

= Charles @-@ Valentin Alkan =

Charles @-@ Valentin Alkan (French : [ʃaʁl valɑ̃ ʔ tʁɑ̃ ʔ alkã] ; 30 November 1813 ? 29 March 1888) was a French @-@ Jewish composer and virtuoso pianist . At the height of his fame in the 1830s and 1840s he was , alongside his friends and colleagues Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt , among the leading pianists in Paris , a city in which he spent virtually his entire life .

Alkan earned many awards at the Conservatoire de Paris , which he entered before he was six . His career in the salons and concert halls of Paris was marked by his occasional long withdrawals from public performance , for personal reasons . Although he had a wide circle of friends and acquaintances in the Parisian artistic world , including Eugène Delacroix and George Sand , from 1848 he began to adopt a reclusive life style , while continuing with his compositions ? virtually all of which are for the keyboard . During this period he published , among other works , his collections of large @-@ scale studies in all the major keys (Op. 35) and all the minor keys (Op. 39) . The latter includes his Symphony for Solo Piano (Op. 39 , nos . 4 ? 7) and Concerto for Solo Piano (Op. 39 , nos . 8 ? 10) , which are often considered among his masterpieces and are of great musical and technical complexity . Alkan emerged from self @-@ imposed retirement in the 1870s to give a series of recitals that were attended by a new generation of French musicians .

Alkan 's attachment to his Jewish origins is displayed both in his life and his work . He was the first composer to incorporate Jewish melodies in art music . Fluent in Hebrew and Greek , he devoted much time to a complete new translation of the Bible into French . This work , like many of his musical compositions , is now lost . Alkan never married , but his presumed son Élie @-@ Miriam Delaborde was , like Alkan , a virtuoso performer on both the piano and the pedal piano , and edited a number of the elder composer 's works .

Following his death (which according to persistent but unfounded legend was caused by a falling bookcase) Alkan 's music became neglected , supported by only a few musicians including Ferruccio Busoni , Egon Petri and Kaikhosru Sorabji . From the late 1960s onwards , led by Raymond Lewenthal and Ronald Smith , many pianists have recorded his music and brought it back into the repertoire .

= = Life = =

= = = Family = = =

Alkan was born Charles @-@ Valentin Morhange on 30 November 1813 at 1 , Rue de Braque in Paris to Alkan Morhange (1780 ? 1855) and Julie Morhange , née Abraham . Alkan Morhange was descended from a long @-@ established Jewish Ashkenazic community in the region of Metz ; the village of Morhange is located about 30 miles (48 km) from the city of Metz . Charles @-@ Valentin was the second of six children ? one elder sister and four younger brothers ; his birth certificate indicates that he was named after a neighbour who witnessed the birth .

Alkan Morhange supported the family as a musician and later as the proprietor of a private music school in le Marais , the Jewish quarter of Paris . At an early age , Charles @-@ Valentin and his siblings adopted their father 's first name as their last (and were known by this during their studies at the Conservatoire de Paris and subsequent careers) . His brother Napoléon (1826 ? 1906) became professor of solfège at the Conservatoire , his brother Maxim (1818 ? 1897) had a career writing light music for Parisian theatres , and his sister , Céleste (1812 ? 1897) , was also a pianist . His brother Ernest (1816 ? 1876) was a professional flautist , while the youngest brother Gustave (1827 ? 1882) was to publish various dances for the piano .

= = = Prodigy (1819 ? 1831) = = =

Alkan was a child prodigy . He entered the Conservatoire de Paris at an unusually early age , and studied both piano and organ . The records of his auditions survive in the Archives Nationales in

Paris . At his solfège audition on 3 July 1819 , when he was just over 5 years 7 months , the examiners noted Alkan (who is referred to even at this early date as " Alkan (Valentin) " , and whose age is given incorrectly as six @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half) as " having a pretty little voice " . The profession of Alkan Morhange is given as " music @-@ paper ruler " . At Charles @-@ Valentin 's piano audition on 6 October 1820 , when he was nearly seven (and where he is named as " Alkan (Morhange) Valentin ") , the examiners comment " This child has amazing abilities . "

Alkan became a favourite of his teacher at the Conservatoire , Joseph Zimmermann , who also taught Georges Bizet , César Franck , Charles Gounod , and Ambroise Thomas . At the age of seven , Alkan won a first prize for solfège and in later years prizes in piano (1824) , harmony (1827) , and organ (1834) . At the age of seven @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half he gave his first public performance , appearing as a violinist and playing an air and variations by Pierre Rode . Alkan 's Opus 1 , a set of variations for piano based on a theme by Daniel Steibelt , dates from 1828 , when he was 14 years old . At about this time he also undertook teaching duties at his father 's school . Antoine Marmontel , one of Charles @-@ Valentin 's pupils there , who was later to become his bête noire , wrote of the school :

Young children , mostly Jewish , were given elementary musical instruction and also learnt the first rudiments of French grammar ... [There] I received a few lessons from the young Alkan , four years my senior ... I see once more ... that really parochial environment where the talent of Valentin Alkan was formed and where his hard @-@ working youth blossomed ... It was like a preparatory school , a juvenile annexe of the Conservatoire .

