

Alkan, the ‘orchestral’ piano and Concerto for Piano Solo (*Homage to Alkan*)

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This essay incorporates elements from my undergraduate dissertation *The Context of Charles Valentin Alkan (Morhange) and his music (University of Durham, 1991)* and the preface to the published score of my Concerto for Piano Solo (*Homage to Alkan*) (*Composers Edition, 2015*).

I first encountered the music of Alkan as a teenager. Having for a while frequented the public Music and Drama library in my home town, Reading, in search of new scores – mainly of piano music – I was dimly aware of some archaic-looking tomes of his music lurking on the top shelf between Albeniz and ‘Light Modern Piano Pieces’, to which I paid scant attention. (The dryly off-putting title ‘12 studies in minor keys’ hardly helped.) Only when I happened upon Norman Demuth’s book *French Piano Music* was my interest sufficiently aroused to reach for those buff-coloured volumes, alerted by the following passage: ‘Amongst Alkan’s most interesting works are ...“12 Etudes dans les tons majeurs” and another set in “Les tons mineurs”. In the set...in the minor, three of the grandest conceptions in the literature can be found – a “Symphony” in four movements, a “Concerto” for solo piano in three, and a graphic set of variations, *Le Festin d’Esope*. Alkan contrives to give an orchestral effect in the “Symphony”; in the “Concerto” the writing is of two kinds, conveying the impression that an orchestra is playing with the soloist’.¹

Already interested in ‘orchestral’ piano writing, I was electrified by the delectable but outrageous idea of a concerto for piano solo, and immediately sought to unlock the secrets imprisoned within those forbidding hardback façades. Brushing off the metaphorical layer of dust, my eyes fell upon the pages of Alkan’s Concerto for Piano Solo (op.39 nos 8-10). I was astonished, astounded, transfixed. In those copious pages of antique engraving a whole undreamed-of world of possibility was revealed to me.

The Op.39 Concerto is the *ne plus ultra* of what I consider Alkan’s most distinctive approach to piano writing: the evocation of other instruments/sounds, or combinations thereof: ultimately, the full orchestra – and even more ultimately, the full orchestra plus the piano sound ‘itself’. The ‘orchestral’ style of keyboard writing can be traced back at least as far as Bach’s Italian Concerto (1735), although this solo concertante piece implies a monophonic solo instrument playing with the baroque keyboard ‘orchestra’ rather than a keyboard one. Following Bach’s lead, in his piano sonatas Mozart conjures up aural images of a variety of Classical ensembles, including the orchestra, through dipping into the 18th-century’s pool of rhetorical ‘topics’ (the Mannheim rocket; the ‘brilliant’ style), which contemporaneous audiences would have understood as referring to other instrumental sounds (or activities such as dancing, hunting, marching etc.). In part of his B♭ major sonata K333, Mozart even evokes a Classical piano concerto on solo keyboard, with orchestral *ritornello* (culminating in the obligatory 6-4 chord) and solo piano cadenza.

The range and polyphonic nature of keyboard instruments has always facilitated their reproduction of music otherwise only performable by ensembles of instruments and/or singers. From the rise in the early 19th century of opera vocal scores and solo or duet transcriptions of orchestral music, purely functional renditions of various ensemble textures on the piano became, in Ronald Smith’s words: ‘an industry relying on a treadmill of routine formulae to provide a crude realisation of the original textures.’ However (Smith continues), ‘Liszt swept all this aside in 1833 with his monumental transcription of Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*.’²

Original orchestrally-conceived piano music, then, has a context in both functional realisations and a more creative approach associated with Liszt’s transcriptions and later (in response?) Alkan in his own published arrangements (his solo adaptations of Mozart and Beethoven piano concertos can be seen as particularly significant in this regard, paving the way for his later original work in this form). As Isidor Phillip noted,³ Alkan took the idea of the ‘orchestral’ piano to a further extreme than any other 19th-century composer, Liszt and Schumann included. Schumann’s *Concert sans orchestra* (1836), sometimes cited as a precedent for Alkan’s unaccompanied concerto, was (sub-)titled thus by his publisher after

¹ *French Piano Music – A Survey with Notes on its Performance*, London, 1959, p.31.

² *Alkan Volume Two: The Music*, London & New York, 1987, p.172.

