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Charles-Valentin ALKAN



Complete Recueils de Chants Volume Two

Book IV, Op. 67

Book V, Op. 70

Deux Nocturnes, Op. 57

Deux Petites Pièces, Op. 60

Chapeau bas!

Désir

Stephanie McCallum, piano

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDING

CHARLES-VALENTIN ALKAN AND HIS RECUEILS DE CHANTS, VOLUME TWO

by Peter McCallum

Alkan's five books of *Chants* were written over a fifteen-year period from 1857 to 1872 during his most artistically mature and productive phase, after he emerged from a period of self-imposed social and artistic seclusion. In spite of their expressive variety, they are unified both internally and over the complete five-volume cycle, the fifth book returning to some of the characteristics of the first book, ending with a reflective summary. Unlike the Opp. 35 and 39 studies in all the major and minor keys, they are not the alpha and omega of his achievement, but rather a more subtle and intricate map of the strands and range of his musical thought.

It is a characteristic of all of Alkan's best music that – although he works within the harmonic and tonal language, the range of genres and the stylistic parameters of the nineteenth century – he brings to each of them a singular personality defined by the sense of far-sighted clarity that comes with isolation. Such isolation finds beautiful, poignant and varied expression in G minor Barcarolles that conclude each of the five volumes of *Chants*. His sentimental moods (often found in the E major pieces that open each set) are tinged with yearning and a sense that such comfort is for others; instead, as later with Mahler and Shostakovich, he is haunted by visions of parody, the banal and the grotesque. As seen sometimes in the third number of each set, each one a vigorous piece in A major, he often uses these elements to create a keen edge to his artistic tone of voice. These individual traits inform and sometimes challenge the boundaries, both formal and expressive, of the genres in which he worked, and yet it is equally symptomatic of his personality that he adheres to formal and musical strictness with obstinacy bordering at times on obsession, even when his imagination was stretching them to the utmost.

His musical ideas, too, were often pursued with experimental, sometimes obsessive rigour. Here it is the second *Chant* of each volume that is particularly interesting – witness the unusual nagging cross-rhythms in the *Andantino* of the Fifth and final book, Op. 70. In his most extended sets of studies, the twelve of Op. 39, in all the minor keys, and the three of Op. 76 for the left hand, right hand and both hands reunited, the pieces overspill the bounds of the study to become overtures, symphonies and concertos, and yet he persevered insistently with the original intent of the parameters of the two cycles. Similarly, though not to the same extent, the *Chants* push the boundaries of the *Song without Words* established by Mendelssohn and yet maintain their framework.

Alkan's five books of *Chants* are better understood when heard against the genre of 'song-like' pieces for piano that emerged in the nineteenth century as composers discovered the potential of the new pianos, with their more sophisticated actions, stronger frames, longer strings and pedals, to imitate the expressive

Kats-Chernin's *Displaced Dances* with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, a piano concerto written especially for her.

Her solo recordings include a two-disc set of the complete piano sonatas of Weber; *Illegal Harmonies: The 20th-Century Piano*; *Perfume*, a best-selling disc of rare French piano music; two CDs of music by Liszt, *The Liszt Album* and *From the Years of Pilgrimage*; and an album of piano works by Erik Satie, entitled *Gymnopédies*. With the release in 2006 of a two-CD set of Alkan's *Douze études dans les tons mineurs*, she was the first pianist ever to have recorded both of Alkan's sets of studies in the major and the minor keys, Opp. 35 and 39. More recent discs include *A Romantic Christmas*, a CD of Schumann's piano music, *Scenes from Childhood*, including the *Fantasia* in C major Op. 17, and a Beethoven premiere recording – *Für Elise: Bagatelles for piano by Ludwig van Beethoven*. This disc contains a *Bagatelle* in F minor, probably the last piano piece that Beethoven wrote, and never previously published, performed or recorded.

Her first CD of the complete *Recueils de chants* (Tocatta Classics TOCC 0157) was received with universal praise: *CD Review* on BBC Radio 3 felt that the music was 'really exquisitely played by Stephanie McCallum, who really "gets" the style [...] if you really want to get to know what this Alkan guy is all about, then Stephanie McCallum can really show you very well indeed'. MusicWeb International agreed: 'McCallum is a practised exponent of Alkan's music and she has spent a number of years performing and recording it. She is alive to his affectionate *Allegrettos* and is always extremely effective – I would say at her most supremely stylish – in the third movement *Chants* (or Choeur or Canon). She deftly evokes the dog bark in that of Book I, and so too the delicate bell peals in the succeeding piece. The flowing agitation of the tensile fifth pieces of the sets is also finely conveyed. [...] With first class booklet notes and recording quality, this first release in the series can be warmly commended'.

