

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 15 June 2024
1.00pm

Paul Wee piano

Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888)

Concerto for solo piano Op. 39 Nos. 8-10 (pub. 1857)

Allegro assai

Adagio

Allegretto alla barbaresca



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Charles-Valentin Alkan – a contemporary of Chopin and Liszt, and described by Hans von Bülow as ‘the Berlioz of the piano’ – made his name as pianist in 19th-century Paris, and by his mid-20s seemed poised for a glittering career. But fate intervened. Following various personal and professional setbacks, he withdrew into a life of seclusion, and Alkan’s works lay largely neglected following his death.

They were never entirely forgotten. Earlier champions included Busoni and Egon Petri; even Rachmaninov and Claudio Arrau included Alkan in their concert programmes in 1919 and 1925, respectively. But it was not until the 1960s and 1970s, with the sustained advocacy of pianists including Raymond Lewenthal and Ronald Smith – and subsequently, Jack Gibbons, Marc-André Hamelin and Mark Viner – that Alkan has begun to emerge from obscurity.

Alkan’s music exhibits a formidable grasp of form, a strong command of melody, a high sense of drama and an unprecedented exploitation of the capabilities of the piano. As some of his works impose extreme technical demands on the performer, Alkan has frequently been dismissed as a mere note-spinner and composer of unnecessarily difficult piano music. That is regrettable. Many of Alkan’s works are readily accessible, both musically and technically. And where Alkan pushes the limits of pianistic possibility, this is never self-indulgent, but invariably deployed in service of a substantive musical purpose. Its impact is accordingly incendiary.

The Concerto for solo piano forms a pinnacle of Alkan’s legacy. Four aspects of this extraordinary work call for explanation.

The first concerns its title. The term ‘Concerto for solo piano’ may appear contradictory. Earlier precedent aside (see Bach’s Italian Concerto), this should be understood by reference to the tradition of the piano transcription, or the recreation for solo piano of works originally composed for other instrumental settings. Only very few pianists could elevate the piano transcription to an art form in itself; these included Liszt, whose solo piano transcriptions of Beethoven’s symphonies rank among the jewels of the piano literature. Once the symphony was conquered, some pianists went one step further, creating transcriptions of piano concertos that weaved both the orchestral and piano solo parts into the same score. Here, Alkan was unsurpassed. His solo piano transcriptions of Mozart’s D minor Piano Concerto and the first movement of Beethoven’s C minor Piano Concerto are peerless in conveying the contrasts of both orchestra and soloist through the piano alone. Tellingly, the pianistic techniques and devices deployed by Alkan in these transcriptions feature heavily in the Concerto for solo piano. It is therefore alongside them that the Concerto must be understood, with the key difference being that there is no ‘original’ version for orchestra and soloist. Instead, the orchestra-soloist duality has been written organically into the work as conceived for solo piano from the beginning.

The second concerns the context of its publication. The three movements of the Concerto are given as Nos. 8-10 of Alkan’s *12 Études dans tous les tons mineurs* (‘12 studies in all the minor keys’), published in 1857 as his Op. 39, which also encompasses Alkan’s Symphony for solo piano as Nos. 4-7. Even after Chopin and Liszt had transformed the étude into a concert-worthy art form, the inclusion of such colossal works within a set of mere études reflects a characteristically Alkanian irony.

The third concerns its scale. The Concerto is sometimes regarded as a gargantuan and sprawling construction, whose length renders it unsuitable for public performance. But since comparably proportioned works feature regularly in concert, such as Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, Beethoven’s ‘Hammerklavier’ Sonata and *Diabelli Variations* or Schubert’s C major String Quintet, this view is misguided. Moreover, the bulk of the Concerto’s length lies in its first movement. Despite its duration, this is a tightly constructed sonata-form movement, whose inexorable structural logic imposes a clear sense of cohesion and direction across its half-hour trajectory. So although the Concerto is undoubtedly crafted on an epic scale, this should not preclude its presentation in concert.

The fourth concerns its point. Why write a ‘Concerto for solo piano’, constructed on a monumental scale, and buried within a set of études? The best answer seems to be – as a celebration of the piano and its capabilities. The Concerto for solo piano evokes both extremes of the piano concerto: passages of unbearable grandeur, evocative of a symphony orchestra in full flight, set alongside moments of breathtaking intimacy and poetry, showing the soloist at their most personal. The pianist is set free to explore the whole breadth of this drama alone, borne aloft by Alkan’s efforts to transcend the limitations of the instrument. The result is one of the most remarkable riches of the piano literature.

The Concerto for solo piano commences with a classically structured *Allegro assai*, whose principal themes are established in an introductory orchestral ‘tutti’ before the ‘soloist’ enters with a flourish up the keyboard. The remainder of this movement features the exposition and development of these themes through the interplay of ‘soloist’ and ‘orchestra’, culminating in a shattering cadenza built on a torrent of repeated notes. The ensuing *Adagio* is a Chopinesque lamentation, whose disquieting bouts of sunshine dissolve into a tempestuous recitative which itself erupts into a funeral procession. The finale – marked *Allegretto alla barbaresca* – instantly releases the tension of the preceding 40 minutes, with its opening arpeggiated chords popping like champagne corks. The riotous celebration that follows contains some of the most scintillating and innovative writing in the piano literature. As it builds to its conclusion, climax follows climax and notes and harmonies scatter in a kaleidoscope of colours until the work concludes with a precipitous pentatonic sweep down the keyboard.

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