³ Preface to *French Piano Music: An Anthology*, New York, 1977.

the piece was written; and the experience of the music is more like the solo part of a piano concerto played on its own than a genuinely concertante sound. In this latter regard it could be seen more as a precedent for Sorabji's *Concerto per suonare da me solo* (1946), whose score annotations suggest the heroics of an *unaccompanied* soloist subjected to the almost Satiesque thoughts of a *silent* orchestra – 'orchestra tacita e tacente', as the score's subtitle has it (although Jonathan Powell identifies an 'orchestral tutti' style within the piece – see below).

How is such evocation achieved? That is: why does the piano have this unique suggestive power, and how is it written into some of its repertoire? Alkan himself noted that both the mechanism of the piano and the technique of playing it, as they had developed within his own time, were such as to allow slight differences in touch and articulation (as well as varied deployment of the two pedals) to create subtle but discernable differences in tone quality: 'those effects, timbres and "illusions" of voices and instruments in their innumerable combinations that are made possible by the peculiar sonorities of the modern piano.'⁴ Imitative directions can indeed be found scattered through piano literature from the 19th century onwards, especially in Alkan's works (the op.39 Concerto is the location of some obvious examples: *quasi-trombe* and *quasi-tamburo* in the first movement; *quasi-celli* in the second and the more exotic *quasi-ribeche* in the third).

References to this aspect of piano scoring and performance are rather scattered and not common in the literature, other than in discussions of music by Alkan and his contemporaries (including Alkan's own texts). Raymond Lewenthal addresses it in relation to Alkan's music,⁵ while in a more mainstream context Alfred Brendel has made a notable contribution with regard to the performance of Liszt's transcriptions.⁶ From a less high-minded and more practically anecdotal angle comes Jenna Simeonov's tips for operatic répétiteurs playing functional piano reductions at the blog www.schmopera.com.⁷ In such texts we find some detailed and specific suggestions for how pianists might evoke, through the balancing, articulation and phrasing of chordal passages, for instance,⁸ the sounds of individual orchestral instruments (Brendel), or various combinations such as strings and winds (Brendel; Simeonov). Full orchestral effects are often 'composed in', as with Mozart's 'topics' (see also below), but performatively the richness of an orchestral texture is frequently achieved through extensive recourse to the sustaining pedal; an orchestral hush might be invoked by the soft pedal, or both pedals together (Alkan sometimes calls for *due ped.* in the context of orchestral evocation: for instance in op. 39's *Ouverture* and the third movement of the *Symphonie*).

At the level of scoring, Alkan himself recommends (in the essay previously cited) the use of intangible judgements reliant primarily on 'tact' and intelligence in determining registration: 'how to combine the chords in a particular way'; '...to write some part or other at this octave rather than that' and dynamics: 'to emphasise this, to lighten that', with the overall aim 'to use a thousand ingenious methods to arrive not at a mathematical similarity, but a faithful, relative, moral one'. He concludes with an argument for combining serendipitous judgement with a systematic approach: this art of evocation 'must have its rules, i.e. those formulae which everyone can use, but which, without the necessary insight, must remain useless.'⁹

Orchestral evocation can be achieved on the piano through symbolic associations. For instance, exact keyboard translations of Classical orchestral textures will often result in octave doublings (replicating cellos and basses, or first and second violins). Even though when transferred to the piano this doesn't sound like an orchestra in the literal sense, listeners may accept it as such by association, both through the added power and resonance, and potentially, through experience of piano arrangements whose original versions are known.

Octave doubling aside, the symbolic formula perhaps most familiar from pianistic evocations of the orchestra is tremolando. This is symbolic rather than literal because, while orchestral strings tremble through note repetition, the piano trembles most commonly and idiomatically through octave or

⁴ Introduction to *Souvenirs des concerts du Conservatoire*, first series, translated in *Alkan Volume Two: The Music* (p.175).

⁵ See 'Alkan's Treatment Of The Piano' in *The Piano Music of Alkan*, New York/London, 1964, pp.IX-X. For instance: 'With octaves there are three "registrations" possible: top note predominating, lower note predominating, both equal....Alkan cries out for this approach and to play him well you must orchestrate on the piano' (X).

⁶ In *Musical Thoughts and Afterthoughts* ('Liszt'), London, 1976.

⁷ See the post 'Pianists: 3 tips for sounding like an orchestra' (26 September 2015).

⁸ Alkan himself also recommends 'the intelligent use of certain fingerings, hand-crossing etc.' (op. cit.)