From about 1826 Alkan began to appear as a piano soloist in leading Parisian salons , including those of the Princesse de la Moskova (widow of Marshal Ney) , and the Duchesse de Montebello . He was probably introduced to these venues by his teacher Zimmermann . At the same time , Alkan Morhange arranged concerts featuring Charles @-@ Valentin at public venues in Paris , in association with leading musicians including the sopranos Giuditta Pasta and Henriette Sontag , the cellist Auguste Franchomme and the violinist Lambert Massart , with whom Alkan gave concerts in a rare visit out of France to Brussels in 1827 . In 1829 , at the age of 15 , Alkan was appointed joint professor of solfège ? among his pupils in this class a few years later was his brother Napoléon . In this manner Alkan 's musical career was launched well before the July Revolution of 1830 , which initiated a period in which " keyboard virtuosity ... completely dominated professional music making " in the capital , attracting from all over Europe pianists who , as Heinrich Heine wrote , invaded " like a plague of locusts swarming to pick Paris clean " . Alkan nonetheless continued his studies and in 1831 enrolled in the organ classes of François Benoist , from whom he may have learnt to appreciate the music of Johann Sebastian Bach , of whom Benoist was then one of the few French advocates .

= = = Early fame (1831 ? 1837) = = =

Throughout the early years of the July Monarchy , Alkan continued to teach and play at public concerts and in eminent social circles . He became a friend of many who were active in the world of the arts in Paris , including Franz Liszt (who had been based there since 1827) , George Sand , and Victor Hugo . It is not clear exactly when he first met Frédéric Chopin , who arrived in Paris in September 1831 . In 1832 Alkan took the solo role in his first Concerto da camera for piano and strings at the Conservatoire . In the same year , aged 19 , he was elected to the influential Société Académique des Enfants d 'Apollon (Society of the Children of Apollo) , whose members included Luigi Cherubini , Fromental Halévy , the conductor François Habeneck , and Liszt , who had been elected in 1824 at the age of twelve . Between 1833 and 1836 Alkan participated at many of the Society 's concerts . Alkan twice competed unsuccessfully for the Prix de Rome , in 1832 and again in 1834 ; the cantatas which he wrote for the competition , Hermann et Ketty and L 'Entrée en loge , have remained unpublished and unperformed .

In 1834 Alkan began his friendship with the Spanish musician Santiago Masarnau , which was to result in an extended and often intimate correspondence which only came to light in 2009 . Like virtually all of Alkan 's correspondence , this exchange is now one @-@ sided ; all of his papers (

including his manuscripts and his extensive library) were either destroyed by Alkan himself , as is clear from his will , or became lost after his death . Later in 1834 Alkan made a visit to England , where he gave recitals and where the second Concerto da camera was performed in Bath by its dedicatee Henry Ibbot Field ; it was published in London together with some solo piano pieces . A letter to Masarnau and a notice in a French journal that Alkan played in London with Moscheles and Cramer , indicate that he returned to England in 1835 . Later that year , Alkan , having found a place of retreat at Piscop outside Paris , completed his first truly original works for solo piano , the Twelve Caprices , published in 1837 as Opp . 12 , 13 , 15 and 16 . Op. 16 , the Trois scherzi de bravoure , is dedicated to Masarnau . In January 1836 , Liszt recommended Alkan for the post of Professor at the Geneva Conservatoire , which Alkan declined , and in 1837 he wrote an enthusiastic review of Alkan 's Op. 15 Caprices in the Revue et gazette musicale .

= = = At the Square d 'Orléans (1837 ? 1848) = = =

From 1837 , Alkan lived in the Square d 'Orléans in Paris , which was inhabited by numerous celebrities of the time including Marie Taglioni , Alexandre Dumas , George Sand , and Chopin . Chopin and Alkan were personal friends and often discussed musical topics , including a work on musical theory that Chopin proposed to write . By 1838 , at 25 years old , Alkan had reached a peak of his career . He frequently gave recitals , his more mature works had begun to be published , and he often appeared in concerts with Liszt and Chopin . On 23 April 1837 Alkan took part in Liszt 's farewell concert in Paris , together with the 14 @-@ year @-@ old César Franck and the virtuoso Johann Peter Pixis . On 3 March 1838 , at a concert at the piano @-@ maker Pape , Alkan played with Chopin , Zimmerman , and Chopin 's pupil Adolphe Gutmann in a performance of Alkan 's transcription , now lost , of two movements of Beethoven 's Seventh Symphony for two pianos , eight hands .

At this point , for a period which coincided with the birth and childhood of his natural son , Élie @-@ Miriam Delaborde (1839 ? 1913) , Alkan withdrew into private study and composition for six years , returning to the concert platform only in 1844 . Alkan neither asserted or denied his paternity of Delaborde , which , however , his contemporaries seemed to assume . Marmontel wrote cryptically in a biography of Delaborde that " [his] birth is a page from a novel in the life of a great artist " . Alkan gave early piano lessons to Delaborde , who was to follow his natural father as a keyboard virtuoso .

