

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1059

The piano music of Alkan (1813-1888) has come into public view more widely during recent years. Forming as it does the major part of his output, it has inevitably overshadowed works for other media which are nonetheless of equal if not greater interest.

Amongst these are several for organ or pedal-piano, hitherto not recorded and indeed generally out of print. Apart from the *25 Préludes*, Opus 31, they were written over the period from 1859 to 1872, and it is an interesting comment that many of those ascribed to the pedal-piano work at least as effectively on the organ with suitable adaptation, whilst some of those nominally written for the organ come off less successfully on modern instruments. The music seems to transcend its medium in much the same way as the keyboard music of Bach.

This recording presents pieces from the *Onze grands préludes*, Opus 66 written for pedal-piano in 1867, the *Petits Préludes* of 1859 for organ, and most of the *Onze Pièces dans le style religieux*, Opus 72 of 1867 for organ, harmonium or piano. In general they reflect the devotional, reclusive side of Alkan rather than the flamboyant, and frequently achieve their telling effects through their simplicity of means.

The *Grands Préludes* were dedicated to César Franck, who had in turn composed his *Grande pièce symphonique* for Alkan in 1860-2. No. 1 in F is a short but highly challenging conception based on semiquaver passages for alternated feet and manuals, later combined; it is difficult to avoid the impression that Bach's F major Toccata was in Alkan's mind at the time. The ninth, in D flat, is a gem of enharmonic ingenuity, based on a continually-throbbing chordal idea generated from a double pedal opening and rising to a formidable climax of thickly-chorded manual work underpinned by triple pedalling. The last of the set, in F sharp, starts with an enigmatic recitative in the pedals, eventually passing from a pessimistic main section into a grand unison statement of optimism. Of the eleven *Grands préludes* these three seem to offer the greatest musical interest on the organ, though many of the others fare perfectly passably.

The *Petits préludes sur les huit gammes du plain-chant* are short but important works, passing through the eight Gregorian modes in a tightly-knit disciplined style. They show Alkan at his most devout, though the turbulence of the fourth and the brightness of the seventh remind us of other dimensions.

Nearly all of the *Pièces dans le style religieux* lend themselves well to the organ, only two resisting the translation. They are written on two staves, so that suitable discretion is needed in devising pedal parts; occasionally the limits of organ compass dictate further adjustments. The first, in C, is a strongly characterful processional, opening with four-square harmony but developing an unusual central section which includes 72 successive repetitions of G against a mixture of harmonies before returning to the opening material. The second is a melodious piece which juxtaposes contrasted ideas in A major and minor before combining many of the fragments in its closing section. The third, one of those used in a collection by Franck in 1889, is chiefly fugal in character, notable for a remarkable modulation just before the final dominant pedal.

In the fourth we are presented with a quasi-gavotte for the outer sections, strangely reminiscent of the Opus 31 *Préludes*, counter-balanced by a groping middle section in C minor centred around a dominant pedal repeated exactly 200 times. The fifth piece, in D minor, commences with a firmly-assertive chordal passage alternated with a plaintive chromatic notion over a dominant pedal. The two themes are developed until a mawkish middle section in triple time takes over. Here a general buoyancy is undermined by chromaticisms of doubt before the return of the original themes in a concentrated form and the eventual prevalence of the minor.

The seventh of the set is a pastorale in F, beguiling in character with occasional characteristics of a musette. A central section in the tonic minor develops a remarkable chain of modulations before the main themes return. The ninth, in E flat, is the most extensive of the set, elaborating an innocent opening theme in a manner which recalls Mendelssohn and Bruckner. In the tenth we enter the Dorian mode with a lumbering carillon which makes extensive use of bare octaves in its outer sections whilst shifting chords are offset against a falling octave in the central section. Towards the end the various ideas are combined and the piece ends in triumphantly assertive chords.

The last of the set is perhaps the most enigmatically Alkanesque of all. Based around A minor, a frail melody is constantly contradicted by a bleak bare octave on the submediant. A more assured section in C is brought into play but soon lapses into the opening idea before the two are combined. Further development of both themes is interrupted by a sostenuto chorale in five-time. The original ideas are brought forward again in their major form, leading to a positive reading of the chorale fortissimo; but an imperfect cadence brings a return of the opening melody, collapsing into a sustained dominant only loosely resolved at the end of the piece.

Nicholas King ©1988

Nicholas King was born in 1949 and studied the organ with Dr. Allan Wicks at Canterbury before becoming Organ Scholar of Trinity College, Cambridge. Here he took First Class Honours in the Music Tripos and the John Stewart of Rannoch Scholarship in Sacred Music. After several years of teaching he was appointed to the Royal College of Music as Assistant Director of Studies in 1984 and became Vice-Director and Director of Studies there in January 1989. Since January 1998 he has been Chief Examiner in Music for Trinity College *London*. His recital career has included several recordings of contemporary repertoire for the BBC, and he has developed a special interest in the organ music of Alkan under the guidance and encouragement of his former piano teacher, Ronald Smith.

Recorded on the organ of St. Peter's Church, St. Alban's, Hertfordshire, which was built anew by Bishop in 1974 and incorporates the 1726 Schrider casework. The specification of the instrument follows. Symposium Records is grateful to the Vicar and Organist of the church for their co-operation in the production of this recording.

GREAT

53 Contra Geigen 16
 52 Open Diapason 8
 51 Geigen 8
 50 Rohr Flute 8
 49 Principal 4
 48 Fifteenth 2
 47 Nineteenth 1 1/3
 46 Twenty-Second 1
 45 Fourniture III
 54 Swell to Great
 55 Choir to Great
 57 Chancel on Great
 56 Swell to Choir

SWELL

9 Spitzflöte 8
 8 Viola 8
 7 Celeste 8
 6 Principal 4
 5 Gemshorn 2
 4 Mixture III
 3 Contra Fagotto 16
 2 Trumpet 8
 1 Hautboy 8
 10 Octave
 11 Unison Off
 12 Sub Octave
 13 Tremulant

CHOIR (enclosed)

39 Stopped Diapason 8
 38 Octave 4
 37 Flute 4
 36 Nazard 2 2/3
 35 Fifteenth 2
 34 Tierce 1 3/5
 33 Dulzian 16
 40 Choir Octave
 41 Unison Off

PEDAL

25 Open Diapason 16
 24 Violone 16
 23 Sub Bass 16
 22 Principal 8
 21 Bass Flute 8
 20 Fifteenth 4
 19 Mixture II
 18 Bombarde 16
 17 Fagotto 16
 16 Tuba 8
 15 Shawm 4

(unenclosed)

32 Bombarde 16
 31 Tuba 8
 30 Tuba Clarion 4
 26 Swell to Pedal
 27 Great to Pedal
 28 Choir to Pedal
 29 Great and Ped. Combs.
 14 Generals on Sw. Toe

CHANCEL

42 Gedact 8
 43 Principal 4
 44 Mixture II
 58 Chancel Octave

ACCESSORIES

Six foot-pistons to the Pedal
 Six pistons to the Choir
 Six pistons to the Great
 Six pistons to the Swell
 (duplicated on the foot pistons)
 Six general pistons and general cancel
 Reversible pistons to 26,27,28,54,55,56,57
 Reversible foot pistons to 18,27
 Balanced expression pedals to the Swell and
 Choir organs
 The pistons are on instant capture and have
 eight independent memories

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