



Recorded at Marco Barletta Pianoforti, Chiavara, Genoa, on 3–5 December 2013
Producer-engineer: Giovanni Caruso

Toccata Classics gratefully acknowledges a grant from the Centre de musique française romantique at the Palazzetto Bru Zane in Venice towards the costs of making this recording.

The instruments used on this recording – a Tallone No. 9 (1975) and Steinway D (1965) were generously supplied by Marco Barletta Pianoforti, Chiavari, Genoa.

Booklet notes by Malcolm MacDonald
Design and layout: Paul Brooks, paulmbrooks@virginmedia.com

Executive producer: Martin Anderson

TOCC 0237

© 2014, Toccata Classics, London

© 2014, Toccata Classics, London



Toccata Classics CDs are also available in the shops and can be ordered from our distributors around the world, a list of whom can be found at www.toccataclassics.com. If we have no representation in your country, please contact: Toccata Classics, 16 Dalkeith Court, Vincent Street, London SW1P 4HH, UK
Tel: +44/0 207 821 5020 E-mail: info@toccataclassics.com

NEUF PRÉLUDES
CH. V. ALKAN
Op. 66

Transcription pour Piano à 4 Mains
par
JOSÉ VIANNA DA MOTTA



Charles-Valentin ALKAN

The Complete Vianna da Motta Transcriptions

Huit Prières, Op. 64
Neuf Préludes
Benedictus, Op. 54

Vincenzo Maltempo, piano
Emanuele Delucchi, second piano

FIRST RECORDINGS

THE COMPLETE ALKAN TRANSCRIPTIONS BY VIANNA DA MOTTA

by Malcolm MacDonald

Ironically, at the end of the nineteenth century the reputation of Charles-Valentin Alkan – when his existence was remembered at all – had declined to that of a mere composer of exercises. There seemed to be no other explanation for the thousands of notes, to be taken at breakneck speed, divided in extravagant finger-testing and -stretching patterns, that made up so much of the texture of his music. Even a composer as penetrating as Brahms may have rated him so.¹ Since the revival of interest in Alkan spearheaded by Egon Petri, Raymond Lewenthal, Ronald Smith and John Ogdon, which began to turn the tide in the 1960s, we understand him much better, or think we do.

Nevertheless one huge musical intellect who never lost sight of Alkan's importance was Ferruccio Busoni, and time and intelligent performance has amply confirmed Busoni's judgment (delivered in his 1909 Preface to the *Études* of Liszt) that Alkan stood with Liszt, Chopin, Schumann and Brahms as one of the five greatest composers for the piano since Beethoven.² Alkan should now be generally recognised as just that – one of the truest of Beethoven's heirs in terms of his structural handling of rhythm, the supreme exponent of the French *style sévère*, and the creator of some of the most dauntingly difficult (and powerful, and tender, and sardonic) piano music in the entire repertoire of the instrument.

¹ Brahms' keen interest in all aspects of piano technique is well known, and is enshrined in the collection of 51 *Übungen* he published towards the end of his life – a work with parallels to Vianna da Motta's *Exercices de Virtuosité tirés des œuvres de Ch. V. Alkan* mentioned below. The only work of Alkan which remained in Brahms' library after his death was the *Trois Grandes Études pour les mains séparées et réunies*, Op. 76, which I examined in the 1980s. It shows unmistakable signs of frequent use and is so covered in Brahms' pencilled fingerings that it seems likely that he viewed the work as primarily a piece for practice in stretching the hands (there is no record of him having played it in public); it is, of course, so much more than that, and it would be rash to assume that Brahms did not recognise its intrinsic expressive qualities as well.

² Busoni's comment is usually quoted out of context, which weakens its force. He was not seeking to admit Alkan to his canon of piano masters: rather he clearly considered that Alkan, with Chopin, Schumann and Brahms, already constituted that canon, to which Busoni maintained that Liszt should be admitted on the strength of the *Études*.

Palazzetto Bru Zane – Centre de musique romantique française

The vocation of the Palazzetto Bru Zane – Centre de musique romantique française is to favour the rediscovery of the French musical heritage of the years 1780 to 1920, and to obtain for that repertoire the international recognition it deserves.