⁹ Op.cit.

chordal alternation, as Simeonov attests.¹⁰ Harold Truscott has discussed this in a specifically Alkanian context. He argues for tremolando as an idiomatically pianistic device, which while an aesthetically inadequate substitute for string tremolo in functional arrangements becomes poetically suggestive in the first movement of Alkan's Concerto:

the one thing that stands out from the rest, as a piano sound in that large opening passage, is the use of the right hand tremolando. This again, while it suggests a vague orchestral connection, is kept securely to the keyboard because it is high up in the treble of the piano. Normally if a piano tremolando is to be used in a piano arrangement of an orchestral work, it is heard in the lower part of the keyboard. Alkan's is in fact high in pitch so that he secures for these bars a vague orchestral suggestion, without compromising the pianism of the device. Only the piano could give us the sound that comes from these bars which is right for the music and is no substitute for anything else.¹¹

An example, perhaps, of where Alkan has sought a 'relative, moral' orchestral suggestion in preference to a 'mathematical' one.

Going beyond symbolic formulae, whether inadequate or impressive, Jonathan Powell identifies some characteristics of the 'orchestral tutti' piano style common to both Alkan and Sorabji's solo piano concertos: such passages, he finds, 'often employ diatonic chordal writing in both hands...moving consecutively, while others simulate orchestral sonority by using many registers of the instrument simultaneously.'¹² Repeated chords are a further characteristic identified through comparison with another (much shorter) solo concertante piano work by John White, Sonata no 152 (2006); this feature takes us all the way back to Bach's Italian Concerto.

The deployment of different registers of the piano simultaneously (whether as an achievable texture or an aural illusion) is facilitated greatly by the sustaining pedal and its resonance; a texture found in many works by Sorabji and Finnissy, not least Sorabji's solo concerto and Finnissy's solo Piano Concerto No 4 (1978/96). Yet there's a sense in which registration and pedalling can be used to create textures which are more than the sum of their parts. Olivier Messiaen perhaps had this in mind when observing, during a discussion of his own epic piano cycle *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus* (the score of which is replete with suggestions of orchestral instrumental sounds), that 'it is possible to produce on the piano sounds which are more orchestral than those of the orchestra.'¹³ Smith touched on this – while also chiming with Truscott's later point above – in his discussion of Alkan's piano *Symphonie*: 'His unique keyboard sonorities are deliberately orchestral but untranslatable. Their effect is the result of a subtle illusion rooted in the very nature of the piano and its evocative power.' Both Smith and Truscott echo Sorabji, who wrote of Alkan's 'manner of writing for the keyboard that may best be termed a sort of pianistic orchestration, it is orchestration *in terms of the piano*',¹⁴ and commented that in the *Symphonie*: 'The feeling and treatment is thoroughly symphonic, yet superbly adapted to the exigencies of the instrument.'¹⁵

Truscott cites another example of scoring which seems more orchestral than an orchestra, again from the first movement of op.39/8:

My final point comes from the huge coda of the movement. It illustrates Alkan's grasp of the piano for purposes of orchestral suggestion in yet a different, and perhaps the ultimate way. The passage begins with a low, quiet, rumbling shake, and against this, at the extreme upper end of the keyboard, chords staccato and just on the borderline of audibility. This is already a remarkable suggestion, but...he allows the volume to grow gradually, without changing the extremes of height and depth of pitch, by increasing volume and intensity and...filling the intervening space, almost the whole of the keyboard with rumbling echoes, and

¹⁰ www.schmopera.com/pianists-3-tips-for-sounding-like-an-orchestra/2. String tremolos

¹¹ 'Why Alkan's music is so pianistic', talk for the Alkan Society at the Thomas Coram Foundation, 8 December 1986, published in the *Alkan Society Bulletin No 31* (January 1987), p.4.

¹² 'Charles-Valentin Alkan and British piano music of the 20th century and beyond', *Alkan Society Bulletin No 90* (January 2014), p.17.

¹³ Roger Nichols, *Messiaen* (2nd edition), Oxford, 1986, p.37.

¹⁴ *The New Age*, 27 January 1937; cited in 'Charles-Valentin Alkan and British piano music of the 20th century and beyond', op.cit.