For a complete list of recordings please visit Stephanie's website at www.stephaniemccallum.com.

Other Alkan recordings by Stephanie McCallum

- *Douze études dans les tons mineurs*, Op. 39, ABC Classics 476 5335 (2006)
- Cavatina from Beethoven's String Quartet in B flat major Op.130 arr. Alkan (in *The Timeless Music of Beethoven*), ABC Classics 476 9420 (2006)
- *Le Festin d'Esopo*, Op. 39, No. 12 (in *Perfume: The Exquisite Piano Music of France*, with Chabrier, Debussy, Fauré, Poulenc, Ravel, Ropartz and Satie), ABC Classics 461 798-2 (2001)
- *Symphonie* for solo piano, Op. 39, Nos. 4–7 (with Magnard, Promenades), Tall Poppies TP081 (1996)
- *Twelve Studies in All the Major Keys*, Op. 35 (first complete recording), Tall Poppies TP055 (1994)
- *Concerto for Solo Piano*, Op. 39, Nos. 8–10; *Chants*, Op. 70 (first recording), MBS Records 24 CD (1992)
- *The Complete Recueils de Chants: Volume One* – Books 1–3, Opp. 38 and 64; *Une fusée: Introduction et Impromptu*, Op. 55, Tocatta Classics TOCC 0157 (2013)

shares some characteristics with the 'Contrapunctus', Op. 35, No. 9, from the *Studies in All the Major Keys*: both have detailed and carefully worked invertible counterpoint using cascades of double thirds in the central part amid outer sections in octaves.

Peter McCallum is Associate Professor of Musicology at the University of Sydney and the classical-music critic of The Sydney Morning Herald.

Described by Anthony Clarke in *The Bulletin* as 'one of Australia's foremost pianists', Stephanie McCallum has enjoyed an international career of over thirty years, appearing on over forty CDs (including fifteen solo discs) and in hundreds of live solo and concerto performances. Playing a repertoire from the eighteenth to the 21st century, she is especially noted for her performances of virtuosic music of the nineteenth century, particularly the music of Liszt and Alkan, and also for her advocacy of demanding contemporary solo and ensemble scores.

Stephanie McCallum is Associate Professor in piano at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music of the University of Sydney, where she herself studied with Alexander Sverjensky and with the noted Liszt player, Gordon Watson. After advanced studies in England with the Alkan expert Ronald Smith, she made her critically acclaimed Wigmore Hall debut in 1982 where she gave what is believed to be the first performance of Alkan's *Chants*, Op. 70. She is also credited with the first complete performance of Alkan's *Trois Grandes Études*, Op. 76, in London. Her live performances of the Concerto, the Symphony, and other works from the *Douze études dans les tons mineurs* have been described by critics as 'titanic', 'awe-inspiring', 'stupendous', 'virtuosic pianism of the highest calibre' and 'one of the glories of Australian pianism'.

Stephanie McCallum has appeared extensively as a soloist in the United Kingdom, France and Australia, and has toured Europe with The Alpha Centauri Ensemble. She has made many appearances as soloist in the Sydney Festival, and performed in the Brighton, Cheltenham, Huddersfield, and Sydney Spring festivals. A noted exponent of contemporary music, Stephanie was a founding member of the contemporary ensembles AustralYSIS and Sydney Alpha Ensemble and was joint artistic director of the latter since its inception. She has performed with such groups as the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Elision and The Australia Ensemble. She appears in ensemble on many CDs as well as soloist on two CDs by the Sydney Alpha Ensemble, *Strange Attractions*, and *Clocks*, featuring works of Elena Kats-Chernin. In 2000 she gave the world premiere of