Housed in Venice, in a *palazzo* dating from 1695 specially restored for the purpose, the Palazzetto Bru Zane – Centre de musique romantique française is one of the achievements of the Fondation Bru. Combining artistic ambition with high scientific standards, the Centre reflects the humanist spirit that guides the actions of the Foundation.

The main activities of the Palazzetto Bru Zane, which opened its doors in 2009, are research and publishing, the organisation and international distribution of concerts, and support for CD recordings.

bru-zane.com



**PALAZZETTO
BRU ZANE**
CENTRE
DE MUSIQUE
ROMANTIQUE
FRANÇAISE

The *cursus studiorum* of the pianist and composer **Emanuele Delucchi** (born in 1987) was completed in 2009 with a postgraduate diploma *summa cum laude* from the Conservatorio Niccolò Paganini in Genoa and in 2011 with the three-year diploma at the Accademia Pianistica Internazionale Incontri col Maestro in Imola, where he attended the master-classes of Vovka Ashkenazy, Zoltán Kocsis, Robert Levin and Cedric Pescia). He studied also with Canzio Bucciarelli and Riccardo Risaliti and is currently a student of Davide Cabassi at the Conservatorio Claudio Monteverdi in Bolzano.

He has won the first prizes of several national and international competitions, among them, in 2008, the Stefano Marizza Piano Competition in Trieste, 'for the intelligence and the balance shown in reading and producing the works presented' and, in April 2012, the gold medal in the first 'Alkan-Zimmermann International Piano Competition' in Athens.

He has performed as soloist in Croatia, England, France, Germany, Italy, Greece and Slovenia and in chamber ensembles in collaboration with the composers Sylvano Bussotti (Lecce, 2007), Carlo Boccadoro and Fabio Vacchi (Genoa, 2013), with the violinist Giulio Plotino, the cellist Nicola Paoli, pianists Francesco Libetta and Vincenzo Maltempo, in trio with Eva Zahn and Antonio Plotino (in the Weber Trio), the flautists Stefania Carrara and Fabio De Rosa and the soprano Barbara Costa.

He was the first Italian to perform in public (at the Teatro Paisiello in Lecce, at the invitation of Francesco Libetta, during the fourth 'Miami Piano Festival in Lecce') Alkan's monumental *Concerto for piano solo*, a performance recorded live and released on CD by the Conservatorio Niccolò Paganini. In May 2011 he recorded (in studio conditions) the CD *Suite Antique*, which includes recent works by Martin Münch and was released on Prometheus.

Some of his most recent compositions are published by Musicisti Associati Produzioni (MAP) in Milan.

Since 2003 he has been active also as an accompanist, acting as *répétiteur* for fifteen operas, working with the international opera competition in Deiva Marina, south of Genoa, since it was launched in 2010.



Born in 1813 into a large and prodigiously musical Parisian Jewish family of Alsatian extraction, Alkan (he was born Charles-Valentin Morhange, but took the forename of his father, the piano teacher Alkan Morhange, for surname) became a student at the Paris Conservatoire at the age of six. He made his public debut at seven (as a violinist!), gained the Conservatoire's first prize for piano at the age of ten, and gave his first public piano recital when he was twelve. Until the mid-1840s he was one of the most celebrated piano virtuosi in Paris, and often shared the platform with Liszt, Thalberg and, especially, Chopin – who, with George Sand, became a close friend and next-door neighbour. But around the time of Chopin's death in 1849 Alkan withdrew from public life and devoted himself to composition. Apart from an understated return to the concert stage in the mid-1870s, when he gave several series of recitals remarkable for their technical difficulty and imaginative programming, he remained an apparently misanthropic recluse, a vague legend in his own lifetime. The circumstances of his death are obscure, though the traditional account that he was crushed by a falling bookcase while reaching for a volume of the Talmud seems likely to have been a myth promulgated by his natural son, the pianist and pedagogue Elie Miriam Delaborde.