¹⁵ 'Charles Henri Victorin Morhange (Alkan)', *Around Music*, London, 1932, p.218. Similar sentiments were expressed in a letter to me from pianist Peter Donohoe, in response to a suggestion of mine that I might orchestrate Alkan's solo concerto (unaware this had already been done by Mark Starr and Karl Klindworth): 'It has always seemed to me to be one of the fundamental aspects of the piece that the symphonic scale (including the inherent combative nature of the traditional concerto) is forced to be contained within the limitations created by being performable on solo piano alone. Orchestrating it seems to me, therefore, to be rather futile – similar to doing the same to...Messiaen's *Vingt Regards*.' (30 August 1988) I did indeed abandon my orchestration attempts.

from the single notes in the bass he adds just one to make an octave. So that from what appears on the page to be tiny, quite inadequate means, he obtains an earfilling crescendo to lead to the chordal theme from the orchestra's initial tutti, the volume at full pelt.¹⁶

Earlier in the coda – which I hear as both solo and tutti; the ‘orchestra’ playing together with the piano – the starkness of the repeated notes, octaves and chords on the page is similarly at odds with the rich and full texture experienced by the listener in performance: the illusion of sustained harmonies and the effect of multiple registers at play simultaneously, which is certainly facilitated by the resonance of the pedal yet seems to go beyond this mechanical, mathematical phenomenon in an intangible, almost magical way.

My own *Concerto for piano solo (Homage to Alkan)* starts with these two intersecting contexts: the legacy of Alkan, and the broader tradition of orchestral evocation on the piano – including the much narrower solo piano concerto genre.¹⁷ Completed in 2013 (the initial premiere performances in Alkan's bicentenary year)/2014 (the definitive score), the work has a long genesis, with some ideas dating back to my discovery of Alkan and undergraduate music studies in the late 1980s. Certain specific orchestral suggestions (strings, solo flute, harp, bassoons, brass) were inspired by Brendel's imaginative solutions for achieving them. For instance, of string imitation Brendel writes: ‘Characteristic of the string sound is a wide, easily variable dynamic range, a legato supported by pedal vibrations, a tender onset of the notes.... Bass entries may be anticipated. Cellos and double basses need time in which to unfold their sound. Pizzicato chords may be lightly broken; they are plucked away from the keys. Muted string passages of course require soft-peddaling.’¹⁸ And of the horn: ‘The noble, full, somewhat veiled, “romantic” sound of the horn demands a loose arm and a flexible wrist. Although its dynamics extend from *pp* to *f*, the sordino pedal should always be used. In legato, every note is put down separately and connected with its neighbours by pedal alone. The staccato is never pointed. In chords played by several horns, the upper voice must recede slightly in favour of the lower ones.’¹⁹ Thus Brendel's texts inform elements of my score, primarily performance directions.

As for Alkanian influences: these range from subtle suggestions (for instance a sparse three-part canon in octaves alludes to the pedal-point from the middle of Alkan's Concerto first movement, which I think of in terms of Eliot's ‘still point of a turning world’), through clearer but non-specific references (e.g., to Alkan's favoured march and fanfare topics) to short snippets of direct quotation: from the *Scherzo Diabolico* and *Symphonie* (both from the magnum opus 39). The opening bar of my concerto quotes from the closing passage of Alkan's *Symphonie* first movement; in a sense, it starts where Alkan's symphonic movement leaves off.

Cast in four movements (but played *attacca*), the third is a *danza alla barbaresca* in response to Alkan's op.39/10. Throughout the work I have followed Alkan in indicating the alternation of the piano soloist and the illusory orchestra; unlike him, I also indicate where a combination of the two is intended to be evoked (although at times in his work this intention is clearly implied). Also unlike Alkan – but perhaps as a way of extending his aesthetic in a contemporary way – I have introduced an element of indeterminacy in the cadenza between movement III and the toccata finale, which is to be prepared or improvised in response to graphic-score elements.²⁰

The long gestation of the work makes it a kind of compositional autobiography, taking in a long-term interest in the various ways – conventional and extended – of conveying musical material via the medium of the piano; from the intricate manipulation of decorative motifs to a (relatively recent) concern with a more raw and visceral expression. Concerns which were not unknown, of course, to Alkan himself.

A recording of Concerto for Piano Solo (Homage to Alkan), performed by Gabriel Keen, was released by Sargasso Records in September 2017 as part of the album Living Stones (SCD28081). See page 24 of this issue for a reflection on the CD.

¹⁶ Op. cit. (p.5)

¹⁷ Jonathan Powell surveys contributions from British composers to this rarified genre in the article previously cited. Some other examples may be found in the Wikipedia entry ‘Concerto for solo piano’.

¹⁸ Op. cit. (p.95)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Having said this is unlike Alkan, the distinctive appearance of his printed editions was identified by Sorabji, who remarked on ‘the extraordinary original appearance of the music, as of an entirely novel and unfamiliar system of decorative design’ (‘Charles Morhange’, *Around Music*, London, 1932, p.214). Raymond Lewenthal also noted this feature in his edited selection, *The Piano Music Of Alkan* (New York/London, 1964, p.VIII).