qualities of the voice and sustaining instruments. In July 1832 the publisher Novello released a set of 6 *Original Melodies for the pianoforte* by Felix Mendelssohn. The set was hugely successful and was republished the following year under the title *Lieder ohne Worte* ('Songs without Words'), Op. 19b (a term that Mendelssohn and his sister Fanny had used in private correspondence since about 1828), together with a set of songs with words, Op. 19a. Such was the success of Op. 19b that, at his publisher's request, Mendelssohn wrote a further five sets of *Songs without Words* between then and 1845, and in the process established a genre. Simply stated, it can be defined as a melodious piece for solo piano imitating a song, duet or part-song, in a varied ternary form with coda (ABA'C), often with a few introductory bars of the kind found in the piano introduction of songs for voice. Mendelssohn used titles infrequently, thus avoiding the sense that the music was secretly 'about' something. An exception is the 'Venetian Gondola Song', the sixth piece in the first set, and the reference to the Venetian song, or barcarolle, is one he returned to several times (in, for example, Op. 30, No. 6, Op. 53, No. 6, and Op. 62, No. 3). Most of the other titles applied to these pieces have been the interpolations of publishers and editors. In an oft-quoted letter (from 15 October 1842) to Marc-André Souchay, who had asked about the meaning of some of the *Songs without Words*, he said that he did not want to insert words because, in his experience, words were indefinite and capable of multiple interpretations, whereas, for him, musical thought expressed something that was too definite for words. These works thus occupy an ambiguous space in the nineteenth-century German aesthetic debate about the value of 'absolute' music, which communicates purely according to musical laws, and music which derives its meaning from words, drama, programmes or other such external inspiration. On one hand, the title 'song' points to an extra-musical significance; on the other, the qualifier 'without words' dismisses any attempt to define it in non-musical terms. This ambiguity also applies to Alkan's *Chants*. 'Chanson de la Bonne Vieille' from Book IV, for example, is clearly programmatic and descriptive. The preceding piece in that Book, 'Neige et Lave', hints at a metaphorical meaning behind the title pointing to a hidden programme. The *Duetto* which opens Book V, on the other hand, is more elusive. It clearly implies a duet between male and female singers, and the intertwining of parts when the two are combined is passionate, though any programmatic suggestion is veiled behind seemingly musical discourse. The title of the fifth piece of Book IV, 'Appassionato', hints at an unstated programme or idea and this impression is reinforced by the central section marked *Reminiscenzia*.

Many writers, Franz Liszt among them, have pointed to the *Nocturnes* of John Field as a foundational predecessor for the purely pianistic 'song'. Even so, Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* are of particular significance for Alkan's *Chants* because each of his five books is modelled on Mendelssohn's first, Op. 19b. Not only is Mendelssohn's key-sequence followed in each of Alkan's volumes, but the particular styles and textures of Op. 19b recur throughout Alkan's *Chants*. Although this modelling is most apparent in Alkan's first and last books, all five not only continue to use exactly the same sequence of keys as Op. 19b (a sequence that Mendelssohn himself varied in his later volumes) but also allude to their textures and moods. This manner of reworking the same structural framework gives a sense of unity of purpose to the complete cycle of *Chants* and exemplifies a

recurring feature of Alkan's creative practice. In following through an idea, he can be methodical and consistent to the point of obsession, and will sometimes maintain an idea when the details of its realisation grow to a point where they seem to swamp the original conception. In some of the *Chants* Alkan extends the sentimental manner and modest scale of the *Song without Words* well beyond the frame of domestic music-making.

With its popularity, its imitators and its association with middle-class drawing-room music making, the genre that Mendelssohn established acquired a reputation for conventionality that contributed to its decline in the twentieth century. Indeed, Mendelssohn himself was aware of the problems of over-exposure. Hans and Louise Tischler have pointed out that in 1839 he wrote to his publisher that there really were too many pieces of that style being published: 'One should change the tune for once, I think'.¹ The charge of conventionality, by contrast, cannot be levelled at Alkan's *Chants* which, alongside familiar nineteenth-century textures and harmonic usages, feature singular juxtapositions, harmonic ideas and Alkan's instinct for the power of the distinctive solitary artistic voice, and, at times, the expressive potential of the bizarre, the banal and the grotesque.

The model provided by Mendelssohn's Op. 19b provides a useful backdrop against which to study the detail of Alkan's *Chants*:

No. 1 E major. An arpeggiated accompaniment beneath solo *cantabile* melody in three-part song-form with coda in moderate flowing tempo. The first section modulates to the dominant and is repeated, as in a sonata. The central section moves to E minor as a route to G major before returning to E via the dominant. The return section is expanded, leading to a small-scale climax before a quiet coda.

No. 2 The tonality of A minor joins the second Song to the first by creating a dominant-tonic relationship. An expressive melody over an alternating accompaniment with the central section moving to the dominant minor key.