Alkan is said to have been the only pianist in whose presence even Liszt felt nervous; and Vincent d'Indy, who heard him play near the end of his life, maintained that he surpassed Liszt in interpretative powers. He was admired for an absolute technical mastery, a striking range of colour, and most of all for a rhythmic discipline that scorned rubato. All these qualities are demanded by his own music. He wrote a certain amount of orchestral music (mostly lost) and some fine chamber works, but his reputation rests securely on his vast output for the piano. Hummel, Cherubini and Chopin were early influences, and Beethoven and Bach an abiding inspiration, for music which makes most imaginative use of the full range of the keyboard and often poses the performer fearsome rhythmic challenges to be taken at headlong pace in absolutely unyielding tempo (a typical example is the *Allegro Barbaro* from the 12 *Études dans les tons majeurs*, Op. 35, published in 1847, which inspired Bartók's similarly-titled piece of over sixty years later).

Alkan also displays striking harmonic individuality (especially in the use of diatonic dissonance) and an occasionally awesome grasp of large-scale structure. It is these features, quite as much as his uncanny skill at suggesting orchestral timbres in purely pianistic terms, which earned him the epithet bestowed by Hans von Bülow: 'the Berlioz of the piano'.

Yet Alkan should not be considered solely as a piano composer. Among his many attainments, he gained the *premier prix d'orgue* at the Paris Conservatoire in 1834, at the age of 21, and by all accounts

his organ technique was as remarkable as his command of the piano. He was friendly with some leading contemporary organists, notably César Franck and Louis Lefébure-Wély, but never occupied any post as organist of a church or synagogue. Nevertheless, in the last decades of his life, Alkan seems to have devoted much of his creative and interpretative powers to an organ-substitute: the *pédalier* or pedal-piano. This almost forgotten instrument (a piano with an additional keyboard of foot-pedals, as the name implies) was also written for by Schumann, Gounod and by Franck. The great piano-manufacturing concern of Érard, with whom Alkan enjoyed a close association, was a producer of these instruments, one of which was put at Alkan's disposal in the 1850s to assist him in the study of Bach's organ music.

This '*piano à clavier de pédales*' became a favourite compositional medium, though naturally many of the resulting works are equally playable on the organ. (It should be remembered, though, that the two instruments have a completely different sound, the organ altogether lacking what the pianist-composer and Alkan-scholar Ronald Smith has described as 'the clanking resonance and attack of the pedal-piano'.³) Although Franck and Schumann only produced a few works for the instrument, it appears that in the 1860s it became Alkan's principal compositional medium. His works for the *pédalier*, perhaps the most important sector of his late music, add up in themselves to a sizable output, one that, to some extent, is less concerned with the apocalyptic and diabolic aspects of the composer's musical personality than with simpler religious moods and expressions of faith. Except that, with Alkan, nothing is ever entirely simple, and his utter originality of approach is sometimes to be discovered in the most unlikely places and genres.

Thus as Alkan's music entered its long period of neglect towards the end of the nineteenth century, no area of his work was more likely to be neglected than the music for *pédalier* – not for any reason connected with musical quality (except, of course, the usual one with Alkan of extreme technical difficulty) but for sheer reasons of practicality. Few of the instruments had ever been constructed; few people knew how to play them, except organists who used them for practice; and Alkan's scores made astonishing demands on those players, especially in pedal technique, the secrets of whose performance seemed to have died if not with the composer, then soon after him (Delaborde, his son, was also a master performer on the *pédalier*).

At which point, enter the Portuguese composer, virtuoso pianist and educator José Vianna da

Born in 1985, **Vincenzo Maltempo** completed his musical studies under the guidance of Salvatore Orlando (himself a student of Sergio Fiorentino), graduating with highest honours from the Conservatorio Santa Cecilia in Rome, and thereafter studying with Riccardo Risaliti at the Accademia Pianistica Internazionale Incontri col Maestro in Imola.

An important step in his concert career was first prize at the prestigious piano competition Premio Venezia at the Teatro La Fenice in 2006, which was followed by a series of concerts in Italy and in Austria, England, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain and Japan. After other Italian competition successes – first prizes at the Liszt competition in Grottammare in 2008 and the Guido Alberto Fano in Camposampiero in 2012 (where Leslie Howard was chairman of the jury) – he has swapped sides: in 2013 he was asked to be a member of the jury of the XVII Rachmaninov International Piano Competition in Morcone. He is also one of the founders of and teachers at the Imola Piano Academy ('Talent Development') in Eindhoven in The Netherlands.

