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# ALKAN

11 PIÈCES DANS LE STYLE RELIGIEUX OP.72  
ETUDE ALLA-BARBARO

Mark Viner

## CHARLES-VALENTIN ALKAN 1813-1888

### 11 PIÈCES DANS LE STYLE RELIGIEUX OP.72 ÉTUDE ALLA-BARBARO

11 Pièces dans le style religieux  
et 1 transcription du *Messie* de  
Hændel, Op.72

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Mark Viner *piano*



India ink drawing of Charles-Valentin Alkan by Wilhelm Rubach (1870-1905)

### Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888)

Perhaps the most enigmatic figure in the history of music as a whole, let alone the nineteenth century, Charles-Valentin Alkan remains one of the most intriguing and alluring names among the pantheon of pianist-composers.

Born in Paris on the 30th November 1813, he was the second of six children of a prodigiously musical family. At the age of six he was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire where he studied under Joseph Zimmerman (1785-1853) and won a number of prizes including first prize in solfège in 1821, first prize in piano in 1824, first prize in harmony in 1827 and first prize for organ in 1834. It was not long before he began to establish himself as one of France's leading pianists, making frequent public appearances, including two visits to England in 1834 and 1835, whilst profiting from the extraordinary artistic milieu of 1830s Paris. While initial rivalry with Franz Liszt (1811-1886) developed into a friendly camaraderie, he forged a close friendship with Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849). In 1837, at the height of his fame, he moved to the fashionable Square d'Orléans where, in 1842, Chopin became his next door neighbour. Activity was interrupted by the birth of his illegitimate son, Eraïm-Miriam Delaborde

(1839-1913) and it was not until 1844 that he returned to the concert platform. A further setback came in 1848. Following Zimmerman's retirement as head of piano at the Conservatoire, it was generally expected that Alkan, his erstwhile pupil, would succeed him. Instead, a far lesser candidate, Antoine Marmontel (1816-1898) was elected due to political favouritism – it was a position he was to hold for the next twenty-four years. The death of Chopin in 1849 was perhaps the final blow. Giving but two last concerts in 1853, he withdrew into seclusion for some twenty years. It was during this period that much of his finest music was composed while he busied himself with translating the entire Bible from its original languages into French. Compositional activity gradually ceased, his last published work appearing in 1875, and in 1873 he made a Phoenix-like return to the concert platform when he established a series of Six Petits Concerts de Musique Classique whose programmes centred largely around the classics. This activity gradually came to an end and he entered an even greater period of seclusion until his death on the 29th March, 1888 – an event which generated such convoluted rumour that, until relatively recently, it was widely accepted that he was killed by a falling bookcase.<sup>1</sup>

As a pianist, he must have been in possession of an almost frightening command of the instrument and it was reputed that he was the only pianist before whom Liszt felt ill-at-ease for perform. The latter reportedly remarked to the Danish pianist, Frits Hartvigson (1841-1919), that Alkan possessed the finest technique he had ever seen yet preferred the life of a recluse.<sup>2</sup> His compositional output is extensive and comprises some of the most extraordinary music ever conceived for the piano. His mighty *Douze Etudes dans tous les tons mineurs*, Op.39 (1857)<sup>3</sup> – the epic sequel to the *Douze Etudes dans tous les tons majeurs*, Op.35 (1848) [PCL10127] – is the fullest

embodiment of his creative powers. This monumental set of studies runs to 277 pages and comprises some of Alkan's finest music including a Symphony and Concerto for solo piano and a magnificent set of variations on an original theme, *Le festin d'Esopé*. Other major works include the *Trois Grandes Etudes pour les deux mains séparées et réunies*, (1840), the *Grande Sonate*, Op.33 (1847), the *Sonatine*, Op.61 (1861) and the *48 Motifs ou Esquisses*, Op.63 (1861).