No. 3 A major. Vigorous in quick tempo (called in some editions a *Jagdlied* – hunting song) with introductory flourish before the main melody begins. The first section modulates to the dominant.

No. 4 Again A major, in moderate tempo. After an introduction, a simple homophonic melody in four-part hymn-style. Simple central section, expanded return and return to the introduction by way of coda.

No. 5 An agitated piece in F sharp minor. The first section ends in A major with development, varied reprise and coda. The most extended of the set.

No. 6 A simple Barcarolle in G minor, again with a gently undulating accompaniment.

It takes nothing away from Alkan's originality to observe that, when viewed against this model, the *Premier Recueil de Chants*, Op. 38, has sufficient parallels with Mendelssohn's first book as to be in part a conscious homage to the slightly older composer. Yet as Alkan returns to the model over his five books of *Chants*, it is clear that homage, on its own, is inadequate in explaining Alkan's motivation. The cycle of five books is a repeated exploration of a set of compositional problems, extending the types Mendelssohn established in new directions.

¹ Hans Tischler and Louise H. Tischler, 'Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words"', *The Musical Quarterly*, No. 33 (1947), p. 5.

Sostenuto molto ('ardently but strongly sustained'). If this is dear liberty, the next section, *Quasi Scherzando*, seems to poke fun at it with a mischievously deadpan idea in G major with short staccato notes and *gruppetti* that, in a later age, might have been used to accompany a cartoon character furtively creeping in the dark. It is interesting to note that the remote key-relationship – F sharp major to G major – is the same as that used in the *Troisième Nocturne*, Op. 57, No. 2, though the contrast of mood there does not have the bizarre quality of 'Ma chère liberté'. This nervous idea is developed obsessively before an expanded return of the opening section. In the second piece, 'Ma chère servitude', in A minor [16], the main melody makes hints at the motive of the bizarre middle section of the previous piece and transforms it into a tone of sweet tenderness and supplicant expressiveness. The middle section takes up this motif without the sharp *staccato* of 'Ma chère liberté' and answers it soothingly with an idea marked *Teneramente* ('tenderly'). The transformation of this idea in the middle sections of each of the two pieces thus implies that, for Alkan, liberty had its negative side which manifests itself in parody and the grotesque, which is redeemed by servitude.

Désir in A flat major (1844), styled a *Fantaisie* by its composer [17], is of interest for its exploration of groupings that cut across the bar-structure – over and above its tender character, which becomes more impassioned in the central section. After establishing a clear four-beat pattern at the outset, the cadence breaks into three-note groupings (though without changing the time-signature) to give increasing urgency towards the cadence. The central section in G major, though written in four-beat bars, uses six-beat groupings which again break down further as the music becomes more pressing.

Chapeau bas! ('Hats off!') [18] is a virtuosic octave study and the sense of the title, and with it the spirit of the piece, is well captured in the heel-clicking salute of the opening. *Chapeau bas!* is the second of two pieces to which Alkan gave the genre title *Fantasticheria* which is usually translated as 'reverie' or 'daydream'. If this piece is a daydream, it is a singularly vigorous one, and is even further away from the expectations of the term than the *Nocturne*, Op. 57, No. 2, is from the usual characteristics of nocturnes. It is almost as though Alkan were using the term in a self-mocking or self-deprecatory tone, invoking the same sense of diffidence or mock-diffidence that would be implied by calling something a sketch or a doodle. The earlier *Fantasticheria pour piano* (1868) also dates from the period of Books IV and V of the *Chants*. It uses a theme in canon which also implies discipline that seems at odds with the implications of a *fantasticheria*. *Chapeau bas!* has a particular interest in connection with the *Chants* in that it is a ternary form piece in F sharp minor with a B minor middle section and virtuosic F sharp major coda after the return. In broad terms it thus resembles the F sharp minor pieces which occupy the fifth position in each of the books of *Chants* and it is not impossible that it was at some point conceived with that intention. Brigitte François-Sappey's and François Luguénot's catalogue gives a publication date of 1872,⁹ the same year as the fifth and final book, suggesting that if that was its original purpose, the matter was settled with the completion of Book V, at which point Alkan decided to publish it alone. In its sprightly pomposity the piece

⁹ Brigitte François-Sappey and François Luguénot, *Charles-Valentin Alkan*, Bleu Nuit, Paris, 2013.