Early concerto appearances were made with the Orchestra of the Gran Teatro La Fenice, the Orchestra Sinfonica Giovanile del Piemonte and the Bacau Philharmonic Orchestra, but since 2010 he has worked especially closely with the conductor Gustav Kuhn, who regularly invites him to give concerts at his Accademia di Montegral in Lucca, the Erl Festspiele and Festival Südtirol in Dobbiaco, where he performed his own solo-piano transcription of the Symphony in E by Hans Rott. Other transcriptions of major orchestral works have been published by Ries & Erler in Berlin.

His duo with the pianist Francesco Libetta has played on several occasions at the Miami International Piano Festival in Lecce, as well as elsewhere in Italy and in Japan.

He released his first CD in 2008, a Liszt recital on Gramola, presented with a concert in the Bösendorfer-Saal in Vienna. His second CD, recorded in 2012 for Piano Classics, was dedicated to the music of Alkan, on whom he lectures and of whom he is also writing a biography; a second Alkan CD for Piano Classics was as well received as the first, and a third is in preparation. Alkan naturally features in his recitals. In 2012 he played a three-concert 'Alkan Marathon' at the Sagra musicale Malatestiana in Rimini – the same year that he made his debut at the Liszt Festival in Raiding – and he is one of the few pianists ever to perform the complete set of Alkan's *Douze Études dans les tons mineurs*, Op. 39, in a single concert.



³ This and subsequent quotations taken from his still-indispensable *Alkan Volume Two: The Music* (Kahn & Averill, London, 1987), in this case p. 223.

returns in a spirit of glad affirmation.

Da Motta chooses to end with Alkan's Ninth *Prélude* in D flat [17]. He marks it *Adagio*, whereas in the original edition it bears its tempo-marking in German – *Langsam*: and comparisons have justly been drawn with a Bruckner symphonic *Adagio* (not that Bruckner had written any of the most characteristic of those movements at the probable time Alkan was composing this one). The majestic main climax, and a solemn trombone-like motif that contrasts with the otherwise full textures, enhance the resemblance. In its soft chordal pulsation, its extremely rich and original harmonies, and its serenely floating *cantabile* melodies, this extraordinarily beautiful piece reveals Alkan at his most glowingly spiritual: a profession of faith made – to judge by some of the modulations that open unexpected gulfs beneath us – on the edge of the unknowable. Perhaps the last word here should be Vianna da Motta's:

in the final piece the religious feeling ascends to metaphysical heights. In this piece Alkan gives a Dante-like vision from above. It is the soul which glides above life and the world, who understands, who pardons, who loves all. Sorrow is not forgotten, but it is transfigured; the martyr himself is content with his condition and beatitude: here the suffering is voluntarily accepted.¹⁶

Did Vianna da Motta's transcriptions, so clearly a labour of love and admiration, succeed in their intention to rescue Alkan's *pédalier* works from obscurity? Among aficionados of the composer, perhaps – for decades a small and select band. But they hardly led, even today, to increased performance of this marvellous music in recital. Perhaps the present recording will stimulate interest in some of the most extraordinary keyboard music of the mid-nineteenth century.

© Malcolm MacDonald, 2014

Malcolm MacDonald is the author of the volume on Brahms in the 'Master Musicians' series (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2002). He has also written The Symphonies of Havergal Brian (three vols., Kahn & Averill, London, 1974, 1978 and 1983) and edited the first two volumes of Havergal Brian on Music (Toccata Press, London, 1985 and 2009); further volumes are in preparation. His other writings include books on John Foulds, Schoenberg, Ronald Stevenson and Edgard Varèse.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. ii.

Motta, who became a lonely advocate for the music of Alkan at a period when the French master's reputation was at its lowest ebb. The development of concert music in Portugal has sometimes hung by a slender thread, preserved and developed single-handedly, it might seem, by a sole exceptionally gifted individual. An example was João Domingos Bomtempo (1775–1842), who in the age of Beethoven contrived, through his piano concertos, sonatas, symphonies and major choral works (such as the 1818 *Requiem in C minor dedicated to the Memory of Camões*), to transform the long-prevailing situation where opera had dominated Portuguese musical life, and aroused a new appetite for orchestral, chamber and sacred music. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Vianna da Motta found himself performing a similarly vital role.

