

Alkan, Charles-Valentin (1813-1888) : Overview of his Writings

Charles-Valentin Alkan left us no books or articles. His only published writings are three prefaces: [that of the *Grande Sonate for piano, op. 33 \(1847\)*](#), the [“Avertissement”](#) associated with the *Souvenirs des concerts du Conservatoire*, for piano (30 March 1847), and the [“Avertissement”](#) for the 25 Preludes in all major and minor keys for piano or organ (17 April 1847). In the first, he justifies the titles given to the four movements of the sonata. In the second, he discusses the art of arranging orchestral works for piano and calls for the edition of accurate scores. In the third, he discusses the writing and playing styles most appropriate for the piano and organ. These three texts, all published at a pivotal moment in the composer’s life, give the impression that he was making a concerted effort to relaunch his career and make a mark by publishing authentically personal and innovative works. Alas, the Revolution of 1848 and his failure to replace Joseph Zimmerman at the Conservatoire put an abrupt end to these professional ambitions and Alkan’s “literary” publications with them.

It is therefore Alkan’s 220 or so letters that shed some light on the man and his motivations. We regret not being able to establish complete exchanges of letters because, as Alkan states in his will, “As to my correspondence, apart from a few letters from outstanding individuals, given as autographs [given to third parties], I have destroyed it.” We should begin by remarking that reading Alkan is a constant pleasure: his style is lively and varied and he possesses a real gift for amusing turns of phrase: “I say, in a word, that Wagner is not a musician, but a sickness,” (letter to Ferdinand Hiller, 31 January 1860), “I ask myself, and I will also ask you for an explanation of the watery successes that Gounod has come and distilled with you,” (to Hiller, 3 February 1863), “You undoubtedly know that *Les Troyens* was not supported by a clique (*n’ont pas été claqués*), but that it flopped (*ont claqué*); which does not mean the same thing in Parisian language,” (to Hiller, 5 April 1864), “[Of Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine*] I know, among other things [...], the enormous unison gas leak that precedes the air of the manzanilla tree” (to Hiller, 30 May 1865).

Apart from a few formal notes to his students or colleagues, Alkan’s letters are mainly confessions on his condition or his music, some of which exude undeniable humor. Complaints about his state of health and his procrastination are found throughout his correspondence, in particular his letters to Heller. For the length his life, Alkan complained of not composing enough. In the 1830s he confided in Santiago de Masarnau, writing about his deep personal worries and harassing doubts with a freeness of tone not found elsewhere in his known correspondence. In 1849, he confided to de Masarnau about his complicity with Frédéric Chopin and the common projects they had nurtured. On the other hand, he hardly ever

mentions his natural son Eraïm Miriam Delaborde. In the letters he exchanged with his student Marie-Antoinette Colas toward the end of his life, Alkan appears to have become a difficult old man, a character that did not discourage his admirers.

Despite its importance for him, he very rarely mentioned religion: although he affirms in several letters to Heller that he translated the entire Bible, including the New Testament, to French, nothing remains of this effort apart perhaps from the Psalm *Super flumina Babylonis*, which precedes the score of his op. 52 paraphrase for piano (1859). Nor does Alkan ever bring up the scientific discoveries and considerable technical progress of his time. His political opinions evolved: in 1848 he bluntly affirmed his adhesion to the new regime, "The Republic, for which I feel a more ardent love each day allows for strange blunders" (to George Sand, early September 1848). Was he sincere or just calculating, knowing his correspondent's ideological stances? Then, perhaps disappointed by his failure to become professor in the place of Zimmerman, he supported the Caesarism of the Second Empire, defending it in several letters to Hiller. Following the defeat of 1870, he was overcome with disgust, "I would have to fill volumes [...] only to express to you the immense pity that the ignoble populace and cowardly bourgeoisie inspire in me; the immense horror I feel for most of the personalities and real leaders of the commune; finally, the mortal hatred that I harbor for the parliamentary chorus leaders and the men of September, without exception for Mr. Thiers" (to de Masarnau, 24 October 1871), and "I assure you that, if need be, we could even talk about politics; for, if out of 100 Frenchmen, 99 have lost their minds and one has retained their good sense, I am that one. We had to undertake this war. An immense disaster followed, which we thought necessary to follow with other frightful disasters; to which we are preparing to add others that are even more unheard-of. (I say "we" out of charity, because I truly no longer feel French... only out of old age.")

In contrary to his reputation for being an isolated misanthrope, Alkan's letters reveal that he frequented many other artists: Hans von Bülow, Frédéric Chopin, Cornélie Falcon, Charles Gounod, Jules Massenet, Felix Mendelssohn (who played his Piano Trio, op. 30), Giacomo Meyerbeer (who mentions Alkan several times in his agendas), Anton Rubinstein (who dedicated his fifth Piano Concerto, op. 94 of 1875 to Alkan), Pablo de Sarasate, Clara Schumann (who received him on several occasions during her trip to Paris in 1839), Julius Stockhausen (to whose son Alkan gave piano lessons), Chrétien Urhan, François-Joseph Fétis, Eugène Delacroix (who mentions Alkan in his *Journal*), George Sand (with whom he exchanged many letters), Félicité de Lamennais, not to mention the Troubetzkoy, Lannes de Montebello, and Ney de la Moskowa families. Alkan attended concerts, went to the opera, and criticized music and musicians without reserve, but his remarks are too scattered to offer a real musical portrait of his time.