The following 'Scherzo-Coro' in F sharp minor [11] presents a highly original textural adaptation of vocal writing, the upper three voices imitating the close-voiced harmonies of a choral part-song, while the left hand energises the music with driving measured tremolo. The music is grim, austere and impressive with the central trio section in F sharp major providing some relief from the insistent onward movement.

As noted above, the fifth book of *Chants* has the added feature of a *Récapitulation* with the subtitle: 'en guise de Transition, ou Introduction pour le Numéro suivant' ('in the manner of a transition or introduction for the following piece') [12]. Pace Alkan's suggestion it could be used as an introduction for the *Barcarolle* if performed separately, this reflection gives a unified focus to the cycle by bringing back fragments of each of the preceding *Chants* in a freely modulating improvisatory pianistic texture. Unifying a cycle in this way finds its origin in Beethoven's song-cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*, Op. 98 (and, on a symphonic scale, in the incipits of earlier movements found before the choral finale of the Ninth Symphony). The idea can also be found in other, later French cyclic piano works, such as in the final piece of Albéric Magnard's charming cycle, *Promenades*⁷ (1893) and the last waltz of Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911). Finally, the closing *Barcarolle* in G minor juxtaposes a poignant solo melody against a mournful clanging accompaniment recalling bells over dark water.

Just as the *Chants* mix a domestic genre invented and made popular by Mendelssohn with the distinctive characteristics of Alkan's artistic personality, the *Deux Nocturnes*, Op. 57, could be seen to do the same for a genre initiated by John Field but which is forever associated with Alkan's one-time neighbour in the Square d'Orléans in Paris, Chopin. Alkan's earlier nocturne in B major, Op. 22, is a beautifully crafted gem that fulfils all the expectations of the genre created by Field and Chopin, but the two *Nocturnes* in Op. 57 avoid the characteristic pedalled widely spaced accompaniment textures and *cantabile* melody placed in the sweet spot of the lower bass harmonics. The *Deuxième Nocturne*, Op. 57, No. 1, in B minor [13], juxtaposes right-hand statement and left-hand response at the outset which is later inverted. Out of this simple eloquent dialogue, Alkan builds deftly balanced textures that carry expressive weight with refined subtlety. The central section explores subdominant regions of G, F and C, so that the path to the return to B minor is oblique and its arrival fresh. The *Troisième Nocturne*, Op. 57, No. 2, in F sharp major [14], is unusual given the expectation of a slow or moderate tempo within the genre. Marked *Très vif*, the rapidly whirring left-hand pattern suggests, perhaps, racing thoughts,⁸ relieved momentarily in the middle section where the tempo is initially pulled back and the whirring accompaniment ceases.

The so-called *Deux Petites Pièces*, Op. 60 (neither piece is particularly *petit*), embody the dualism discussed above in connection with the fourth book of *Chants* in an intriguing and characteristically enigmatic way. The first, 'Ma chère liberté' [15] begins with a pulsating texture in F sharp major with the instruction *Focosamente ma*

⁷ Recorded by Stephanie McCallum on *Alkan and Magnard*, Tall Poppies TP081 (1996).

⁸ This and other ideas are explored in Stephanie McCallum, 'Alkan: Enigma or Schizophrenia?', *Alkan Society Bulletin*, No. 75, April 2007, pp. 2–10.

Although written up to twenty years before his death, the last two books of *Chants* are among the last major works that Alkan composed. They come at the end of a self-imposed twenty-year exile from the concert platform, during which Alkan pursued a morbidly reclusive lifestyle, shunning society but composing consistently and, at times, prodigiously. Whether the last two books of *Chants* demonstrate the 'late-style' characteristics often remarked upon in other artists – sparseness and economy of utterance, 'fending off with prickly tartness those interested merely in sampling them' (to use Adorno's words about late Beethoven²) – any more than Alkan's earlier music is debatable. To some extent, his mature style always exhibited austere severity and his expressive world often gave voice to alienation. In letters to his friend Hiller, Alkan frequently complained of illness and old age in the 1860s, and there is evidence that his mental health in this period was not good. In retrospect, the fifth and final book of *Chants* seems an apt if melancholy leave-taking. Its pieces reveal concentrated form and intensity of expression and it closes with a fragmented *Récapitulation*, surveying the earlier music in thoughtful reflection, followed by a *Barcarolle* expressive of isolation and resignation [12]. The leave-taking from composition precipitated a surprise return to performance in old age after a long silence: Alkan initiated a series of *Petits concerts* at the Salon Erard in Paris in 1873, the year after the Fifth Book of *Chants* was published.

