

RUBICON

Alkan

Le Petit Concert

ANDREW
YIANGOU

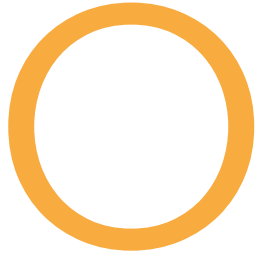
Charles-Valentin Alkan 1813–1888

Le Petit Concert

1	Nocturne in B major, Op.22	6.03
2	Saltarelle in E minor, Op.23	4.56
	from 25 Préludes, Op.31	
3	No.6 Ancienne mélodie de la synagogue (G minor)	4.40
4	No.18 Romance (C# minor)	3.49
	from 12 Études dans tous les tons majeurs, Op.35	
5	No.4 Presto (C major)	5.56
	from Recueil de chants Op.38	
	<i>1^{er} Recueil</i>	
6	No.1 Assez vivement (E major)	5.23
	from 12 Études dans tous les tons mineurs, Op.39	
7	No.3 Scherzo diabolico (G minor)	5.22
8	Nocturne in F# major, Op.57/2 (Troisième Nocturne)	4.53
	Sonatine pour piano in A minor, Op.61	
9	I. Allegro vivace	6.21
10	II. Allegramente	4.33
11	III. Scherzo–Minuetto	4.59
12	IV. Tempo giusto	7.10

	from Esquisses, Op.63	
	<i>1^{ère} Suite</i>	
13	No.1 La Vision (C major)	2.52
14	No.2 Le Staccatissimo (F minor)	1.30
	<i>2^e Suite</i>	
15	No.23 L'Homme aux sabots (B \flat minor)	0.39
	<i>3^e Suite</i>	
16	No.30 Petit Air dolent (B minor)	2.20
	<i>4^e Suite</i>	
17	No.43 Notturnino–Innamorato (F \sharp minor)	1.55
18	No.46 Le Premier Billet doux (E \flat major)	1.15
	from 3^e Recueil de chants, Op.65	
19	No.3 En canon à l'octave (A major)	2.59
	from 5^e Recueil de chants, Op.70	
20	No.1 Duetтино (E major)	3.51
21	No.2 Andantinetto (A minor)	2.19
22	No.6 Barcarolle (G minor)	6.32
	from Les Mois, Op.74	
23	No.5 La Sérénade (F \sharp minor)	2.43
24	No.6 Promenade sur l'eau (A major)	2.17
	from 3 Grandes Études for piano Op.76	
25	No.3 Pour les deux mains: Mouvement semblable et perpétuel (C minor)	6.37
	from Souvenirs de musique de chambre	
26	J.S. Bach. Sonata for harpsichord and flute: II. Andantino 'Siciliano' (G minor) Concert transcription for solo piano, after BWV 1031	2.08

ANDREW YIANGOU piano



n 29 April 1844 in Paris's Salle Érard, Charles-Valentin Alkan returned to the concert platform after an absence of six years. Bach, Scarlatti, Beethoven and Weber featured. The recital ended with the first performance of four of Alkan's latest compositions. Andrew Yiangou opens his programme with two of the new works Alkan performed on that occasion: the **Nocturne in B major, Op.22** and the **Saltarelle in E minor, Op.23**. The Nocturne, in three sections, opens with a beguiling Chopinesque melody, followed by a contrasted second theme which is then ingeniously combined with the first. The scintillating Saltarelle, exploiting the full range of the new seven-octave Érard, was quickly taken up by other pianists.

Alkan's set of 25 *Preludes in all the major and minor keys* was published in 1847. Chopin's iconic set of 24 had appeared eight years earlier but the character of the two are markedly different, Alkan's being generally more reflective. Also Alkan returned to the starting key of C major to provide a 25th Prelude. The whole set was reviewed by the celebrated critic François-Joseph Fétis (1784–1871) who thought the character of the melody of **Prelude No.6 in G minor**, 'its ornaments, its nuances, the absence of forward motion and frequent suspensions on held notes; all of this, in general, is prevalent in songs of the Orient'. Ronald Smith aptly describes **Prelude No.18 in C sharp minor** as what might have been produced 'had Tchaikovsky rewritten Schubert's *Ständchen*'. With its expressive, melancholy theme, it is not as easy to play as it might seem from a casual listen, with the two hands constantly criss-crossing to sustain the melodic line.