#### 11 Pièces dans le style religieux et 1 transcription du *Messie* de Haendel, Op.72

The *11 Pièces dans le style religieux et 1 transcription du Messie de Hændel*, Op.72 first appeared in 1867 with a dedication to the recently deceased publisher, Simon Richault (1780-1866) who issued the majority of Alkan's music, in the wake of two other great sets of similar pieces, the *13 Prières*, Op.64 (1865), the *11 Grands Préludes et 1 transcription du Messie de Hændel*, Op.66 (1867), both scored for pedal-piano. Their dedication to the recently deceased publisher, Simon Richault (1780-1866) who issued the majority of Alkan's music. Their atmosphere and design in many ways harken back to the grave passion instilled in the earlier *25 Préludes dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs*, Op.31 (1847) [PCL10189] whose scoring is, similarly, for piano or organ but not pedal-piano. As such, it is probably no accident that the set in question was conceived for either organ, harmonium or piano and, incidentally, this recording witnesses them presented on the piano for the first time. Like much of Alkan's later music, the writing is of a more conservative idiom, shorn of excess and in which it seems not a note is wasted while the harmonic language is often laced with vintage piquancies

that characterise so much of his later output. Like the aforementioned sets Opp.64 & 66, the majority of these pieces also seem to share a similar structure in which two ideas, some more contrasting than others, are stated and then juxtaposed against one another before a reconciliation where the two ideas are superimposed or intrinsic relationships are spelled out. It is perhaps in this light that the title of the set might best be interpreted. 'Dans le style religieux' - ('in the religious style') isn't necessarily an allusion to character here - indeed, some of these pieces are, at times, somewhat fierce in manner - but rather the philosophical message conveyed through the dialogue within them: the contrasting ideas and contradictory statements perhaps an allegory of man's grappling with temptation; their eventual reconciliation a metaphor for his subsequent redemption. After all, the deeper meaning of the word 'religion' is not 'devotion' or 'worship' but 'reconnection'. Not all of these pieces close with a reconciliation of themes, however, and a few of them end very bleakly, indeed, indicating a more conspicuous preoccupation with the human condition than their title suggests.

#### **No.1 Tempo giustissimo**

The set's opening piece is in C major; its straight-laced design and no-nonsense demeanour putting one in mind of a Revivalist hymn. From the outset, a stealthy left hand tread underpins a confident marching song. A second theme of similar guise then ensues and is developed beneath a chiming dominant pedal-note in the treble, giving way to a brief cycle of fifths, before leading to a more fulsome reprise. Now clad with pounding octaves, it is interpolated with quieter contrasting sections before a giant plagal amen draws the piece to a reverential close.

#### **No.2 Andantino**

The second piece is in A major and is among the more inward-looking of the set. It gently unfolds with a contemplative two-part opening section in which the opening melody is mirrored in the bass. A second theme in the tonic minor then ensues, interpolated by an interlude in the dominant minor, leading to a reflective middle section in C major. Settling on the dominant of the home key, it quietly guides us to the reprise which leads to a coda in which both the main theme and that of the middle section are superimposed and interpolated by the second part of the opening theme, now *poco meno mosso*, before swapping hands and drawing the piece to a hushed close.

#### **No.3 Quasi-adagio**

The third is a mournful fugue in D minor and inhabits a bleak, twilight world. It is the only fugue of the set and is exemplary of Alkan's proficiency in the genre. It is distinguished by a particularly striking *stretto* where, over a dominant pedal note, an inversion of the countersubject gropes painfully through a contrary motion octatonic scale harnessing reiterations of a fragment of the subject. At the close the rhetoric is entirely homophonic with the subject and its inversion mirrored below before a *tierce de Picardie* closes the piece with quiet dignity.

#### **No.4 Assez doucement**

The fourth piece, in G major, is one of the most individual of the set and is typical of Alkan's tendency to lead one up a garden path before, quite without warning, dropping one into a comfortless, alien environment. Unfolding with a melody of disarming grace, its character and writing isn't far removed from *Dans le genre gothique* which, with its shared key, forms the fifteenth number

of the *25 Préludes dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs*, Op.31 and, despite two brief lapses into the tonic minor, it seldom strays from the home key. All at once the skies darken for a brooding middle section headed *mineur* – (minor) where, as Ronald Smith (1922-2004) describes, “without warning, a brief page full of the darkest fantasy occurs. The left hand gropes in widely spaced intervals like a ‘cellist in search of a tune, while a monotonous ostinato rises and falls above an obstinately recurring pedal note. The effect is both eerie and hypnotic, and quite unlike anything else of the period – or of any period, for that matter.”<sup>4</sup> The sunny uplands of the reprise return with the reassuring heading of *majeur* – (major) before the themes of the opening and middle sections intertwine in the tonic minor and dissolve in the major for the close.

#### **No.5 Lentement**

The fifth piece, in D minor, can be counted among the more eccentric numbers of the set; its outer sections, marked *lentement* – (slowly), fashioned from an obsessive ostinato while its middle section, in triple time and marked *modérément* – (moderately), is pronounced in strident dotted rhythms. The two themes are interpolated before the one which opened piece wins the upper hand and draws it to a resigned close.

