CD Reviews

Alkan

48 Esquisses op. 63

Steven Osborne *pf*

Hyperion CDA67377 (75 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

Although it could hardly be said that the imaginative and intriguing piano music of Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813–1888) is yet part of the standard repertoire, there has been a significant and apparently sustained upsurge of interest in it of late, not least by pianists of the younger, or near-younger, generation. No longer does one have to seek out old recordings by Alkan pioneers such as Ronald Smith or Raymond Lewenthal to get an idea of how this brilliant, sometimes bizarre, but rarely boring master's music might actually sound when performed by musicians convinced of its quality and feasibility. We have even entered the stage where there is actually a choice of CDs of at least a few of the most important works. A potent catalyst for this mini Alkan-renaissance has undoubtedly been the quite superb recordings by Marc-André Hamelin on the Hyperion label, which have shown listeners, among them certainly many fellow pianists, that the Herculean technical challenges of the larger pieces reward with stunning effectiveness when conquered with both commitment and panache. Hyperion is now the purveyor of a new Alkan release, this time not of the more grandiose heaven-storming virtuoso music, but of miniatures – the 48 *Esquisses*, performed with vivid musicality and beautiful tone-colour by Steven Osborne.

As a composer, Alkan reached maturity relatively late. One has only to compare the variable success of the major-key *Etudes* op. 35 (1848) with the consistently impressive studies in the minor key, op. 39 (1857), to see the strides he made after publication of the former set, not in the fertility of his keyboard imagination – which was always commanding and frequently novel – but in formal organization and sheer quality control. The music he produced in the few years after the minor-key *Etudes*, which includes the intensely felt 'psalm-paraphrase' for piano *Super flumina Babylonis* (1859), the almost ludicrously un-sonatina-like op. 61 Sonatina (1861), and the finely etched op. 63 *Esquisses* (1861) can count among his finest inspirations. The *Esquisses* in particular, a collection of epigrammatic character-pieces displaying entertaining variety and rarely flagging inventiveness, are an excellent introduction to Alkan as a miniaturist. They are undoubtedly more enticing as a whole than the 25 *Préludes*, the five books of *Chants* or *Les Mois*, which unfortunately tend to retain the dross along with the more sparkling elements. Almost all of Alkan's characteristic traits are found here on a small scale, and it is at times difficult to believe that a

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composer capable of such focus and conciseness was the same that often displayed such loquaciousness in other genres.

The influence of Mendelssohn is less marked in the *Esquisses* than in the *Chants* (each book of which, among other features, closes with a melancholy barcarole in homage to the composer of the *Lieder ohne Worte*), although there is indeed a 'Barcarollette' (no. 12). The 'Notturnino-Innamorato' (no. 43), however, is nothing less than another Mendelssohnian barcarole, a fact hardly hidden by its surely deliberately deceptive title, which sends listeners' expectations erroneously off in the direction of another major Alkan influence – that of his friend Chopin. Osborne plays these numbers with warmth, but also with an admirable lack of sentimentality that can be convincingly matched with accounts of Alkan's own famously objective style of performance. The chastely sculpted gracefulness of 'La Vision' (no. 1) is also well caught, its reticence contrasting amusingly with Liszt's far better known, grandiloquently extrovert *Transcendental Study* of similar title.

Many of Alkan's most striking allusions in the *Esquisses* are nevertheless not to the music of his famous contemporaries, but to that of the past: the French clavecin school of Rameau and Couperin, Baroque concerto and fugue, Classical opera and string-quartet. Pieces such as 'Le Staccatissimo' (no. 2), 'Le Legatissimo' (no. 3) and 'Les Enharmoniques' (no. 41) recall the characteristic titles of the clavicenists if not their musical contents, but 'Début de quatuor' (no. 31) is a slick pastiche of the Classical style, which Alkan follows immediately by a Minuettino 'alla Vedrai Carino di Mozart' (no. 32), while 'Tutti di Concerto' (no. 15) and 'Inflexibilité' (no. 28) recall just as vividly the orchestral world of the Baroque. Osborne responds to these changes of style and era with admirable musicality. He is particularly lucid as a fugue-player, 'Fuguette' (no. 6) and the highly contrapuntal 'Les Initiés' (no. 5) coming off with clarity and intelligence.

Osborne seems, to my mind, slightly less at home with the more eccentric, acerbic side of Alkan's musical personality – rather too sensible a player for a witty, sarcastic piece such as 'Héraclite et Démocrite' (no. 39), where the respectively pessimistic and optimistic philosophers' clashing views are represented by the juxtaposition of a sternly dignified melody with one of utterly inane Auberian triviality. The dignified tune is eventually completely edged out by the trivial, which itself becomes ever more ludicrously twisted before Alkan puts a humanitarian end to the proceedings with three dismissive fortissimo chords. All of this is impeccably played by Osborne, even if one does harbour feelings that a little more caprice and panache, here and occasionally elsewhere in the set, would not go amiss. Such comments, however, sound like carping in the face of the enormously impressive achievement represented by this recording as a whole – highly recommendable both to those who are already captivated by Alkan and to those who are curious to find out what the fuss is all about.

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