Alkan 's return to the concert platform in 1844 was greeted with enthusiasm by critics , who noted the " admirable perfection " of his technique , and lauded him as " a model of science and inspiration " , a " sensation " and an " explosion " . They also commented on the attending celebrities including Liszt , Chopin , Sand and Dumas . In the same year he published his piano étude Le chemin de fer , which critics , following Ronald Smith , believe to be the first representation in music of a steam engine . Between 1844 and 1848 Alkan produced a series of virtuoso pieces , the 25 Préludes Op. 31 for piano or organ , and the sonata Op. 33 Les quatre âges . Following an Alkan recital in 1848 , the composer Giacomo Meyerbeer was so impressed that he invited the pianist , whom he considered " a most remarkable artist " , to prepare the piano arrangement of the overture to his forthcoming opera , Le prophète . Meyerbeer heard and approved Alkan 's arrangement of the overture for four hands (which Alkan played with his brother Napoléon) in 1849 ; published in 1850 , it is the only record of the overture , which was scrapped during rehearsals at the Opéra .

= = = Retreat (1848 ? 1872) = = =

In 1848 Alkan was bitterly disappointed when the head of the Conservatoire , Daniel Auber , replaced the retiring Zimmermann with the mediocre Marmontel as head of the Conservatoire piano department , a position which Alkan had eagerly anticipated , and for which he had strongly lobbied with the support of Sand , Dumas , and many other leading figures . A disgusted Alkan described the appointment in a letter to Sand as " the most incredible , the most shameful nomination " ; and Delacroix noted in his journal " By his confrontation with Auber , [Alkan] has been very put out and

will doubtless continue to be so . " The upset arising from this incident may account for Alkan 's reluctance to perform in public in the ensuing period . His withdrawal was also influenced by the death of Chopin ; in 1850 he wrote to Masarnau " I have lost the strength to be of any economic or political use " , and lamented " the death of poor Chopin , another blow which I felt deeply . " Chopin , on his deathbed in 1849 , had indicated his respect for Alkan by bequeathing him his unfinished work on a piano method , intending him to complete it , and after Chopin 's death a number of his students transferred to Alkan . After giving two concerts in 1853 , Alkan withdrew , in spite of his fame and technical accomplishment , into virtual seclusion for some twenty years .

Little is known of this period of Alkan 's life , other than that apart from composing he was immersed in the study of the Bible and the Talmud . Throughout this period Alkan continued his correspondence with Ferdinand Hiller , whom he had probably met in Paris in the 1830s , and with Masarnau , from which some insights can be gained . It appears that Alkan completed a full translation into French , now lost , of both the Old Testament and the New Testament , from their original languages . In 1865 , he wrote to Hiller : " Having translated a good deal of the Apocrypha , I 'm now onto the second Gospel which I am translating from the Syriac ... In starting to translate the New Testament , I was suddenly struck by a singular idea ? that you have to be Jewish to be able to do it . "

Despite his seclusion from society , this period saw the composition and publication of many of Alkan 's major piano works , including the Douze études dans tous les tons mineurs , Op. 39 (1857) , the Sonatine , Op. 61 (1861) , the 49 Esquisses , Op. 63 (1861) , and the five collections of Chants (1857 ? 1872) , as well as the Sonate de concert for cello and piano , Op. 47 (1856) . These did not pass unremarked ; Hans von Bülow , for example , gave a laudatory review of the Op. 35 Études in the Neue Berliner Musikzeitung in 1857 , the year in which they were published in Berlin , commenting that " Alkan is unquestionably the most eminent representative of the modern piano school at Paris . The virtuoso 's disinclination to travel , and his firm reputation as a teacher , explain why , at present , so little attention has been given to his work in Germany . "

From the early 1850s Alkan began to turn his attention seriously to the pedal piano (pédalier) . Alkan gave his first public performances on the pédalier to great critical acclaim in 1852 . From 1859 onwards he began to publish pieces designated as " for organ or piano à pédalier " .

= = = Reappearance (1873 ? 1888) = = =

It is not clear why , in 1873 , Alkan decided to emerge from his self @-@ imposed obscurity to give a series of six Petits Concerts at the Érard piano showrooms . It may have been associated with the developing career of Delaborde , who , returning to Paris in 1867 , soon became a concert fixture , including in his recitals many works by his father , and who was at the end of 1872 given the appointment that had escaped Alkan himself , Professor at the Conservatoire . The success of the Petits Concerts led to them becoming an annual event (with occasional interruptions caused by Alkan 's health) until 1880 or possibly beyond . The Petits Concerts featured music not only by Alkan but of his favourite composers from Bach onwards , played on both the piano and the pédalier , and occasionally with the participation of another instrumentalist or singer . He was assisted in these concerts by his siblings , and by other musicians including Delaborde , Camille Saint @-@ Saëns , and Auguste Franchomme .