#### **No.6 Majesteusement**

The sixth number of the set is in B flat major. The opening section comprises a brassy fanfare consisting of a descending scale contrasted by more reflective melodic interludes. All at once those descending fanfares change direction when they are taken by an ascending left hand, the mood adopting a more heroic aspect. The two contrasting ideas continue their exchange, the

dialogue becoming terser as the fanfare is iterated in double notes and things come to a head when a fragment of the fanfare and its inversion, chase one another’s tails in a brief canon in chains of thirds. A final interception of the placating contrasting idea, now clad with some stinging harmonic piquancies does little to check its course and the piece is rounded off with two bold inversions of the fanfare.

#### **No.7 Molto moderato**

The seventh piece is in F major and, like many others in the set, is laced with the harmonic piquancies and baffling modulations particular to Alkan’s vintage years. It has been described by Smith as “one of Alkan’s most beguiling shorter pieces. Once discovered, its lilting refrain might easily become the popular mainstay of every other organist’s repertoire. Harmonic surprises, however, abound and a wonderful series of modulations just before the return should prevent it from ever becoming hackneyed.”<sup>5</sup>

#### **No.8 Assez vite**

Number eight, in A minor, like most of the others of the set, features an interplay between two contrasting ideas where, in this instance, the first is a restless melody in the minor soaring over chattering semiquaver chords while the second is a more expansive one in the major underpinned by undulating triplets. Their respective iterations witnesses an increasing terseness of dialogue amplified by some unlikely modulations and crawling dissonances before the piece’s opening theme gets the upper hand.

### **No.9 Assez lentement**

The ninth piece, in E flat major, is the longest and one of the most inward looking of the set. Prayerful and deeply felt, it gradually unfolds in an atmosphere not far removed from that of the late music of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). A series of powerful modulations then leads to a luminous middle section which guides us through a host of different keys before fanning out into steady semiquaver movement. Pivoting on a four-note oscillation in the home key, it forms a pedal point precariously supporting a dominant harmony before melting into the reprise. The whole episode is curiously redolent, in substance rather than character, of another middle section; that which forms the thunderous cavalry charge of Frédéric Chopin's (1810-1849) great *Polonaise*, Op.53 (1843).<sup>6</sup> The end of the reprise then gives way to a starker reminiscence of the middle section, now in the tonic minor, before the themes of both opening and middle sections are superimposed at the close.

### **No.10 Modérément**

The penultimate piece is an absolute oddity and, while effectively in D minor, it remains, for the most part, in the Dorian mode. It features two sections: the first, a virile theme anchored above a lumbering left hand pedal point, both entirely in octaves; the second, a pulsing ostinato supporting threadbare, abortive wisps of a melody which is later given room to breathe. The reprise witnesses the action turned on its head when the left hand takes the theme and the right hand the pedal point before overheating and being cut short by a brief interjection of the second theme. All at once enters a pulverising coda in the major, comprising ideas from the preceding sections, which summarily rounds the piece off.

### **No.11 Dolcemente**

The final piece before the closing transcription is one of the very best of the set and inhabits a bleak, twilight world revisited in the *Barcarolle* which closes the *5e Recueil de chants*, Op.70 (1872). While the opening section consists of a doleful melody in A minor, it is announced by a stark submediant note: a sinister apparition which is to haunt the piece throughout. A more persuasive melody in the relative major then enters, undulating and mildly chromatic, and is mirrored by the the left hand in the home key before groping for the dominant harmony. A more fulsome reprise of the opening section is then cut short by a strangely haunting chorale in E flat minor, intercepted those same ominous warnings that punctuate the rest of the piece. Both the melodies of the opening and middle sections now combine in the home key for an eloquent duet and are checked by that submediant note before swapping hands in a dialogue of aching poignancy in the major. All at once the chorale returns, now in the tonic major and arching to a reverential *fortissimo* before breaking off. Alas, it seems not even the power of exorcism can banish the sinister forces which pervade the air, for out of the void beckons a bare wisp of the opening melody, twice intercepted by that omnipresent submediant note, before closing with bleak resignation.