During his long career Vianna da Motta was probably the most distinguished Portuguese musician in Europe, if not the world. Born in 1868 on the island of São Tomé off the coast of what is now Gabon, the son of an amateur musician and pharmacist, he moved to Portugal with his parents at the age of two and soon manifested extraordinary musical gifts. Thus he studied at the Lisbon Conservatoire between 1875 (that is, he entered it at the age of seven) and 1881. He then moved to Berlin on a scholarship provided by the King of Portugal, the German-born Fernando II, where he studied at the Scharwenka Institute with the pianist-composer brothers Franz and Philipp Scharwenka. Subsequently he became a private pupil of Karl Schäffer and from 1885 attended Franz Liszt's masterclasses in Weimar, an experience he treasured all his life. From 1887 da Motta worked for two years with Hans von Bülow in Frankfurt. He lived in Berlin until the outbreak of World War I, principally teaching piano and composing, but toured widely as pianist and conductor in Europe (including, naturally, Portugal) and the USA, performing with some of the most celebrated artists of the time, including Sarasate, Casals, Ysaÿe and Busoni. After a spell directing the piano masterclass at the Geneva Conservatoire, at the age of 50 he was appointed director of the Lisbon Conservatoire, where he implemented far-reaching educational reforms and occupied the post until his retirement at the age of 70. He was also conductor of the Lisbon Symphony Orchestra and established the Lisbon Concert Society. An acknowledged authority on Bach and Beethoven, he performed a cycle of the complete 32 piano sonatas of Beethoven in Lisbon in 1927. Da Motta gave his last public recital in 1945, and died in Lisbon in 1948, aged 80.

As a composer Vianna da Motta was not prolific, but his works were significant for the development of music in Portugal. Drawing on the innovations of Liszt and Wagner, as well as the Russian nationalist composers, he applied these both to Portuguese cultural themes and folk motifs. There is an early Piano

Concerto (1887) composed when he was nineteen and a more substantial *Fantasia Dramática* for piano and orchestra of 1893, but the bulk of his mature work comprises solo-piano and chamber music as well as numerous songs, and his masterpiece is probably the Symphony *A Pátria* ('The Fatherland', worked on between 1895 and 1908), eventually published in Brazil, a monumental work of approximately 50 minutes' duration inspired by verses of Portugal's national poet, Camões. He also composed symphonic poems and a choral work based on Camões's epic, *Os Lusíadas*.

In Berlin, the Portuguese virtuoso became one of Busoni's closest friends and collaborators. They often played two-piano recitals together, and as early as 1898 they collaborated on the ground-breaking volume of *Orgelchoralvorspiele von Johann Sebastian Bach auf das Pianoforte in Kammerstil übertragen* (which would be reissued as part of the monumental 'Bach-Busoni' edition in 1916). Vianna da Motta was also one of the editors of Busoni's monumental Liszt Complete Edition, and during World War I shared his Swiss exile in Geneva, until 1917, when he returned to Portugal to take up the directorship of the Conservatoire in Lisbon. They kept in touch; it was Vianna da Motta who gave the world premiere of Busoni's fearsome Bach-based *Toccata, Adagio and Fugue* in 1921.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Vianna da Motta issued his own transcriptions of three of the most important of Alkan's *pédalier* works, for piano without the necessity of a pedal-board, offering in each case a different form of realisation: eight of the *13 Prières* (arranged for solo piano; that is, a single player with two hands), the *Benedictus* (arranged for two pianos, four hands) and nine of the *11 Grands Préludes* (arranged for piano duet, i.e., four hands at one piano), in that order. Published between 1901 and 1907, these works were to be followed by the monumental series of 118 *Exercices de Virtuosité tirés des œuvres de Ch. V. Alkan aîné* published in Paris in 1908 – a volume that ranges from short passages plucked from Alkan's output and projected through all twelve major or minor keys, to complete works – and which includes passages from the three *pédalier* works (the *Benedictus* and the *Préludes*, be it noted, in new versions involving two hands rather than four).

It seems certain that it was from and through Busoni that Vianna da Motta arrived at his own assessment of Alkan's importance and worth. He himself implies that was the case by dedicating his transcription of the *Prières* to Busoni and by citing him, in the Preface to the *Préludes*, for the idea that the three works in question form a natural triptych, with the comparatively intimate *Prières* and *Préludes* surrounding the more 'symphonic' approach of the *Benedictus*.