Those encountering Alkan at this phase included the young Vincent d 'Indy , who recalled Alkan 's " skinny , hooked fingers " playing Bach on an Érard pedal piano : " I listened , riveted to the spot by the expressive , crystal @-@ clear playing . " Alkan later played Beethoven 's Op. 110 sonata , of which d 'Indy said : " What happened to the great Beethovenian poem ... I couldn 't begin to describe ? above all in the Arioso and the Fugue , where the melody , penetrating the mystery of Death itself , climbs up to a blaze of light , affected me with an excess of enthusiasm such as I have never experienced since . This was not Liszt ? perhaps less perfect , technically ? but it had greater intimacy and was more humanly moving ... "

The biographer of Chopin , Frederick Niecks , sought Alkan for his recollections in 1880 but was sternly denied access by Alkan 's concierge ? " To my ... enquiry when he could be found at home ,

the reply was a ... decisive ' Never ' . " However , a few days later he found Alkan at Érard 's , and Niecks writes of their meeting that " his reception of me was not merely polite but most friendly . "

= = = Death = = =

According to his death certificate , Alkan died in Paris on 29 March 1888 at the age of 74 . Alkan was buried on 1 April (Easter Sunday) in the Jewish section of Montmartre Cemetery , Paris , not far from the tomb of his contemporary Fromental Halévy ; his sister Céleste was later buried in the same tomb .

For many years it was believed that Alkan met his death when a bookcase toppled over and fell on him as he reached for a volume of the Talmud from a high shelf . This tale , which was circulated by the pianist Isidor Philipp , is dismissed by Hugh Macdonald , who reports the discovery of a contemporary letter by one of his pupils explaining that Alkan had been found prostrate in his kitchen , under a porte @-@ parapluie (a heavy coat / umbrella rack) , after his concierge heard his moaning . He had possibly fainted , bringing it down on himself while grabbing out for support . He was reportedly carried to his bedroom and died later that evening . The story of the bookcase may have its roots in a legend told of Aryeh Leib ben Asher , rabbi of Metz , the town from which Alkan 's family originated .

= = Personality = =

Alkan was described by Marmontel (who refers to " a regrettable misunderstanding at a moment of our careers in 1848 ") , as follows :

" We will not give the portrait of Valentin Alkan from the rear , as in some photographs we have seen . His intelligent and original physiognomy deserves to be taken in profile or head @-@ on . The head is strong ; the deep forehead is that of a thinker ; the mouth large and smiling , the nose regular ; the years have whitened the beard and hair ... the gaze fine , a little mocking . His stooped walk , his puritan comportment , give him the look of an Anglican minister or a rabbi ? for which he has the abilities . "

Alkan was not always remote or aloof . Chopin describes , in a letter to friend , visiting the theatre with Alkan in 1847 to see the comedian Arnal : " [Arnal] 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 . " Hugh Macdonald notes that Alkan " particularly enjoyed the patronage of Russian aristocratic ladies , ' des dames très parfumées et froufrouantes [highly perfumed and frilled ladies] ' , as Isidore Philipp described them . "

Alkan 's aversion to socialising and publicity , especially following 1850 , appeared to be self @-@ willed . Liszt is reported to have commented to the Danish pianist Frits Hartvigson that " Alkan possessed the finest technique he had ever known , but preferred the life of a recluse . " Stephanie McCallum has suggested that Alkan may have suffered from Asperger syndrome , schizophrenia or obsessive ? compulsive disorder .

Alkan 's later correspondence contains many despairing comments . In a letter of about 1861 he wrote to Hiller : " I 'm becoming daily more and more misanthropic and misogynous ... nothing worthwhile , good or useful to do ... no one to devote myself to . My situation makes me horribly sad and wretched . Even musical production has lost its attraction for me for I can 't see the point or goal . " This spirit of anomie may have led him to reject requests in the 1860s to play in public , or to allow performances of his orchestral compositions . However , it should not be ignored that he was writing similarly frantic self @-@ analyses in his letters of the early 1830s to Masarnau .

Jack Gibbons writes of Alkan 's personality : " Alkan was an intelligent , lively , humorous and warm person (all characteristics which feature strongly in his music) whose only crime seems to have been having a vivid imagination , and whose occasional eccentricities (mild when compared with the behaviour of other ' highly @-@ strung ' artistes !) stemmed mainly from his hypersensitive nature . " Macdonald , however , suggests that " Alkan was a man of profoundly conservative ideas ,

whose lifestyle , manner of dress , and belief in the traditions of historic music , set him apart from other musicians and the world at large . "

= = Judaism = =

Alkan grew up in a religiously observant Jewish household . His grandfather Marix Morhange had been a printer of the Talmud in Metz , and was probably a melamed (Hebrew teacher) in the Jewish congregation at Paris . Alkan 's widespread reputation as a student of the Old Testament and religion , and the high quality of his Hebrew handwriting testify to his knowledge of the religion , and many of his habits indicate that he practised at least some of its obligations , such as maintaining the laws of kashrut . Alkan was regarded by the Paris Consistory , the central Jewish organisation of the city , as an authority on Jewish music . In 1845 he assisted the Consistory in evaluating the musical ability of Samuel Naumbourg , who was subsequently appointed as hazzan (cantor) of the main Paris synagogue ; and he later contributed choral pieces in each of Naumbourg 's collections of synagogue music (1847 and 1856) . Alkan was appointed organist at the Synagogue de Nazareth in 1851 , although he resigned the post almost immediately for " artistic reasons " .

