

ALKAN Esquisses • Laurent Martin, pn. • NAXOS 8.555496 (74:31)

Curiously, I reviewed this disc in its original Marco Polo incarnation exactly ten years ago (*Fanfare* 16:2). Since few readers will remember that review, mostly I will ignore it. The only significant change in the re-release is the better look of the insert notes. But it would help to have an updated biography of the pianist. This one stops in 1988. Naxos could also have fixed some of the mistakes, but no—it repeats the assertion (in not quite so many words) that Alkan married his son. Obviously a fellow ahead of his time. Yes, I pointed out this gaffe ten years ago. See you in 2012 for the next attempt?

These 49 pieces, op. 63, are an ideal introduction to Alkan as miniaturist. While some are fairly ordinary, they are never less than finely sculpted. Even the few yawners reveal something most composers could learn from. Then there are pieces like "Le staccatissimo," "Les cloches," "Increpatio," and "Les soupirs," where Alkan's sound world grabs you as both startlingly original and effective. "Les soupirs" sounds like it's by a composer born the year after the *esquisses* were published. (Debussy, if you're curious.) And these four are among only the first dozen. There are many other marvelous pieces like them—no, unlike them! Perversely, perhaps, my favorite among the *esquisses* is "Les enharmoniques" (no. 41), which begins in the wrong key and crawls into a quiet, deranged chromaticism that even Liszt and Wagner never wrote. It ends with a couple of growls and mutterings in a withering E-Minor cadence. A close second is "Les diabolins" (no. 46), with its rhythmic jokes and clusters Henry Cowell could be proud of.

Far from everything Alkan wrote is freakish; many of the *esquisses* are straightforward or contain only little irregularities. Their range of tempo, texture, and mood is considerable. If you want to sample Alkan in brief, these pieces are a fine place to start.

The playing varies, but on the whole reveals strong understanding of the music. A few lines are uneven or buried. Occasionally there is a misjudged tempo. Some dynamics could be more pronounced. I'd prefer more bite in places (e.g., "Les diabolins"). But Martin plays with agility and security. He lets the pieces speak for themselves, and can be quite tender in those that require that kind of expression. It would better to hear more of the repeats Alkan indicated, but in 1992 Marco Polo probably didn't want to try to go much beyond 74 minutes total.

All piano students need to hear this CD; and it would be pleasant if more actually played these pieces. We're long past needing to ask "Who was Alkan?"

Paul Rapoport

This article originally appeared in Issue 26:3 (Jan/Feb 2003) of *Fanfare* Magazine.

Charles-Valentin ALKAN (1813-1888) - MusicWeb Review - Martin & Esquisses

Esquisses Op.63 (1861)

Laurent Martin, piano

Recorded in Heidelberg in 1990 DDD Stereo

NAXOS 8.555496 [74:29]

This remarkable disc was originally issued in 1992 on the full price Marco Polo label. At its new price it becomes an essential purchase. A first class recording by a first class pianist of extraordinarily interesting music.

Before starting the detailed eulogy, a word about the recording. I have already noted its excellent quality but listeners should be warned that the piano is startlingly close and seems to sit exactly across the speakers. Not between - across. The pianist can be heard breathing from the left-hand channel and the treble strings too can be heard from that direction. The length of the concert grand clearly stretches across to the right-hand channel. The instrument is thus as long as your speakers are wide. You sit a few feet back from the open piano lid. Terrifyingly realistic!

Fortunately, Laurent Martin, a French pianist with a special interest in this repertoire, is up to the demands both of the microphone and the fiercer demands of Charles-Valentin Alkan. And what demands they are. The *Esquisses* Op.63 last nearly 75 minutes and whilst they may not make the sustained calls on virtuosity of the huge *Symphony for solo piano* or *Concerto for solo piano* that are contained within the innocently named set of twelve *Études* Op.39, they do demand enormous powers of characterisation. There are forty eight of these so called *sketches*, plus a postlude called *Laus Deo* making forty nine tracks in all. The longest piece is the postlude at just over 4 minutes, the shortest pieces last well under a minute.