The next piece (Alkan's No. 8) is an impressive *Tempo giusto* in F minor, powered by a four-note ostinato phrase in the *secondo* part, over which Alkan lays a melody marked *soutenu et noblement* [12]. The piece has the clipped, controlled rhythmic power of some of his great piano pieces, and the arching *cantabile* second subject is reminiscent of that in the finale of the *Symphonie* for piano from the *Études dans les tons mineurs*. There is a kind of trio-section in the major, in swaggering march style, before a return and typical rhythmic intensification of the opening materials – in fact, they are subjected to a resourceful development that ranges far afield harmonically, leading to a severe coda in Alkan's heavy-*staccato* manner.

The ensuing *Quasi Adagio* in E flat – Alkan's *Prélude* No. 5, and also da Motta's: this and the next two pieces occupy the same positions in both composers' versions of the cycle – alternates ecclesiastical-sounding close harmony with a hymn-like transformation of the same material [13]. Some distant modulations bring a blazing climax before a shortened recapitulation of the opening section leads into a calm coda.

For da Motta *Prélude* No. 6 in C minor [14] represented 'the extreme of tragic expression'; Ronald Smith described it as 'one of Alkan's most bizarre inventions' and 'a piece of irresistible perversity';¹⁵ but its curiosities may be less apparent to the ear than to the eye. It has the rhythm of a moderately paced gigue (the tempo is *Andantino*) and bounces along with some subtle harmonic colourings (a *staccatissimo* chordal passage with modal inflections and false relations sounds, to British ears, curiously like Vaughan Williams). But rhythm in Alkan has a knack of becoming obsessive and unleashing forces that seem far more sinister than the actual notes would warrant, and that is the case here. A repeated, syncopated G in high register triggers a serene but mysterious coda that spans the heights and depths as if contemplating the wonders of the cosmos.

The Seventh *Prélude, Andante* in A flat [15], bears the indication '*Alla giudesca*' ('in Jewish style') and reflects the idiom of Jewish devotional music. This piece is the one da Motta sees as a 'prayer'. The long opening tenor line, marked *con divozione* and maybe intended to represent a synagogue cantor, becomes steadily more florid and ornamented before the full choir enters with its response, rising to a grandiose conclusion. The following *Lento* in F sharp major (Alkan's No. 11) [16] seems an expression of mysticism, even of the occult. Beginning with a querulous 'Quasi-Recitativo' in the pedals the music gropes towards the light only to be cast down again into the depths, at which moment melody breaks out in splendour over a huge dominant pedal and the recitative, doubled throughout the octaves,

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 229.

This quotation gives some idea of the eloquence to be found in da Motta's preface, so different from that which he wrote from the *Prières*. Contrasting the *Préludes* with the *Benedictus* and *Prières*, he writes that they

combine the character of the two preceding works; generally more intimate than the *Benedictus*, they seem to express, like the *Prières*, the confessions of a recluse, but more tortured, darker, more conflicted. The polyphonic texture demands more than one player, but the poetic character demands the unity of a single instrument. This is why we have chosen an arrangement for four hands. [...] It is in the intimate study of two understanding friends that these *Préludes* reveal all their psychological profundities. In reading these poems we have the impression of studying the intimate journal of a man who is alone with his thoughts, his sufferings, and who discovers in them the supreme deliverance, namely religious redemption.¹³

Vianna da Motta further explained his ordering of the *Préludes* in programmatic terms, with Nos. 1–3 'posing the problem', Nos. 4–6 'developing the conflict between the spirit of rebellion and the aspiration towards peace', and Nos. 7–9 representing 'Prayer – last resigned monologue of the martyr (Gethsemane) – redemption'.¹⁴

In Vianna da Motta's ordering, the *Préludes* begin with a powerful piece in G minor, marked *Moderatamente* (originally Alkan's No. 4) [9]. It alternates a beefy march with biting staccato chordal writing and an ardent, flowing *Sostenuto* melody with chromaticisms more reminiscent of Franck than of Alkan himself. On its third appearance the march acquires a diabolically virtuosic upper part and the piece ends with an apocalyptic coda and a final few bars that bizarrely contrast *piano* and *fortissimo* dynamics.