Alkan's letters often address musical questions, which is not the least of their interests. Although revolutionary at the piano, he had conservative taste, condemning Berlioz, Wagner (of whose antisemitism he seems to have been unaware), and Liszt, whereas he praises the bland compositions of Hiller. His idol was Bach, but he also revered Mozart, Beethoven, and Schumann (whose devastating critiques of 1838 and 1839 he also seems to have not known). He

advocated the scrupulous respect of original scores, perhaps as a partisan of the critical edition before its time or as a Jewish traditionalist for whom the written word and even its graphic form, possessed an intrinsic value. From the 1850s onward, he developed an interest for the pedal piano, and instrument he presented at the Universal Exposition of 1855, and of which he became an incomparable virtuoso, leaving behind many compositions for the instrument and even a bequeathal in his will that was ultimately refused by the Institute. At the end of 1852, he exchanged several lengthy letters with François-Joseph Fétis on the subject of meters in 5 and 7, which the Fétis later mentioned in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* of 31 October 1852. Sometimes an isolated detail reveals the thoroughness of his approach, be it an accidental in a Beethoven's Sonata op. 106 or the placement of a cadenza in a Bach concerto.

Alkan's letters, however, reveal nothing of his readings or literary tastes, which hardly seem penetrating, if one judges by the poems he used in his rare songs or in the piano paraphrase op. 45, *Salut, cendre du pauvre !* of 1856. At most, we learn from the inventory made at his death that he owned, "Forty volumes of Rousseau, Bernadin de Saint-Pierre and others, thirty-seven volumes (of) Israelite archives and others; ninety-three volumes of works by Rabelais, Don Quichotte and others; forty-nine bound volumes of the memoirs of Saint-Simon, works in Hebrew, etc." and "Twenty-eight volumes, the Metamorphoses of Ovid and others, thirty-eight bound and paperback volumes[,] Israelite works and others; fifty-two bound volumes[,] works of music and others and about a hundred volumes and brochures." But are these representative of his readings?

Alkan's writings tell us first and foremost about his character, and all too sparsely about his creative process. He evidently lacked the energy and taste of Berlioz, Schumann, or Wagner for publicly affirming his opinions or teaching to vast auditoriums. If he felt the "in the mood to musicalize an entire generation" (letter to George Sand, early September 1848) it was in the setting of private lessons. Like Chopin, he dreaded the stage and only revealed himself in private settings. Despite everything, it is therefore the portrait of an endearing man that emerges from what remains the far too limited corpus of his writings.

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Trans. : Christopher Murray

Further reading

The preface to the *Grande Sonate* op. 33 can be found in all editions of that work. The *Avertissement* to the op. 31 Preludes and the *Avertissement* to the *Souvenirs des concerts du Conservatoire* are more difficult to locate and are often missing from surviving copies of the original edition as they were printed on a separate loose leaf that was not reproduced in later editions. These were republished in the *Bulletin de la Société Alkan* no. 14 (January 1990) and no. 26 (May 1994).

A volume of Alkan's correspondence is currently being prepared for publication by Vrin. The proceedings of an international conference held in November 2013 offer a more detailed idea of the letters Alkan sent to Santiago de Masarnau (*Société française de musicologie*). At present, Alkan's letters can be found published in a number of different sources, particularly:

. Aus Ferdinand Hillers Briefwechsel (1826-1861) : Beiträge zu einer Biographie Ferdinand Hillers / von Reinhold Sietz. — Köln : [s. n.], 1958.

. Aus Ferdinand Hillers Briefwechsel : Beiträge zu einer Biographie Ferdinand Hillers. Band II, 1862-1869 / von Reinhold Sietz. — Köln : Arno Volk-Verlag, 1961 (Beiträge zur rheinischen Musikgeschichte ; Heft 48).

. Aus Ferdinand Hillers Briefwechsel : Beiträge zu einer Biographie Ferdinand Hillers. Band III, 1870-1875 / von Reinhold Sietz. — Köln : Arno Volk-Verlag, 1964. — (Beiträge zur rheinischen Musikgeschichte / herausgegeben von der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für rheinische Musikgeschichte ; Heft 56).

. « Alkan et George Sand : analyse d'une relation épistolaire » / François Luguenot, Jacques-Philippe Saint-Gérand. *In* : Autour de George Sand : mélanges offerts à Georges Lubin. — Brest : Centre d'étude des correspondances des xixe et xxe siècles, UPR 422 du CNRS, Faculté des lettres et sciences sociales, 1992.

. Lettres de compositeurs à Camille Saint-Saëns : lettres conservées au château-musée de Dieppe / présentées et annotées par Eurydice Jousse & Yves Gérard. — Lyon : Symétrie, 2009. — (Collection Perpetuum mobile).

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