As well as bringing to a close the output of one of the giants of nineteenth-century pianism – whom Ferruccio Busoni placed among the century's five most significant composers for the piano³ – these books of *Chants* also complete a project, begun at least fifteen years earlier, that had become a minor obsession. The earliest date that can be attached to any of the five books of *Chants* is that on the manuscript of the 'Hymne' which opens the Second Book,⁴ which bears the date '5/5/1855'. The repeated fives in that date may have had some special significance for Alkan and it is even conceivable (though this is pure speculation) that it is related in some way to his writing five books of *Chants*. What can be stated with certainty is that the cycle of five books were unified both in Alkan's mind and in their overall form by the use in each of a consistent sequence of keys, matched by a recurring pattern of genres or musical types, following the initial model of Mendelssohn's first book of *Songs without Words*.

Stephanie McCallum has pointed out⁵ that a feature of the fourth book of *Chants* is the dualism found in its titles and in the internal structure of some of its pieces, a feature of recurring interest in Alkan's music. Alkan used dualism to bring together opposites, often with abrupt transitions and bizarre juxtapositions. His titles sometimes suggest a dualistic principle in the organisation of his thought, in structure or expression or both. In 'Chant d'amour – Chant de mort', Op. 35, No. 10, from his twelve studies in the major keys, for example, the song

² Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, p. 123.

³ 'Vorbemerkungen', *Franz Liszt's Musikalische Werke: herausgegeben von der Liszt-Stiftung. II Pianofortwerke: Etüden für pianoforte zur zwei händen*, Band 1, Breitkopf and Härtel, Berlin, Brussels, London and New York, 1910, p. iii.

⁴ Stephanie McCallum's recording of the first three *Recueils de chants* can be found on Toccat Classics TOCC 0157.

⁵ 'Alkan's take on a Domestic Piano Genre: The five *Recueils de Chants* (1857–1872)', *Recital e paesaggio urbano nell'Ottocento* (conference organised by the Società dei Concerti, La Spezia and the Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini, Lucca in collaboration with the Palazzetto Bru Zane – Centre de musique romantique française, Venice), La Spezia, 11–13 July 2013.

of love is lyrical and expansive, and death, appearing as a coda, is short, bleak and grotesque. *Jean qui pleure et Jean qui rit* (about 1840) applies the principle to two fugues (the second on 'Fin ch'han dal vino' from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*), and an example can also be found in the duet from the third book of *Chants*, 'Horace et Lydie'. In the so-called *Deux petites pièces*, Op. 60 (1859), the duality is both within and between the pieces, 'Ma chère liberté' and 'Ma chère servitude', and creates an intriguing association that is ambiguously linked with the title. Such dualism pervades the fourth book of *Chants*.

'Neige et lave' ('Snow and Lava') [1], the first *chant* of the fourth book, captures this duality in musical moods strongly contrasted in mood, texture and dynamism. The opening, *Tranquillement*, carries a bracketed direction *con indifferenza*, and the indifference is represented by a degree of primness, with regular balanced phrases, and a rhythm paired in even two-note groups. Alkan is very particular in marking held inner and bass notes, creating a texture of controlled precision. The second section (presumably the 'lava') doubles the speed of the two-note pattern against a turbulent left hand to create breathless passion marked *Con fuoco*. Whether the indifference and the fire are supposed to be heard as the Janus-like characteristics of a single person, or as a disdainful beloved and an imploring lover is not clear, but 'snow' has the last word.

The 'Chanson de la bonne vieille' ('Song of the Old Woman') in A minor [2] seems to present a single person and her memories of youth. The melody of the outer section is given pointed spikiness by the addition of acciaccaturas to each note, suggestive of pain or complaint. In the central section, *quasi-Rimenbranza*, the melody retains the same rhythm as the first section, but the key turns to major and the acciaccaturas disappear to create mellifluous sweetness, implying the same body but without the tormenting aggravations.