There follows an *Andantino* in B flat (Alkan's No. 3) [10] that contrasts three distinct elements: a gentle bass recitative in the *secondo* part that sounds as if it might become a fugue subject (but doesn't); a middle-register fanfare; and a high cantilena with rippling accompaniment rather reminiscent of Gounod's *Ave Maria*. These ideas are juxtaposed and combined, the recitative eventually bringing the piece to a close in majestic octave unison through the range of the instrument.

Da Motta follows this piece with a stormy D minor *Allegro moderato* (Alkan's No. 2) [11], which combines a balefully relentless rhythm with yelping grace-notes and turbulent bass lines, with a brief *Sostenutissimo* passage for contrast.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. i.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

The set of 13 *Prières*, Op. 64, certainly stands among Alkan's most intensely personal works. Published around 1866, it bears the dedication 'À la mémoire de Pierre Érard (1796–1855)', the managing director of the Paris piano firm whom Alkan had known for many years and who was presumably responsible for originally placing the *pédalier* at Alkan's disposal. No less a figure than César Franck later transcribed seven of these pieces for organ. Vianna da Motta's version of 8 *Prières* (Nos. 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 11 and 12 in Alkan's numbering) is the earliest of his Alkan transcriptions, dating from 1901, and unlike the *Benedictus* and *Préludes* his preface to the publication is comparatively laconic, without going into detail on his approach to the transcriber's task. Alkan himself indicated that an extra pair of hands could take the pedal parts if there were no pedals, but Vianna da Motta clearly scorns this makeshift solution: in the much later and more detailed preface he provided for his arrangement of the *Préludes*, he comments that as 'the most delicate and most intimate of these pieces demand performance by a single person'.⁴ Some of his solutions – which entail a good deal of octave doubling, and often require the left hand to become a kind of amalgam of Alkan's left-hand and pedal parts – have been criticised by Ronald Smith, despite their ingenuity, for attempting the impossible.⁵ Nevertheless in performances as sensitive and convincing as those on the present CD, it is possible to claim that da Motta's transcriptions have a strong effectiveness of their own.

The opening piece [1], in a modally inflected G major that keeps the music poised between that key and C minor, immediately establishes an exalted mood, caused especially by the repetitions of the chant-like figure which answers the opening descending motif. It is followed by serene three-part invention in A major with an almost Schubertian principal melody [2] interrupted at one point by severe block chords. The delightfully lyric and the hint of religious fervour are here deftly combined.

The magnificent third *Prière* in B minor [3] presents a Hebraic melody sounding out from deep, resonating depths (and shared between the hands as da Motta elevates the roiling *tremolando* accompaniment to the upper registers). It builds to a dramatic climax, suddenly cut off, the key changing to E major in the mysteriously triumphant coda.⁶ The next piece [4] alternates an altogether more extrovertly triumphant C major *Maestoso* music with an initially quiet chorale with celestial right-hand accompaniment. The feeling of grandeur accumulates as both elements are developed,

⁴ Édition Costallat, Paris, 1907, p. i (original in French and German; my translation here and subsequently).

⁵ Cf. especially *op. cit.*, pp. 223 and 228–29.

⁶ It occurs to me that this wonderful piece could have been one inspiration behind the third (the *Allegro*) of Busoni's *Short Pieces for the Cultivation of Polyphonic Playing* (1923), which Anthony Beaumont has incorporated into his speculative completion of Busoni's opera *Doktor Faust* as the music of Faust's final act of conjuring.

intensified and aggrandised through a majestic progression of textures and thematic developments. Titled in Latin (*Deus Sabaoth*), Hebrew and French, the fifth *Prière* [5] is in fact a highly contrapuntal march with obvious accompanying fanfares – revealed in the ‘*quasi trombe*’ indications near the closing bars. To this the following E major *Andantino* (marked *Doucement*) [6] provides a complete contrast: a fragrantly melodious piece, with bell-effects as we approach the peaceful coda.

