



Bisel Classics

Charles-
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ALKAN
TROIS
MORCEAUX
op. 15

PIANO
SOLO



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Preface

The *Souvenirs: Trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique* were composed around 1837 when Alkan was just 24 but even at this age he was considered the best French pianist rubbing shoulders with Chopin, Delacroix and Victor Hugo. In these pieces, it is easy to see why he might be considered the best: the level of technique required to play them must have presented any publisher with something of a risk. The sheer technical difficulty of these works may have figured in the decision of the Parisian publisher Richault to delay or at least hold back the publication of the pieces until 1845. The intervening period between 1838 and 1844 marks an unusual time for Alkan however, in which he all but removed himself from public and performing life to set the Bible to music. This did not stop him from composing several other works during this period but it may account for the years between composition and publication of the *Souvenirs*.

The works themselves might easily be performed separately displaying a range of moods from the rhapsodic to the sombre. The tender melody of *Aime-Moi* that commences the work is soon enlivened by a rhythmic development in triplet rhythm which soon gives way to semiquavers to sextuplets and so on, as the pace of the piece picks up we get the flights of the arpeggios sweeping over the keyboard. The journey is akin to a rapturous display, imitating the reckless abandon of love before settling back into the opening theme which then transforms into the fluttering call and response of both hands: two hearts (we imagine) finally beating as one.

Le Vent places an altogether more aggressive set of demands on the player with lightning fast chromatic scales that imitate the nebulous swirling gusts and eddies of the wind. A force of nature embodied in the precipitous ferocity of scalar technique. The challenge to the player almost surpasses the limits of the possible: in one measure Alkan sets one group of 61 notes against a group of 62. The use of the prime number 61 precludes any division of the note group into smaller beat units and there is only one place in the measure where the left and right hand are synchronised on a beat: the first note. This is not the only place he uses prime numbers in the metrical organisation of the work. This strikingly modernistic use of mixed meters must be considered one the earliest examples of complex mathematical forms in music. There is a heavy emphasis on the feel or the mood of the work though, and the approach calls for an intuitive level of interpretive understanding rather than a mathematical one. This is also suggested by the fact that in this edition, there are no dynamic markings whatsoever, whereas later editors and later editions, included them. We do not know if these subsequent adulterated editions carried the stamp of Alkan's approval. The technique required to approach these pieces must be flawless at the outset, but the pieces themselves represent something of a journey in which we are encouraged to cut our own path and see our own way through the clearing.

Morte begins with that most famous of calls to Judgement, the *Dies Irae* or *Day of Wrath*. Of course, this was not the first time the plainsong tune had been used, Berlioz famously used it in his orchestral masterpiece *Symphonie fantastique* composed in 1830 and (curiously) published in 1845. It is perhaps no accident that Alkan for a time, was known as early as 1837, as the *Berlioz of the piano* and no accident either that the *Souvenirs* appeared on sale at around the same time as the *Symphonie*. We may speculate

that the *Symphonie* was the catalyst that brought forth the *Souvenirs* into the world both as a composition and ultimately as a publication.

Morte itself, follows the methodology of *increase*, and *augmentation* laid out in the first two movements with the *Dies Irae* returning in a variety of guises as the drama plays itself out. The listener has barely a moment to grasp the *Dies Irae* theme before it shifts direction and transforms into a new melodic strand, never quite reappearing in full, but never quite disappearing either. The work concludes with a direct quote from *Aime-Moi* and a slightly less direct but equally pronounced quote from *Le Vent*. This *récapitulation* of themes reminds the listener that in spite of life's separate journeys our sum of experiences are brought into sharp relief by the fact of our mortality; or *C'est la vie* as Alkan might have said.

Stephen Begley, March 2010.

Vorwort

Die *Souvenirs : Trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique* wurden um 1837 komponiert, als Alkan gerade 24 Jahre alt war, aber schon selbst in diesem Alter wurde er als bester französischer Pianist angesehen, der enge Beziehungen zu Chopin, Delacroix und Victor Hugo pflegte. Es ist leicht, in diesen Stücken zu erkennen, warum er tatsächlich als der Beste angesehen werden konnte: Das Niveau der Technik, die benötigt wird, um sie zu spielen, musste jeglichem Verleger als ein gewisses Risiko vorkommen. Die reine technische Schwierigkeit dieser Arbeiten mag in der Entscheidung des Pariser Verlegers Richault eine Rolle gespielt haben, die Veröffentlichung der Stücke bis 1845 zu verzögern oder doch wenigstens zurückzuhalten. Die Zeit zwischen 1838 und 1844 kennzeichnet eine ohnehin ungewöhnliche Phase für Alkan, in der er nichts Geringeres tat als sich vom öffentlichen und aufführenden Leben zurückzuziehen und die Bibel zu vertonen. Dies hielt ihn zwar nicht davon ab, in dieser Zeit mehrere andere Werke zu komponieren, aber es mag die Jahre zwischen Komposition und Veröffentlichung der *Souvenirs* erklären.

Die Werke selbst können leicht getrennt aufgeführt werden und zeigen eine Bandbreite von Stimmungen, die vom Rhapsodischen bis zum Düsternen reichen. Die zärtliche, das Werk einleitende Melodie des Aime-Moi wird schnell von einer rhythmischen Entwicklung im Triolen-Rhythmus belebt, die bald Sechszehntelnoten, dann Sextolen und so fort Platz macht, und wenn das Tempo des Stückes auflebt, erleben wir die Flüge der Arpeggios, die über die Tastatur fegen. Die Reise gleicht einer begeisterten Darstellung, die die