Alkan 's Op. 31 set of Préludes includes a number of pieces based on Jewish subjects , including some titled Prière (Prayer) , one preceded by a quote from the Song of Songs , and another titled Ancienne mélodie de la synagogue (Old synagogue melody) . The collection is believed to be " the first publication of art music specifically to deploy Jewish themes and ideas . " Alkan 's three settings of synagogue melodies , prepared for his former pupil Zina de Mansouroff , are further examples of his interest in Jewish music ; Kessous Dreyfuss provides a detailed analysis of these works and their origins . Other works evidencing this interest include no . 7 of his Op. 66 . 11 Grands préludes et 1 Transcription (1866) , entitled " Alla giudesca " and marked " con divozione " , a parody of excessive hazzanic practice ; and the slow movement of the cello sonata Op. 47 (1857) , which is prefaced by a quotation from the Old Testament prophet Micah and uses melodic tropes derived from the cantillation of the haftarah in the synagogue .

The inventory of Alkan 's apartment made after his death indicates over 75 volumes in Hebrew or related to Judaism , left to his brother Napoléon (as well as 36 volumes of music manuscript) . These are all lost . Bequests in his will to the Conservatoire to found prizes for composition of cantatas on Old Testament themes and for performance on the pedal @-@ piano , and to a Jewish charity for the training of apprentices , were refused by the beneficiaries .

= = Music = =

= = = Influences = = =

Brigitte François @-@ Sappey points out the frequency with which Alkan has been compared to Berlioz , both by his contemporaries and later . She mentions that Hans von Bülow called him " the Berlioz of the piano " , while Schumann , in criticising the Op. 15 Romances , claimed that Alkan merely " imitated Berlioz on the piano . " She further notes that Ferruccio Busoni repeated the comparison with Berlioz in a draft (but unpublished) monograph , while Kaikhosru Sorabji commented that Alkan 's Op. 61 Sonatine was like " a Beethoven sonata written by Berlioz " . Berlioz was ten years older than Alkan , but did not attend the Conservatoire until 1826 . The two were acquainted , and were perhaps both influenced by the unusual ideas and style of Anton Reicha who taught at the Conservatoire from 1818 to 1836 , and by the sonorities of the composers of the period of the French Revolution . They both created individual , indeed , idiosyncratic sound @-@ worlds in their music ; there are , however , major differences between them . Alkan , unlike Berlioz , remained closely dedicated to the German musical tradition ; his style and composition were heavily determined by his pianism , whereas Berlioz could hardly play at the keyboard and wrote nothing for piano solo . Alkan 's works therefore also include miniatures and (among his early works) salon

music , genres which Berlioz avoided .

Alkan 's attachment to the music of his predecessors is demonstrated throughout his career , from his arrangements for keyboard of Beethoven 's Seventh Symphony (1838) , and of the minuet of Mozart 's 40th Symphony (1844) , through the sets *Souvenirs des concerts du Conservatoire* (1847 and 1861) and the set *Souvenirs de musique de chambre* (1862) , which include transcriptions of music by Mozart , Beethoven , J. S. Bach , Haydn , Gluck , and others . In this context should be mentioned Alkan 's extensive cadenza for Beethoven 's 3rd Piano Concerto (1860) , which includes quotes from the finale of Beethoven 's 5th Symphony . Alkan 's transcriptions , together with original music of Bach , Beethoven , Handel , Mendelssohn , Couperin and Rameau , were frequently played during the series of *Petits Concerts* given by Alkan at Erard .

As regards the music of his own time , Alkan was unenthusiastic , or at any rate detached . He commented to Hiller that " Wagner is not a musician , he is a disease . " While he admired Berlioz 's talent , he did not enjoy his music . At the *Petits Concerts* , little more recent than Mendelssohn and Chopin (both of whom had died around 25 years before the series of concerts was initiated) was played , except for Alkan 's own works and occasionally some by his favourites such as Saint Saëns .

== = Style = = =

" Like ... Chopin " , writes pianist and academic Kenneth Hamilton , " Alkan 's musical output was centred almost exclusively on the piano " . Some of his music requires extreme technical virtuosity , clearly reflecting his own abilities , often calling for great velocity , enormous leaps at speed , long stretches of fast repeated notes , and the maintenance of widely spaced contrapuntal lines . The illustration (right) from the *Grande sonate* is analysed by Smith as " six parts in invertible counterpoint , plus two extra voices and three doublings ? eleven parts in all . " Some typical musical devices , such as a sudden explosive final chord following a quiet passage , were established at an early stage in Alkan 's compositions . Macdonald suggests that

unlike Wagner , Alkan did not seek to refashion the world through opera ; nor , like Berlioz , to dazzle the crowds by putting orchestral music at the service of literary expression ; nor even , as with Chopin or Liszt , to extend the field of harmonic idiom . Armed with his key instrument , the piano , he sought incessantly to transcend its inherent technical limits , remaining apparently insensible to the restrictions which had withheld more restrained composers .

However , not all of Alkan 's music is either lengthy or technically difficult ; for example , many of the *Op. 31 Préludes* and of the set of *Esquisses* , *Op. 63* .