What could be more dull than listening to forty-nine short movements by a renownedly eccentric romantic Frenchman? Well, probably many activities would be more dull, because this is an enthralling disc and I, for one, ended up listening to all of them in one go. Not for a moment did I get bored, and I found myself frequently reaching for the microscopic notes, plus a magnifying glass (no joke) to find out what on earth Alkan was depicting this time. Amongst a long list of

notable portrayals are the philosophers Heraclitus and Democritus, who are heard conversing, or perhaps arguing. Heraclitus is vindicated, for this music *is* ever changing, and at amazing speed. Also striking are *Increpatio* which thumps and crashes for most of its minute-and-a-half, *Ressouvenir* which hypnotises the ear, *Les diabolins*, a weird composition of tone clusters that had me thinking momentarily of Nancarrow, and *Pseudo-Naïveté* which wanders prettily but then stops without warning. Also present are several movements entitled *Toccata*, *Toccatina*, *Scherzetto* and *Scherzettino*, which show the amazing virtuoso writing with which we associate the Alkan of the *Grande Sonate: Les Quatres Âges*.

Keith Anderson's notes are excellent and very necessary if, like me, you've not come across these particular pieces before. Naxos continues to fly the flag for thorough documentation which should put practically all the competition to shame, and they still find time to provide a great Camille Pissarro on the front cover. Brilliant!

Dave Billinge

ALKAN 12 Études in All the Minor Keys, op. 39: Nos. 4–7, Symphony for Solo Piano; Nos. 8–10, Concerto for Solo Piano • Paul Wee (pn) • BIS 2465 (SACD: 78:32)

Let us first consider the strange case of Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813–1888). By his mid-20s, he was poised to become the most formidable and feared piano virtuoso the world had ever known, surpassing even Chopin and the legendary Liszt. For about eight years, from 1831 to 1839, Alkan's career followed the expected trajectory of most young musical phenoms. He was oohed and ogled by the concertgoers of Paris, flattered and fawned over by the critics, and both esteemed and envied by his rivals. His amazing technical mastery bedazzled audiences, and even his earliest original compositions—most of his own output dates from much later—foreshadowed an approach to writing for the keyboard that prompted Hans von Bülow to characterize Alkan as "the Berlioz of the piano." Then, suddenly, for reasons that remain a mystery, Alkan withdrew from the stage, went into virtual seclusion, and retreated into a life of Hassidic-like Orthodox Judaism in which he immersed himself in the study of Torah, the Talmud, and Tanakh, and made French translations of the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek. It was noted at the time that Alkan's retreat from the public stage coincided with the birth of his presumed, out-of-wedlock son, Élie-Miriam Delaborde (1839–1913). The birth "was registered under the name of his mother, Lina Eraïm Miriam, aged 38, of Nantes, and an unnamed father." That Alkan was the father was assumed and never denied or challenged, but short of DNA evidence, we shall

never know for sure that Alkan was the sperm donor. In any case, Élie-Miriam became a virtuoso pianist and composer in his own right, and later devoted himself to editing the works of his alleged father.

Alkan's first absence from the stage lasted only five years, from 1839 to 1844. But his return was even shorter, only four years. In 1848, he took his leave again, this time shutting himself away and shunning society for 25 years, by which time he'd been practically forgotten. He did, however, reappear in 1873 to re-establish himself on the concert scene, and to accept a professorship at the Paris Conservatory. It was during his two-and-a-half-decades-long seclusion that the bulk of Alkan's musical works and the fruits of his Judaic studies were produced and published.

