

Abstracts

Wolfgang Rathert: The Lost Profile. On Charles Valentin Alkan

The opinions and critiques that musicians, listeners and scholars have formulated about the personality and work of Charles Valentin Alkan since the mid-1830s are difficult to surpass in their contradictions. For some, he was (and is) a justifiably forgotten eccentric who lost himself down the path of the obsessive piano virtuoso. For others, he is (and was) an enigmatic genius whose artistry ranks among the romantic piano music of Chopin, Liszt, Schumann and Brahms. The re-evaluation of his appearance, which has continued since the mid-1960s, has made clear that one cannot classify Alkan using simple black and white formulas. This article attempts to place the central aspects of the artist and his work in appropriate historical and aesthetic contexts.

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Jascha Nemtsov: Charles Valentin Alkan. A Jewish Musician in the Age of Emancipation

In contrast to most composers of Jewish descent who worked in the 19th century, Alkan's Jewish identity played an important role not only for his life but also for his musical work. The emancipation of the Jews in France and later in other European countries was achieved at the price of a denial of their own culture. The Jewish »double« identity was not in conformity with the social norms of the time. Any Jewish references in music were thus tabooed. It is all the more amazing how important and diverse such influences are in Alkan's musical world. They are recognizable at various levels: 1. The traditional Jewish melos is used as a basis for some of Alkan's compositions. 2. Elements of the Jewish musical tradition are integrated into his personal musical language. 3. Images and associations associated with Judaism influence the character and expression of music. 4. Finally, texts from the Hebrew Bible serve as the starting point for the own musical imagination.

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Arnfried Edler: Charles Valentin Alkan and the Pedal Piano

The most striking aspect of Alkan's compositional output is undoubtedly the proportion of works for the pedal piano – perhaps more than any other composer. This is certainly true of the later period after 1849, when having failed

to acquire the position of his former professor Pierre J. Zimmermann at the Paris Conservatoire he retired from his virtuoso career to his »petits concerts« in the concert room of the Érard piano firm where besides a normal grand, an exhibition »piano pédalier« was at his disposal. The instrument, which had previously been used mostly by professional musicians for organ practise before spreading to Paris, had had a limited career as a concert instrument in Germany to which the non-organist Robert Schumann had contributed an article in his *New Review of Music* (*Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*) as well as his compositions op. 56 and 58, which appeared in 1845. Despite Schumann's reserved attitude towards Alkan's work, Alkan belonged to the Paris community of Schumann admirers. The composers' concepts of the instrument were in stark contrast with one another: Schumann deemed the piano as a rival and equal to an orchestra whereas Alkan, in his role as organist at the Paris synagogue (albeit for a few weeks), was in search of an opportunity to present the organ repertoire in small, intimate concert halls. His cultural-historical conception of piano music was connected to the eclecticism of Victor Cousin, which was the predominant Paris intellectual trend during this time. Alkan had been introduced to eclecticism by his professor of music theory François J. Fétis, who professed himself publically to eclecticism as a basis for the arts including his own system of music theory. Principally it was an attempt of basing artistic – including musical – activity on enlightenment and progression, by connecting it with the »vrai, beau, bien«.

Alkan's central cycles for pedal piano were composed in 1866. It has been argued that the *13 Prières pour orgue avec pédale obligée ou piano à clavier de pédale obligé ou à piano à 3 mains* op. 64, in the *Benedictus* op. 54 (1859) and in the *Impromptu sur le Chorale de Luther (Un fort rempart est notre dieu)* op. 69 (1866) attempt to convey the intellectual findings of the three European religions; Judaism, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, to the artistic sensibility of an urban public. Perhaps Alkan's Pedaliter-Music culminates in the *11 Grands Préludes* op. 66 which is maybe the purest example of Alkan's eclectic compositional conception.

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Christoph Flamm: Alkan's Piano Trio

Among the few chamber music works of Alkan, the austere piano trio has usually been overshadowed by the much more expansive *Duo concertant* and the cello sonata. Yet its alleged classicism has not yet been put into perspective. Written only some years after Beethoven's piano trios had been presented triumphantly to the Parisian audience by Liszt, Urhan and Batta, Alkan's contribution displays dense motivic and cyclical structures. At the same time it gives free rein to deeply romantic idioms which are seemingly indebted to its French environment, but nevertheless show Beethovenian inspiration as well. The

piano trio thus forms part of the complex variety of Beethoven reception in French romanticism. Apparently, it had a strong impact on the compositional debut of Franck a couple of years later.

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Jacqueline Waeber: Alkan's »pièces à titre«. A Poetics of the Vague and the Commonplace

This essay focuses on Alkan's »pièces à titre,« i. e., his short piano pieces bearing a title, especially those from his collections *Esquisses* and *Chants* – some of which being his shortest, if not most aphoristic pieces. Alkan attributes to his titles a function that is no mere paramusical ornament: his titles invite for a strategy of listening between the work and its recipient, be it its performer and/or its listener. The title also points toward an essential dimension in Alkan's compositional posture. Alkan's pièces à titre imply the axiom according to which the more precision can be brought by the title, the more the score needs to be counterbalanced by a fragmentary structure. This peculiar, fragmented physiognomy of Alkan's short pieces displays an elliptic treatment of the musical material: it avoids the normative strategy of the thematic development. In so doing, such works heavily rely on the musical *topos*: defined by its semantic versatility, the *topos* generates a web of meanings, implying a notion of deciphering that should be paired with the notion of »vague« in music that Chabanon had defined at the end of the 18th century. Alkan's fondness for the musical *topos*, the »common place«, is an aspect that has been often vexing for musicologists quick to dismiss the originality of Alkan's music. I argue that the banality of the musical material evinced in his pièces à titre reaches to a sublimation of the trivial through the musical technique of obsessive repetition and juxtaposition – Alkan's »musical anamorphosis«.

Alkan's musical poetics need to be scrutinized along 18th century aesthetic criteria largely conveyed by Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*: for example the notion of sketch (»esquisse«, or »croquis«) in the visual arts, and its corollary, the »fragment«, that will quickly gain artistic recognition by the end of the 18th century, as well as the notions of »hiéroglyphe« and the »idée accessoire« presented by Diderot in his *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets*. Furthermore, these notions found their way into 19th century visual aesthetics, as evinced in the writings of one of Alkan's close friends, the painter Eugène Delacroix. Reconsidering Alkan's »pièces à titre« through the privileged lenses of Delacroix's aesthetics allows for a better understanding of his musical poetics: rather than perpetuating the cliché of Alkan as an outsider at odds with the normative conception of a Germanocentered conception of musical romanticism, Alkan emerges as a most emblematic figure of a French romanticism pervaded by the legacy of 18th century aesthetics.

Hartmut Lück: Humour, irony and theatrical roles

When discussing prose literature, one should take note of the difference between an author and a narrator. In some novels or short stories, this may be of no particular aesthetic importance, but in other cases the difference is an integral part of the work. In such cases, the narrator is a medium in his own right, quite distinct from the real person of the author. The narrator can even express convictions alien to the thinking of the author himself, a special trick of narrative. In view of the fact that some 19th century composers began to employ a variety of musical styles in one work, it might be of interest to discuss the difference between the composer and his role as »narrator«. Some works of Charles Valentin Alkan suggest exactly that: he slips into a role that diverges from his customary style and uses it as a source of humour, irony or sarcasm. This question is here discussed by examining Alkan's cycle *Esquisses* op. 63 and his *Toccatina* op. 75.