Moreover , in terms of structure , Alkan in his compositions sticks to traditional musical forms , although he often took them to extremes , as he did with piano technique . The study *Op. 39* , no . 8 (the first movement of the *Concerto for solo piano*) takes almost half an hour in performance . Describing this " gigantic " piece , Ronald Smith comments that it convinces for the same reasons as does the music of the classical masters ; " the underlying unity of its principal themes , and a key structure that is basically simple and sound . "

Some of Alkan 's music gives hints of the obsessiveness which some have detected in his personality . The *Chant Op. 38* , no . 2 , entitled *Fa* , repeats the note of its title incessantly (in total 414 times) against shifting harmonies which make it " cut ... into the texture with the ruthless precision of a laser beam . " In modelling his five sets of *Chants* on the first book of Mendelssohn 's *Songs Without Words* , Alkan ensured that the pieces in each of his sets followed precisely the same key signatures , and even the moods , of the original . Alkan was rigorous in his enharmonic spelling , occasionally modulating to keys containing double @-@ sharps or double @-@ flats , so pianists are occasionally required to come to terms with unusual keys such as E @-@ sharp major , enharmonic equivalent to F major , and the occasional triple @-@ sharp .

== = Works = = =

===== Early works =====

Alkan 's earliest works indicate , according to Smith , that in his early teens he " was a formidable musician but as yet ... industrious rather than ... creative " . Only with his 12 Caprices (Opp.12 ? 13 and 15 ? 16 , 1837) did his compositions begin to attract serious critical attention . The op . 15 set , *Souvenirs : Trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique* , dedicated to Liszt , contains *Le vent* (The Wind) , which was at one time the only piece by the composer to figure regularly in recitals . These works , however , did not meet with the approval of Robert Schumann , who wrote : " One is startled by such false , such unnatural art ... the last [piece , titled *Morte* (Death) , is] a crabbed waste , overgrown with brush and weeds ... nothing is to be found but black on black " . Ronald Smith , however , finds in this latter work , which cites the *Dies Irae* theme also used by Berlioz , Liszt and others , foreshadowings of Maurice Ravel , Modest Mussorgsky and Charles Ives . Schumann did , however , respond positively to the pieces of *Les mois* (originally part published as Op. 8 in 1838 , later published as a complete set in 1840 as Op. 74) : " [Here] we find such an excellent jest on operatic music in no . 6 [*L'Opéra*] that a better one could scarcely be imagined ... The composer ... well understands the rarer effects of his instrument . " Alkan 's technical mastery of the keyboard was asserted by the publication in 1838 of the *Trois grandes études* (originally without opus number , later republished as Op. 76) , the first for the left hand alone , the second for the right hand alone , the third for both hands ; and all of great difficulty , described by Smith as " a peak of pianistic transcendentalism " . This is perhaps the earliest example of writing for a single hand as " an entity in its own right , capable of covering all registers of the piano , of rendering itself as accompanied soloist or polyphonist . "

===== Early maturity =====

Alkan 's large scale Duo (in effect a sonata) Op. 21 for violin and piano (dedicated to Chrétien Urhan) and his Piano Trio Op. 30 appeared in 1841 . Apart from these , Alkan published only a few minor works between 1840 and 1844 , after which a series of virtuoso works was issued , many of which he had played at his successful recitals at Érard and elsewhere ; these included the *Marche funèbre* (Op. 26) , the *Marche triomphale* (Op. 27) and *Le chemin de fer* (also published , separately , as Op. 27) . In 1847 appeared the Op. 31 *Préludes* and his first large @-@ scale unified piano work , the *Grande sonate Les quatre âges* (Op. 33) . The sonata is structurally innovative in two ways ; each movement is slower than its predecessor , and the work anticipates the practice of progressive tonality , beginning in D major and ending in G @-@ sharp minor . Dedicated to Alkan Morhange , the sonata depicts in its successive movements its ' hero ' at the ages of 20 (optimistic) , 30 (" Quasi @-@ Faust " , impassioned and fatalistic) , 40 (domesticated) and 50 (suffering : the movement is prefaced by a quotation from Aeschylus 's *Prometheus Unbound*) . In 1848 followed Alkan 's set of 12 *études dans tous les tons majeurs* Op. 35 , whose substantial pieces range in mood from the hectic *Allegro barbaro* (no . 5) and the intense *Chant d'amour @-@ Chant de mort* (Song of Love ? Song of Death) (no . 10) to the descriptive and picturesque *L'incendie au village voisin* (The Fire in the Next Village) (no . 7) .