And then, in a most freak and cruel manifestation of the adage that no good deed goes unpunished, it was long believed that Alkan met his end when a heavy bookcase, housing volumes of the Talmud, overturned on top of him, pinning and crushing him beneath it. At least that story was rich in biblical resonance. But biographer and music historian Hugh Macdonald cast the accident in a much more mundane if unintentionally droll light, when he discovered a contemporary letter by one of Alkan's 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." Eccentric, assuredly; misanthropic, maybe; Alkan remains one of music's more enigmatic figures.

Let us next consider the origins of the works on this disc. In 1857, during Alkan's self-imposed withdrawal from public life, he published his 12 Études in All the Minor Keys, op. 39, a set of treacherously taxing exercises in the manner of Liszt's *Transcendental Études* of 1852, but even wilder and more difficult. And embedded within Alkan's Études—almost as in one of those brain-teaser pictures where you're challenged to find the hidden frogs among the lily pads—are two works comprised of individual études from among the 12. One of those works is the Symphony for Solo Piano, the other is the Concerto for Solo Piano. Where are the hidden frogs—i.e., the études that make up these two works? For the Symphony, they are: **DELETED**

In only one way, of course, can either of these works be construed to reflect its title, and that is in the tempo progression of its movements. We expect the formal layout of a Classical symphony to contain four movements in the order of a sonata-allegro first movement, a slow movement, a minuet or scherzo, and a fast finale. And we expect the formal layout of a Classical concerto to contain three movements in the order of a sonata-allegro first movement, a slow movement, and a rollicking or more relaxed sonata-rondo-type movement. On that score, whether by design or accident, the Études 4 through 7 do seem to suggest the movement order of a symphony, while the Études 8 through 10 do seem to suggest the movement order of a concerto.

On other levels, however, Alkan's Symphony for Solo Piano is not a symphony, nor is his Concerto for Solo Piano a concerto. It's obvious, first off, that being part and

parcel of the 12 Études in All the Minor Keys, each of the “movements” comprising these works is necessarily in a different key, ending in a rather improbable key from the one in which it started. Secondly, because these are études, there are no thematic or motivic connections that bind them together as a unified whole, a principle that informs our usual understanding of symphony and concerto. So why, one wonders, were Alkan’s 12 minor-key études composed and published in this way, with a so-titled “Symphony” and so-titled “Concerto” embedded within them?

The answer, I think, is simple, even if it is a bit cynical: *money*. A concert program advertising a Symphony and Concerto for Solo Piano would be bound to attract a larger audience than one willing to sit through an academic exercise of 12 études. And, the publisher could sell the score in three different printings: the 12 études complete, the symphony by itself, and the concerto by itself. All of this, of course, became irrelevant with the advent of recording, and especially with the advent of the compact disc, which enables one to program which tracks one wishes to hear and in what order.

Be that as it may, there have been surprisingly few pianists over the years that have been bold enough to take on the complete set, which, in terms of its technical demands, is truly monstrous—perhaps hellish is a better description. Back in the 1960s, the legendary Raymond Lewenthal was one of the early, if not the first, pianist to tackle Alkan’s minor-key études in public, but I don’t believe he ever got around to recording all 12 of them. A decade later, Ronald Smith may be the first pianist to have recorded op. 39 complete, and a good deal of Alkan’s other works as well, for EMI. They were digitized and transferred to Arabesque, on which label some or all of Smith’s “Alkan Project” was reviewed in *Fanfare* in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Whether those discs are still available or not, I don’t know. In the early 2000s, pianist Vincenzo Maltempo put out a three-CD set on the Piano label, containing the complete op. 39, plus several other Alkan works. That set was reviewed by Lynn René Bayley in 39:1. Around the same time, in 2006, ABC Classics released its two-disc set of the op. 39 Études, performed by Stephanie McCallum. She has been gradually working her way through Alkan’s complete solo piano *oeuvre*, and several of her releases have been reviewed here, including her Concerto for Solo Piano (Nos. 8–10) of the op. 39 Études, but her two-disc set of the complete op. 39 (ABC 4765335) seems not to have reached Tenafly, New Jersey.

