

# SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1037

## VIRTUOSO VARIATIONS FOR PIANO DUET

played by

ANTHONY GOLDSTONE & CAROLINE CLEMMOW

Alkan (actually Charles-Valentin Morhange) was a French composer of Eastern European Jewish ancestry. He became a famous piano virtuoso in his native Paris in his teens and a friend of Chopin and Liszt, but a reserved nature, belied by the boldness of his music, impeded his concert career and much of his later life was spent in seclusion. A stupendous pianist, he stretched the technique and sonorities of the piano to hitherto undreamed-of limits. Has anyone else written for the piano a fugue in *nine* parts?

His *Fantasia sur "Don Juan"*, written in 1844, is a traditionally laid out set of variations enclosed by an introduction and a finale, but two features stand out as unconventional: the finale is based on 'Finch' han del vino' and not the theme used for the variations, which is 'Venite pur avanti', and each variation is in a different key. Here Alkan may have taken as his model Beethoven's Op.34 set for piano solo, which has the same number of sections (though no introduction) and the same tonal scheme of descending thirds. The listener's attention is commanded by an explosion of sound as the introduction opens grandly in E minor. An abrupt change of direction produces an animated allegro around the key of the theme, C major, becoming more excited and leading via a short, suddenly quiet, cadenza into the sturdy, march-like theme. The A minor first variation bubbles irrepressibly along, in contrast to the following one in F major which is chordal and dynamic. The oppressive D minor mood of the opera infuses the first part of variation three, balanced by the second half in the major, which attains an almost celestial atmosphere. Then comes a furious *moto perpetuo* in B flat major in which the four hands travel in bare unison - an example of Alkan's uncompromising originality.

Some emphatic modulations lead into variation five, which is a haunting "operatic" duet in G minor, with more than a hint of Berlioz. Again a shift into the major brings serenity, only to be shattered as four spread chords herald the comic finale (C major) on the Don's drinking song. The performers are instructed to play *con forsennaria* (with unbridled temperament) as this madcap escapade hurtles towards its climax, bringing to a close a highly entertaining, arresting and inexplicably neglected work from one of the greatest pianist-composers of the nineteenth century.

One of Beethoven's most perfect miniatures is his *Ich Denke Dein* Variations. The harmonious effect of this five-minute work is the more remarkable when one realises that the theme and variations 1, 2, 5 and 6 were composed in

1799 and variations 3 and 4 in 1803. On both occasions Beethoven was writing in the album of the young countesses Josephine and Therese Brunsvik who were brought by their mother from Hungary to Vienna in May 1799, received lessons from him and, with the rest of their family, became his close friends. His affection for the two girls (which in the case of Josephine blossomed into an affair of the heart in 1805) is demonstrated by the choice of Goethe's poem to set as the theme: "I think of thee when the sun's rays shine on me from the sea, I think of thee when spring-waters are painted with the flicker of moonlight."

The first two variations transform this gentle melody with its little tailpiece into tiny studies for each piano pupil in turn (one can imagine him smiling as he wrote them). There follows a variation in dialogue - almost a love-duet, then one in lively triplet figuration. After a heartrending minor-key variation the work ends in mellow sunlight with a skipping finale concluding with a short valedictory coda. This lovely work touchingly reveals the tender feelings of a giant among composers.

The Belgian César Franck, who became a close friend of Alkan, was nine years younger. They had the same piano- and organ-teachers at the Paris Conservatoire, and when Franck was only fourteen shared the same concert platform. The following year Alkan was on a jury which had to penalize him for showing off by transposing a sight-reading test piece (perfectly) into a remote key! Later in life Franck edited some of the senior man's music.

His *Duo sur le "God Save the King"* was written in 1842, the year in which, at the age of nineteen, he was withdrawn from the conservatoire by his father to pursue a career as piano virtuoso instead of concentrating on composition, which he would have preferred. His works of this period have a sense of the grand manner, can be adventurous in form and are brilliant and dramatic. The duo's introductory adagio, in B flat minor, is tragic and lyrical by turns, with only one substantial reference to the "King", which is stated quietly enclosed by passionate bursts of melody reminiscent of Chopin's Etude, Op.10, No.12. A sonata *allegro molto* in the same key follows, full of driving energy relieved by an expressive second subject of rising chords. Only in the development does the "King" return, loudly and in the minor key an odd effect to the British listener. No sooner has the recapitulation begun than a huge Tchaikovskian double-octave scale, played by both performers simultaneously, ushers in a "normal" statement of the "King", marked *trionfante, pomposo*. This is now masterfully varied and elaborated, including a gentle filigree variation in the minor and a final massively orchestral rendering, which leads back into the recapitulation in the tonic major and a coda in which snatches of the "King", now in common time, urge this fascinating product of the youthful Franck towards an imposing close.

On 6th October 1828 the Leipzig publisher Probst replied to Schubert's offer of the three last piano sonatas and the string quintet by asking for "anything easily understandable *à quatre mains*, rather like the '*Marie*' Variations". With hindsight this seems extraordinary, but in the previous twelve months the work had been enthusiastically received both publicly and critically. The Leipzig *Allgemeine*

*Musikalische Zeitung* declared it to be "the best of his that have so far come our way. The theme is . . . captivatingly treated . . . the variations are . . . diversified, and rich without affectation."