A number of Alkan 's compositions from this period were never performed and have been lost . Among the missing works are some string sextets and a full @-@ scale orchestral symphony in B minor , which was described in an article in 1846 by the critic Léon Kreutzer , to whom Alkan had shown the score . Kreutzer noted that the introductory adagio of the symphony was headed " by Hebrew characters in red ink ... This is no less than the verse from Genesis : And God said , Let there be light : and there was light . " Kreutzer opined that , set beside Alkan 's conception , Joseph Haydn 's *Creation* was a " mere candle (lampion) . "

===== Internal exile =====

During his twenty @-@ year absence from the public between 1853 and 1873 Alkan produced many of his most notable compositions , although there is a ten @-@ year gap between publication

of the Op. 35 studies and that of his next group of piano works in 1856 and 1857 . Of these , undoubtedly the most significant was the enormous Opus 39 collection of twelve studies in all the minor keys , which contains the Symphony for Solo Piano (numbers four , five , six and seven) , and the Concerto for Solo Piano (numbers eight , nine and ten) . The Concerto takes nearly an hour in performance . Number twelve of Op. 39 is a set of variations , *Le festin d 'Ésope* (Aesop 's Feast) . The other components of Op. 39 are of a similar stature . Smith describes Op. 39 as a whole as " a towering achievement , gathering ... the most complete manifestation of Alkan 's many @-@ sided genius : its dark passion , its vital rhythmic drive , its pungent harmony , its occasionally outrageous humour , and , above all , its uncompromising piano writing . "

In the same year appeared the *Sonate de Concert* , Op. 47 , for cello and piano , " among the most difficult and ambitious in the romantic repertoire ... anticipating Mahler in its juxtaposition of the sublime and the trivial " , and with its four movements showing again an anticipation of progressive tonality , each ascending by a major third . Other anticipations of Mahler (who was born in 1860) can be found in the two " military " Op. 50 piano studies of 1859 *Capriccio alla soldatesca* and *Le tambour bat aux champs* (The drum beats the retreat) , as well as in certain of the miniatures of the 1861 *Esquisses* , Op. 63 . The bizarre and unclassifiable *Marcia funebre , sulla morte d 'un Pappagallo* (Funeral march on the death of a parrot , 1859) , for three oboes , bassoon and voices , described by Kenneth Hamilton as " Monty @-@ Pythonesque " , is also of this period .

The *Esquisses* of 1861 are a set of highly varied miniatures , ranging from the tiny 18 @-@ bar no . 4 , *Les cloches* (The Bells) , to the strident tone clusters of no . 45 , *Les diabolins* (The Imps) , and closing with a further evocation of church bells in no . 49 , *Laus Deo* (Praise God) . They were preceded in publication by Alkan 's deceptively titled *Sonatine* , Op. 61 , in ' classical ' format , but a work of " ruthless economy [which] although it plays for less than twenty minutes ... is in every way a major work . "

Two of Alkan 's substantial works from this period are musical paraphrases of literary works . *Salut , cendre du pauvre* , Op. 45 (1856) , follows a section of the poem *La Mélancolie* by Gabriel @-@ Marie Legouvé ; while *Super flumina Babylonis* , Op. 52 (1859) , is a blow @-@ by @-@ blow recreation in music of the emotions and prophecies of Psalm 137 (" By the waters of Babylon ... ") . This piece is prefaced by a French version of the psalm which is believed to be the sole remnant of Alkan 's Bible translation . Alkan 's lyrical side was displayed in this period by the five sets of *Chants* inspired by Mendelssohn , which appeared between 1857 and 1872 , as well as by a number of minor pieces .

Alkan 's publications for organ or *pédalier* commenced with his *Benedictus* , Op. 54 (1859) . In the same year he published a set of very spare and simple preludes in the eight Gregorian modes (1859 , without opus number) , which , in Smith 's opinion , " seem to stand outside the barriers of time and space " , and which he believes reveal " Alkan 's essential spiritual modesty . " These were followed by pieces such as the 13 *Prières* (Prayers) , Op. 64 (1865) , and the *Impromptu sur le Choral de Luther " Un fort rempart est notre Dieu "* , op . 69 (1866) . Alkan also issued a book of 12 studies for the pedalboard alone (no opus number , 1866) and the *Bombardo @-@ carillon* for pedalboard duet (four feet) of 1872 .

Alkan 's return to the concert platform at his *Petits Concerts* , however , marked the end of his publications ; his final work to be issued was the *Toccata* , Op. 75 , in 1872 .

= = Reception and legacy = =

Alkan had few followers ; however , he had important admirers , including Liszt , Anton Rubinstein , Franck , and , in the early twentieth century , Busoni , Petri and Sorabji . Rubinstein dedicated his fifth piano concerto to him , and Franck dedicated to Alkan his *Grand pièce symphonique* op . 17 for organ . Busoni ranked Alkan with Liszt , Chopin , Schumann and Brahms as one of the five greatest composers for the piano since Beethoven . Isidor Philipp and Delaborde edited new printings of his works in the early 1900s . In the first half of the twentieth century , when Alkan 's name was still obscure , Busoni and Petri included his works in their performances . Sorabji published an article on Alkan in his 1932 book *Around Music* ; he promoted Alkan 's music in his reviews and criticism , and

his Sixth Symphony for Piano (*Symphonia claviensis*) (1975 ? 76) , includes a section entitled Quasi Alkan . The English composer and writer Bernard van Dieren praised Alkan in an essay in his 1935 book , *Down Among the Dead Men* , and the composer Humphrey Searle also called for a revival of his music in a 1937 essay .