Study No.4 in C major from *Douze Études dans tous les tons majeurs*, Op.35 (1847) also demands much criss-crossing of hands. Here, though, it is within the context of 'the most testing exercise in tremolando ever devised' (Ronald Smith again), 'mercilessly sustained for nearly two hundred bars'. After nearly a decade of silence, 1857 was something of a miracle year in the chronology of Alkan's compositions and saw the publication of a string of great works. His five volumes of *Chants* appeared between 1857 and the early 1870s. The very first of these from the *Premier recueil de chants* is entitled 'Assez vivement' ('quite strongly') and, as if to underline it, marked to be played 'largement, quoique assez vif' ('spaciously, though quite lively'). But it is Alkan's Op.39, *Douze Études dans tous les tons mineurs*, that is the undisputed masterpiece, not only of 1857 but, arguably, the whole of the 19th century, a set of gigantic studies that incorporates a four-movement symphony and a three-movement concerto, both for solo piano. Study No.3 is the **Scherzo diabolico**, a truly demonic challenge for any pianist. The central section is a trio (*fff*) with four- and five-part chords in both hands. The scherzo returns but this time has to be played *ppp* with both pedals to be held down. Op.57 contains two further Nocturnes. Andrew Yiangou chooses the second of these, the **Troisième Nocturne** – a strange piece and rare example of a fast nocturne (it's marked *très vif* and *Appassionatamente*).

At the centre of Andrew Yiangou's recital is one of Alkan's most extraordinary and fascinating works, the **Sonatine pour piano in A minor, Op.61**. For those expecting the innocently titled Sonatine to resemble something of the small-scale and technical simplicity of a sonatina by Beethoven or Clementi, they are in for a shock – and a treat. While the keyboard texture may be

lighter and airier than Alkan's *Grande Sonate* or the minor key *Études*, the effect is equally exhilarating. It was described by Sorabji as 'vehement, droll, gargoyle-like, childlike and naïve in turn – almost as though Berlioz had written a Beethoven sonata'. The Sonatine was published in 1861, the same year as Alkan's **Esquisses** – 48 miniatures, some of them barely more than a page of score in length, and accumulated over a period of 15 years. The fecundity of ideas and the variety of expression is quite astonishing. Alkan arranged them in a sequence which sees them passing through all the major and minor keys twice. Mr Yiangou plays a selection of six.

In the same vein, we hear No.3 of the six brief works that make up the *Troisième Recueil de chants*. It is a haunting lullaby and simultaneously a beautifully harmonised and ingenious strict canon at the octave – the melody is played by the right hand, followed a bar later an octave lower by the left hand. After this we have three pieces from the *Cinquième Recueil de chants*, a volume once more of six pieces which, like the first volume of *Chants*, follows the key sequence of Mendelssohn's first set of *Songs without Words*. **Duettino**, indeed, could be mistaken for Mendelssohn. Not so the **Andantino**, where a songful melody in duple time is set against a left-hand accompaniment in triple time. Very Alkan. The **Barcarolle** shares a key (G minor) and number (No.6) with Mendelssohn's far better-known 'Venetian Gondola Song'. Though Andrew Yiangou has ordered his programme in chronological order by opus number, the high number allocated to **Les Mois** is misleading. Another (early) collection of six pieces, *Six Morceaux caractéristiques*, were published in the late 1830s. Soon afterwards, a further six were added, but the collection remained unpublished for some reason, without an opus number, until being ascribed much later as Op.74.

This sequence of charming *morceaux* ends definitively with the last of the *Trois Grandes Études pour les mains séparées et réunies*, another work with a misleadingly high opus number, and left in limbo though composed in 1838–40. It is one of the most challenging of keyboard works (though perhaps not quite as challenging as its two companions, the first a study for the left hand alone, the second a rare example of a study for the right hand alone). The final **Mouvement semblable et perpétuel (Rondo-Toccata) in C minor** for hands reunited is a vigorous toccata with the two hands 'lock[ed] together in desperate unison for nearly five hundred bars, with sallies of parallel tenths forbidding all but the largest hands from exploring their vigorous contours' (Smith). Finally, another rarity: Alkan's transcription of the **Siciliano from Bach's Flute Sonata in E flat major, BWV 1031**, the second of six pieces published in c.1870 entitled *Souvenirs de musique de chambre*. It offers a pleasant alternative to the famous arrangement made in the 1930s by Wilhelm Kempff.

Jeremy Nicholas



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