Among today’s 20-fingered titans of the keyboard, I’d have expected a complete op. 39 from Marc-André Hamelin, but so far, as from Paul Wee on the present BIS album, and others, we are tantalized only by the symphony and concerto. (Note: Hamelin, and others, have recorded the final étude, No. 12, in the set, *Le festin d’Esopé*, either as an added number to their recordings of the Symphony or Concerto, or as a stand-alone number in mixed programs of Alkan’s works. *Le festin d’Esopé* is to Alkan’s op. 39 what the Caprice No. 24 is to Paganini’s op. 1.) Hamelin is the man to beat, and I think Wee may be the man to do it. Wee is a

sensation; there's no other word to describe his jaw-dropping playing. This is the Australian pianist's debut album, and it's a blockbuster. Yet here's the shocker. Playing the piano isn't even Wee's day job. The piano, he tells us, is his "love," but professionally he's a lawyer and barrister of London's prestigious Gray's Inn. I have a feeling that may change, though, as a result of this recording. No one who plays the piano like this can keep his talent to himself. That would be a crime against which barrister Wee would have to defend pianist Wee in court.

The *Presto* finale of the symphony is astonishing in its speed and dead accuracy. Or, listen to the Funeral March from the same work. There's a creepy, crepuscular character to Alkan's music that seems particularly fitting for this Halloween season in which I'm writing this. I think I'll pipe Wee's Funeral March out my windows to scare away the trick-or-treaters. He plays it like a grotesquely leering cadaver. It's almost funny, unless you're a six-year-old with a bag of candy encountering a ghost-costumed adult accompanying his kids.

I'm not sure how "barbaric" the finale of the concerto is. In Wee's hands, it comes across as a dizzying, drunken barroom brawl, with fists flying and chairs being hurled through plate glass windows. There are no innocent bystanders and no one is left standing or leaving the riot without a black eye and bloody nose.

Exhilarating!

All of this is captured in the most spectacular and vivid sound by BIS's full-dimensional SACD recording. An exceptional release, urgently recommended to everyone. **Jerry Dubins**

This article originally appeared in Issue 43:3 (Jan/Feb 2020) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

Paul Wee Wows In Alkan - ClassicsToday Review

Review by: Jed Distler *Artistic Quality: 10 Sound Quality: 10*

The fourth through the seventh of Alkan's Twelve Etudes in the Minor Keys Op. 39 comprise his Symphony for Solo Piano, while Etudes 8 through 10 represent the more daunting Concerto for Solo Piano. They require a pianist who possesses transcendental technical prowess, the stamina of a marathon runner, a sure command of large-scale structure, rhythmic élan, and a large portfolio of nuance and color. Paul Wee is precisely this pianist and more.

He creates the impression of tonal mass, yet his shaping of individual lines within thick textures imparts a welcome horizontal vantage point to the piano writing. In the Symphony's second movement, for example, listen to Wee's thoughtfully contoured interaction between the legato cantabile detached chords. His *Presto* finale zooms from the gate like a bat out of hell, yet the pianist's staggeringly accurate fingers never even hint at potential derailment.

Likewise, Wee brings a playful audacity and airborne lilt to the Concerto's

aggressive quasi-bolero third movement that contrasts to the relatively suaver reserve of Marc-André Hamelin's equally astonishing pianism. And Wee's timbral contrasts in the long first movement bring out the music's solo/tutti perspectives in true orchestral fashion with no more than ten fingers, although one could swear that an extra pair of hands sneaks in to help out every now and then.

Wee's achievement is all the more unbelievable when you consider that he is not a professional pianist, but a highly successful international commercial London-based lawyer! One should mention, too, Wee's superb booklet notes and BIS' world-class production values. To call this disc an auspicious solo recording debut is an understatement. Better to describe it with a single word: WOW!