viner's fingers the iridescent showers of notes cascade with scintillating exuberance [...] a blazing young British talent"
— Gramophone Magazine



We would like to thank the following sponsors
for their generous support:
Philippe Cahill
John Eaden