### **No.12 No.13 du *Messiah* de Hændel: Larghetto**

Like the earlier great set of *11 Grands Préludes et 1 transcription du Messie de Hændel*, Op.66 (1867), the present set concludes with a transcription from George Frederic Handel's 1685-1759 oratorio, *Messiah*, HWV 56 (1767). In this instance it is a transcription of the Pastoral Symphony which serves to introduce the scene of the 'Shepherds abiding in the field' at the beginning of Act IV. While Alkan transposes it down a semitone to B major, its very

writing, together with delicate double trills and various prescribed fingerings, all indicates that this transcription is to be played a great deal slower than the original is often heard today, making for a serene and dignified close to an important collection of pieces.

### **Etude [from the *Encyclopédie du Pianiste Compositeur*]**

This *Etude* appeared in 1840 in the second part of a large three-part publication entitled *Encyclopédie du Pianiste Compositeur* by Alkan's former professor, Pierre Zimmerman (1785-1853), comprising elementary instruction, exercises and études together with theoretical guidance. The second part comprises music old and new together with études from the author himself, Alkan, Carl Czerny (1791-1857), Emile Prudent (1817-1863) and Henri Ravina (1818-1906). Zimmerman could not possibly have passed up the opportunity to commission a new étude from his favourite pupil for inclusion and Alkan's contribution to the set is, by far, the most striking. From beginning to end, it is wrought almost entirely from an interlocking chordal device, the rhythm of which might best be described as a paradiddle which, at the tempo marking of *allegro molto*, makes for a rather bruising study in chord playing. In the key of A minor, the paradiddle rhythm is established from the outset with an introductory dominant note hammered out between the hands before the theme gets underway. A contrasting central section in the tonic major offers brief respite where a truncated version of the paradiddle rhythm obsesses over a dominant pedal note before a chordal iteration of the introductory passage signals the reprise, short-circuiting to a brief coda and spurring the étude on to its clamorous close. The effect of the thing is so screamingly outrageous and, like so much of Alkan's music, so far ahead of its time, that it would be better suited to an Ibiza rave in the twenty-first century rather

than the Paris salon of the nineteenth and, indeed, the present writer knows of not one person who hasn't doubled over in amazement and incredulity upon hearing it.

### **Etude Alla-Barbaro**

The discovery of the *Etude Alla-Barbaro* came as a complete surprise when it was stumbled upon by the French-Canadian pianist, Marc-André Hamelin (b.1961) on the 14th August, 1995, within the archive of Raymond Lewenthal (1923-1988) held at the International Piano Archive in Maryland, USA. There exists no catalogue listing of it nor a single mention of it anywhere yet it was, indeed, published. The copy found among Lewenthal's effects was an extremely grainy photostat of the original edition accompanied by an insightful typewritten preface from Lewenthal himself with which he had evidently intended to republish the work. This photostat is the sole testimony to the work's existence: the original has not resurfaced nor do we know where Lewenthal made the photostat. The publisher of this first edition reads as Nowinski on the title page with a further seller's stamp reading Th. Nowinski | Graveur | De Musique. We can be confident this was a certain Thomas Nowinski, born in the palatinate of Krakov, who came to Paris and had some success as an engraver having developed a novel printing process by which he transferred the printed score to the page via sheets of zinc rather than tin thus cutting costs substantially. He later published an album for piano and voice entitled *Union musicale* which was issued in instalments and it is almost certain that the *Etude Alla-Barbaro* formed part of its contents.<sup>7</sup> Aside from the this, the ambiguous inclusion of 'No.5' at the bottom of the title page suggests the piece was published as part of a series. Whether there might have been accompanying works by Alkan remains to

be seen but the possibility is a tantalising one. Quite why Lewenthal never succeeded in republishing the piece we don't know but, happily, it was re-engraved by Billaudot in 2000 and, more recently, by Muse Press, comprising Lewenthal's entertaining and insightful preface in 2019.

Connoisseurs of Alkan's music will already be familiar with his excursions into the *barbaro* genre: the fifth of the *Douze Etudes dans tous les tons majeurs*, Op.35 (1848) [PCL10127], *Allegro barbaro*, also in the key of F major, and the finale of the Concerto for solo piano, *Allegretto alla barbaresca*, which forms the tenth of the *Douze Etudes dans tous les tons mineurs*, Op.39 (1857) being famous examples, yet, as Alkan seldom repeats himself, this particular foray behaves like neither. Its principal material is fashioned from chords alternating between the hands where the melody is passed between the thumbs and clad with bristling chordal *acciaccature*: a device which, Lewenthal points out, was used in an earlier piece entitled *L'hallali* – (a whoop or hunting cry) which forms the ninth piece, ascribed to the month of September, in the set of *Les Mois, 12 morceaux caractéristiques* (1838), later misleadingly listed as Op.74 by subsequent publishers. The other parallel Lewenthal draws is the second of Béla Bartók's (1881-1945) *Burlesques*, Sz.47 (1912) entitled '*a little tipsy...*' and again, this is intriguing as given the extreme rarity of this piece it is highly unlikely that Bartók was ever aware of its existence yet witness the effect the other more famous contender of the *barbaro* genre, the *Allegro barbaro* from the *Douze Etudes dans tous les tons majeurs*, Op.35, clearly had on him when, in 1911, he came to pen his own *Allegro barbaro*, Sz.49 (1918) after having undoubtedly heard the piece from Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) in the latter's Berlin recitals.