For much of the 20th century , Alkan 's work remained in obscurity , but from the 1960s onwards it was steadily revived . Raymond Lewenthal gave a pioneering extended broadcast on Alkan on WBAI radio in New York in 1963 , and later included Alkan 's music in recitals and recordings . The English pianist Ronald Smith championed Alkan 's music through performances , recordings , a biography and the Alkan Society of which he was president for many years . Works by Alkan have also been recorded by Jack Gibbons , Marc @-@ André Hamelin , Mark Latimer , John Ogdon , and Hüseyin Sermet , among many others . Ronald Stevenson has composed a piano piece *Festin d 'Alkan* (referring to Alkan 's Op. 39 , no . 12) and the composer Michael Finnissy has also written piano pieces referring to Alkan , e.g. *Alkan @-@ Paganini* , no . 5 of *The History of Photography in Sound* . Marc @-@ André Hamelin 's *Étude No . IV* is a moto perpetuo study combining themes from Alkan 's *Symphony* , Op. 39 , no . 7 , and Alkan 's own perpetual motion étude , Op. 76 , no . 3 . It is dedicated to Averil Kovacs and François Luguenot , respectively activists in the English and French Alkan Societies . As Hamelin writes in his preface to this étude , the idea to combine these came from the composer Alistair Hinton , the finale of whose *Piano Sonata No. 5* (1994 ? 95) includes a substantial section entitled " Alkanique " .

Alkan 's compositions for organ have been among the last of his works to be brought back to the repertoire . As to Alkan 's pedal @-@ piano works , due to a recent revival of the instrument , they are once again being performed as originally intended (rather than on an organ) , such as by Italian pedal @-@ pianist Roberto Prosseda , and recordings of Alkan on the pedal piano have been made by Jean Dubé and Olivier Latry .

= = Selected recordings = =

This list comprises a selection of some premiere and other recordings by musicians who have become closely associated with Alkan 's works . A comprehensive discography is available at the Alkan Society website .

Piano Trio , Op. 30 ? played by Trio Alkan . Recorded 1992 . Naxos , 8555352 (2001)

Grande sonate , Op. 33 ? played by Marc @-@ André Hamelin (piano) . Recorded 1994 . Hyperion , CDA669764 (1995) .

Études dans tous les tons mineurs , Op. 39 ? played by Ronald Smith (piano) . Recorded 1977 . EMI , SLS 5100 [3 LPs] (1978) , partly reissued EMI Gemini , 585 4842 (2003)

Études dans tous les tons mineurs , Op. 39 and other works ? played by Jack Gibbons (piano) . Recorded 1995 . ASV , CD DCS 227 [2 CDs] (1995)

Concerto , Op. 39 , nos . 8 ? 10 ? played by John Ogdon (piano) . Recorded 1969 . RCA , LSC @-@ 3192 [LP] (1972) . *Great British Pianists* , 4569132 (1999)

Le festin d 'Esopé (Op. 39 , no . 12) and other works ? played by Raymond Lewenthal . Recorded 1966 . RCA LM 2815 [LP mono] , LSC @-@ 2815 [LP stereo] ; BMG High Performance Series 633310 (1999)

Sonate de concert , Op. 47 , for cello and piano ? played by Steven Osborne (piano) and Alban Gebhart (cello) . Recorded 2008 . Hyperion CDA67624 (2008) .

11 Pièces dans le style religieux , et une transcription du *Messie* de Hændel , Op. 72 ? played by Kevin Bowyer (organ) . Recorded 2005 . *Toccata TOCC 0031* (2007)

Symphony for Solo Piano (Op. 39 , no . 4 @-@ 7) ? played by Egon Petri (piano) . c . 1952 ? 53 . Symposium Records , CD 1145 (1993)

= = = About Alkan = = =

Alkan Society , including complete and regularly updated discography

Alkan web site of Sylvain Chosson , contains detailed listing of Alkan 's works , with some

downloadable scores

" The Myths of Alkan " by Jack Gibbons

Unriddling Alkan by David Conway

Alkan @-@ Zimmerman International Music Association

Pictures of Alkan

= = = Scores and sheet @-@ music = = =

Free Alkan scores and manuscripts ? site of Sylvain Chosson

Kunst der Fuge : many of Alkan 's piano works in MIDI performances

Alkan Piano Trio @-@ Discussion of work and soundbites

www.kreusch @-@ sheet @-@ music.net ? Free Scores by Alkan

Free scores by Alkan at the International Music Score Library Project

= = = Performances on the Web = = =

Trois Andantes Romantiques , Op. 13 , No 2 on YouTube , played by Lloyd Buck

Scherzo Focoso , Op. 34 on YouTube , played by Lloyd Buck

" Allegro Barbaro " , Op. 35 , No. 5 on YouTube , played by Jack Gibbons

Menuet , Symphonie , Op. 39 , No. 6 on YouTube , played by Jonathan Powell

Last movement , Symphonie , Op. 39 , No. 7 on YouTube , played by Jonathan Powell

First movement , Concerto , Op. 39 , No. 8 on YouTube , played by Jack Gibbons

Le Festin d 'Ésope , Op. 39 , no . 12 on YouTube , played by Edward Cohen

Four Esquisses from Op. 63 on YouTube , played by Edward Cohen

" Trois anciennes mélodies de la synagogue " and " Sicut cerva " on YouTube - Klára Kolonits (soprano) and Daniel Dinyes (piano)