Although dating from 1827, it shares several features with the "*Wanderer*" *Fantasie* of 1822: the key is C major, the basic rhythmic cell dactylic, and the overall effect is one of brilliance. The French composer Hérold's opera *Marie* had been successfully performed in Vienna in 1826; in his song which opens Act III the miller Lubin expresses contentment with his lot to the accompaniment of the clack of the water-mill wheel. Schubert at the start of the theme cleverly reproduces the grinding of machinery in the bass register, and the same idea, this time more animated, reappears to open the finale. The first three variations, all in the home key, echo the simple happiness of the miller, while the fourth in C minor is weightier and in dotted rhythm, which is carried over into the next variation as the accompaniment to a serene barcarolle-like melody in A flat. The calm is destroyed by a *fortissimo* German sixth chord which begins a stormy variation in the original rhythm of the theme. The headlong chromatic semi quavers eventually subside on a half-close to introduce a lilting *andantino* in A minor, in which, while adhering closely to the harmonic structure of the theme, Schubert creates a completely new sound-world of great beauty. Variation eight becomes a grand finale; here the composer's playfulness is evident in the E flat episode (later reappearing in C major) in which a skittish descant joins the texture, and a final *accelerando* propels the music to an exhilarating conclusion.

Brahms was not the most generous of colleagues in his appreciation of other composers' music, and, although Heinrich von Herzogenberg and his wife Elizabeth, who was for a time Brahms' pupil, were valued and long-standing friends, Brahms' lack of sympathy with Heinrich's music must have been a factor in its remaining on the periphery of the public's consciousness. Harold Truscott, who has made a study of his works, argues that it is only by performances, which are few, that their true worth can be demonstrated, and cites in particular some of the choral and chamber music as among the best from the nineteenth century.

An Austrian baron, Herzogenberg spent his later years in Germany. He helped to found the Bach-Verein in Leipzig, conducted it from 1875 to 1885, and at the end of his life was head of the Meisterschule in composition at the Berlin Hochschule. While obviously an admirer of Brahms - and the *Variations* on his setting of a German folksong *Die Trauernde* (*The Grieving Girl*), Op.7, No.5, are in the nature of an affectionate tribute - his music is by no means a slavish imitation, and though sharing the same lingua franca it exhibits its own absorbing qualities. The approach to variation writing is freer than in the other pieces in this recording, and Brahms' allegiance to more classical treatment of the form led him to wonder whether the term "fantasy variations" might be more appropriate for this sort of work. Indeed the variations (not numbered) seem sometimes entirely independent, but the theme may be discovered as a bass and/or inner voice, or woven almost imperceptibly into a new melody with new harmonies, and melodic cells from it may be used to generate fresh material. The work's wide range of

characters includes a "hunting" scene, a tender *allegretto* in sixths, an eloquently passionate lament with pulsating accompaniment, and a whimsical "Hungarian" caprice. Finally the theme returns softly, enveloped in a dominant pedal, leading to a consolatory major-key close with farewell horn-calls. Herzogenberg's art is such that it is a feeling of warmth that remains in the memory. The work originated shortly after the Herzogenbergs first met Brahms in the mid 1870s.

The many compositions of the German-Bohemian Ignaz Moscheles were for a long period rated extremely highly. While still in his twenties he was hailed as a front-rank virtuoso pianist; particularly admired in Britain he settled in London in 1826, among many important activities conducting the first English performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* in 1832 and in 1845 acting as regular conductor of the Philharmonic Society. Mendelssohn received piano lessons from him in Berlin at the age of fifteen, became a close friend and in 1846 instated him as first piano professor in his newly formed Leipzig Conservatory.

The *Variations Brillantes* were composed in 1833 for a specific concert. Only three evenings before, according to Moscheles' son Felix, they planned the outline of the work. For instance Mendelssohn suggested "I will write a variation in the minor and growl in the bass. Will you do a brilliant one in the major and in the treble?" (These became numbers two and three.) In the event the première contained much improvisation by both composers and, in the words of *The Morning Post*, "the most rapturous plaudits were elicited from the delighted company." Published in addition to the duet work performed in this recording was a quite different version for two pianos with or without orchestra. The theme comes from Weber's incidental music written in 1820 to Wolff's play *Preciosa*, after Cervantes' novel *La Gitanella (The Gipsy Girl)*.

The expansive minor-key introduction by Mendelssohn contains Beethovenian elements of tragedy and pathos, which are abruptly dispelled by the perky march-tune in the major key announced by soft "drum-taps". Mendelssohn now provides a contrasting pair of variations, one immediately taking off into flamboyant display, the other earthbound and sinister. The first of Moscheles' contributions combines vigour with textural originality, while the second, slower variation has much charm and includes a beautiful *bel canto*, melody marked "con amore". The finale is a happy collaboration in Mendelssohn's elfin *Scherzo* vein, which transforms itself into a flamenco dance before breaking off to reminisce briefly on Weber's theme. The Spanish flourishes return and bring this remarkably homogeneous work to its brilliant conclusion.

ANTHONY GOLDSTONE and CAROLINE CLEMMOW, who are both established soloists and chamber musicians in their own right having played in many parts of the world, formed their duo in 1984. Since then they have played together all over Britain and regularly in London, including the 1988 Alkan Centenary Commemorative Festival on London's South Bank. They have also performed and broadcast in Athens.

The duo's repertoire includes concertos for two pianos and piano duet, and music for four hands at one and two pianos from the first Elizabethan era to the present day - the Anglo-Indian composer John Mayer was the first to be commissioned to write a work for them. They perform both acknowledged masterpieces and fascinating rarities, sometimes long out of print, which they very often research and unearth themselves. They are well known for their enterprising and highly entertaining concert programmes.

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