Opening with an introductory seven bars and with the tempo marking *allegro*, it launches into its main theme, marked *énergique et résolu* –

(energetic and resolute). A sudden lurch back to the motoric 'hunting' rhythm of the opening signals a change in character as coruscating right hand figurations intensify the rhetoric. Arching to a blazing reinstatement of the main theme and underpinned by the ever pulverising 'hunting' rhythm of the left hand, it navigates some raucous seven-note clusters before a sequence of unrelated ideas spirals out of control. A clamorous salvo of descending octaves leads to a brief return to the writing of the opening before a mock-military clarion fans out into an ascending arpeggio figuration of blind octaves anchoring, at their summit, on the dominant note of the home key before petering out in their descent. A return to the main theme lands on a false chord of G flat major with the added dissonance of a seventh before it rounds itself off resolutely, its bristling chordal *acciaccature* screamingly displaced at a distance of two octaves. Brash, vociferous, and utterly uncompromising, it will find little sympathy among those seeking a cosier breed of romanticism yet it remains utterly arresting, unique and decades ahead of its time.

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1 Hugh Macdonald's essay, *More on Alkan's Death*, is the final word on this subject and, while open ended, gets closest to debunking this tantalising myth. *The Musical Times*, Vol. 129, No. 1741, (March, 1988) pp.118-120

2 Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Man, The Music*, Volumes 1-2, Khan & Averill, (2000), (Volume 1, *The Man*) p.95

3 All dates given refer to first publication.

4 Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Man, The Music*, Volumes 1-2, Khan & Averill, (2000), (Volume 1, *The Man*) p.105

5 Smith, (Volume 2, *The Music*), pp.225-6

6 While this analogy is spurious, it is worth remembering that Franz Liszt (1811-1886) had earlier paid homage to the Polish master in his powerful evocation of this passage in *Funérailles* which forms the seventh number of the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, S.173 (1853).

7 Albert Sowinski, *Les Musiciens Polonais et Slaves*, Librairie Adrien le Clere et Cie., (1857), p.434

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## MARK VINER

Described by International Piano Magazine as “one of the most gifted pianists of his generation”, Mark Viner is steadily gaining a reputation as one of Britain’s leading concert pianists; his unique blend of individual artistry combined with his bold exploration of the byways of the piano literature garnering international renown.

Born in 1989, he began playing at the age of 11 before being awarded a scholarship two years later to enter the Purcell School of Music where he studied with Tessa Nicholson for the next five years. Another scholarship took him to the Royal College of Music where he studied with Niel Immelman for the next six years, graduating with first class honours in a Bachelor of Music degree in 2011 and a distinction in Master of Performance 2013; the same year which afforded him the honour to perform before HRH the Prince of Wales.

After winning 1st prize at the Alkan-Zimmerman International Piano Competition in Athens, Greece in 2012, his career has brought him across much of Europe as well as North and South America. While festival invitations include appearances the Raritäten der Klaviermusik, Husum in Germany, the Cheltenham Music Festival and Harrogate Music Festival in the United Kingdom and the Festival Chopiniana in Argentina, radio broadcasts include recitals and interviews aired on Deutschlandfunk together with frequent appearances on BBC Radio 3. His acclaimed Wigmore Hall début recital in 2018 confirmed his reputation as one of today’s indisputable torchbearers of the Romantic Revival.

He is particularly renowned for his album recordings on the Piano Classics label which include music by Alkan, Chaminade, Liszt and Thalberg, all of which have garnered exceptional international critical acclaim. His most important project to date is a survey of the complete piano music of Alkan: the first of its kind and which is expected to run to some 18 albums in length. Aside from a busy schedule of concerts and teaching, he is also a published composer and writer and his advocacy for the music of Alkan and Liszt led to his election as Chairman of both the Alkan Society and the Liszt Society in 2014 and 2017 respectively.



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