Alkan creates a sense of dualism between the third and fourth pieces by the apposition of their titles 'Bravement' [3] and 'Doucement' [4]. 'Bravement' picks up the swagger of Mendelssohn's *Jagdlied* from Op. 19b using the same compound metre. The whirring semiquavers in the right hand with the melody in the bass bring to mind the coda of Mendelssohn's piece, as though he has taken the climactic texture of his model as his point of departure. Alkan's own coda takes this device to extremes and, as often when he is in this mood, there is a hint of parody in the way he exaggerates the idea, moving to the extremes of the piano. The central section of this piece introduces a hemiola rhythm (or duple rhythm across triple time), which he uses again in the fifth piece, 'Appassionato' [5]. 'Doucement' picks up the hymn-like tone of Mendelssohn's fourth piece with a theme marked *Divoto* ('devout') which returns in an inner voice at the recapitulation.

As with all the F sharp minor pieces in Alkan's *Chants* (the fifth piece in each book), following their Mendelssohnian model, 'Appassionato' is the most extended and unsettled of the set, exploiting sprinting off-beat rhythms and the hemiola idea of the third piece. The central section is more subdued and, just before the first theme returns with its turbulent semiquaver left hand, there is a *cantabile pianissimo* theme marked *Reminiscenzia*. The 'reminiscence' here is actually a new theme but the term recalls the *Quasi-Rimenbranza* of the second piece, 'Chanson de la bonne vieille', and also several other moments in Alkan where the music is interrupted by a hushed

hymn (for example, in the first movement of the *Concerto* for solo piano, Op. 39, No. 8, and in the Funeral March from the *Symphony*, Op. 39, No. 5). This section also contains a repeated bell-like note highlighted in a middle voice, recalling the anecdote of his punctuality told by Alexandre de Bertha, who relates that Alkan was obsessive about the time: when he heard 10 o'clock chime, he would depart abruptly from a gathering, no matter who the company.⁶

The *Barcarolle* [6] of the fourth book sets a melody of melancholy beauty over an accompaniment reminiscent of the gentle lapping movement of Mendelssohn.

The *Duetto* [7] which opens the final book of *Chants* imitates a vocal duet, the first section led off by a tenor with rippling upward arpeggios as accompaniment. The middle section for soprano inverts the arpeggiated texture and the return section unites both together in impassioned counterpoint. Again, a hymn-like passage interrupts the music just before the close. The following *Andantino* in A minor [8] is a sophisticated example of Alkan's interest in rhythmic experimentation (his *Impromptus*, Op. 32, No. 2, for example, pioneer the use of five- and seven-beat metres). This piece combines patterns of four in the melody against a thick chordal texture grouped in three in the left hand, with the slightly dragging effect thus created further complicated in several ways. The low bass note comes on the second of the three-beat patterns, and Alkan occasionally adds an extra quaver in the melody to give a pattern of five against three rather than four. In the central section, marked *con anima*, the three-note chordal pattern in the left hand is itself subject to a hemiola pattern across the barline which Alkan emphasises with held notes, the whole producing a sense of expressive and richly intricate weightiness. The *Allegro Vivace* [9] plays with alternations of duple and triple rhythms with more straightforward directed rhythmic thrust, the trills that permeate both sections suggesting some kind of imaginary military pageant, and the flamboyant virtuosity again hints at parody. Emphasising the unified focus of this cycle, the opening idea picks up the closing chords of the previous piece, as though the quiet cadence served to set off an entirely new and more boisterous train of thought.

'La voix de l'instrument' [10] extends the chain of piano-voice imitation so that the piano represents a cello within a string-quartet texture, the cello, and later the violin, hinting at the representation of vocal melody. In this respect the piece has some similarities with the voice-like melodies and duet textures given to cello and violin in the melodious third movement of Borodin's String Quartet No. 2 and if one imagines that movement transcribed for piano one arrives at the sort of piece Alkan conceived here. The structure uses the model found in the *Duetto* by presenting at first a line on the cello with apparent plucked accompaniment, later joined in imitative duet by a violin which eventually moves into the top register before handing the blithe melody back to the cello to close.

⁶ Alexandre de Bertha, 'Ch.-Valentin Alkan aîné: étude psycho-musicale, *Bulletin Français de la Société Internationale de Musique*, 15 February 1909, pp. 135–47 (<http://archive.org/stream/simrevuemusicale190951pari/page/134/mode/2up>). A translation by Julian Haxby can be found in 'Ch. Valentin Alkan Sr.: A Psycho-Musical Study by A. de Bertha, *Alkan Society Bulletin*, No. 88, December 2012, pp. 10–18; cf. in particular p. 14 ([http://www.alkansociety.org/bulletin%2088/Bulletin%2088%20final%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.alkansociety.org/bulletin%2088/Bulletin%2088%20final%20(1).pdf)).