The seventh piece is another *Andantino*, with the expression-mark *Ingenueamente* (ingenuous) [7]. With its lulling rhythm and infectious tune this label seems at first an adequate description, though the next section, with its dry off-beat chords, challenges it somewhat. In the final stages of the movement a new, noble tune stands out against the prevailing rhythm and brings some surprisingly grandiose developments to this initially innocent-sounding piece.

The final *Allegretto* in F [8] is reminiscent of some of Alkan’s near-contemporary piano *Esquisses*, Op. 63, where what seems an old-fashioned dance-tune is intermingled with hints of a march. In the coda the main tune is silenced with a resonant, mysterious and self-destructing carillon.

An earlier work by some years, Alkan’s *Benedictus*, Op. 54 [18], appeared in 1859, and is dedicated to the critic and church-music authority Joseph d’Ortigue (1802–66), with whom he had been friends since the 1840s.⁷ It is designated ‘*pour piano à clavier de pédales ou Piano à 3 mains*’ suggesting that in the absence of a pedal-board a second player could take the very substantial pedal part. Vianna da Motta found the interposition of a third hand really implied a fourth: because the function of the foot-pedal was partly to strengthen the melodic line at a lower octave, and partly to develop the fundamentally polyphonic nature of the textures. For the same reasons – the ‘symphonic’ presentation of the material and its polyphonic extension – he preferred the freedom and antiphony afforded by a second piano rather than a duet at a single keyboard. As he writes in the aforementioned Preface to the *Préludes*, ‘the *Benedictus* with its dramatic dialogues and its powerful developments imperiously demands the contrast and fullness of tone of two pianos.’⁸

This music is no simple expression of faith and comfort (as in the orchestral *Benedictus* of Alexander Mackenzie, for example) but a grand enactment of the course of a spiritual struggle. Moving with remorseless strides through a D-minor darkness of turbulent, balefully elephantine

pulsations where ‘hungry clouds swag in the deep’⁹ a trombone-like theme arises like a cry. It is answered from on high by a seraphic D major melody, *dolcissimo ed espressivissimo* – one of Alkan’s most glorious themes, with a calmly rippling semiquaver accompaniment. Though the piece’s overall trajectory is from D minor to D major this vision of its goal is only fleeting. The music of the lower depths recurs, the ‘trombone’ theme canonically intensified, and its celestial counterpart answers again, this time in C major and further developed. With increasing confidence the music strives upward to a bright F major outburst. Only after it has subsided does a new, grand march theme enter in D major. Here again safe harbour has not yet, in fact, been attained, and a powerful development ensues before the ‘trombone’ theme is finally transfigured into a D-major expression of faith in the triumphant final bars.

In the late 1860s Alkan produced two astonishing collections of medium-sized pieces, the *Grands Préludes*, Op. 66, and the *11 Pièces dans le Style Religieux*, Op. 72. Although Vianna da Motta never seems to have attempted a transcription of Op. 72, there can be little doubt that Alkan designed them as parallel or complementary sequences. For one thing both sets contain eleven original pieces but each is rounded off by a twelfth, in both cases a transcription from Handel’s *Messiah*.

The *11 Grands Préludes et 1 Transcription du Messie de Haendel*, to give Alkan’s Op. 66 its full title, was published about 1867 with a dedication ‘À son Confrère C: A: Franck’.¹⁰ It follows a careful pattern of key relations that descends in thirds through relative major and minor keys (thus F major, D minor, B flat major, G minor and so on). In the preface to his version – entitled merely *Neuf Préludes* and dedicated to Isidore Philipp¹¹ – Vianna da Motta fully recognises Alkan’s elaborate tonal pattern; yet in transcribing only nine of the eleven *Préludes* (Nos. 1 and 10 are omitted), and omitting the Handel transcription, he has broken it – and as he says, has completely re-ordered the *Préludes* according to a different principle:

We have attempted to give a poetic unity to the nine pieces, so that their succession forms the development of a drama of the soul struggling against suffering, protesting against Humanity and Nature, and finding at last the supreme peace in mystic ecstasy.¹²

⁷ Vianna da Motta’s transcription is dedicated to the pianist Carl Klindworth, student of Liszt and champion of Wagner.

⁸ Édition Costallat, Paris, 1907, pp. i. The *Benedictus* has been recorded as an organ work by Kevin Bowyer on Toccata Classics rocc 0030, and also in a modern transcription for two pianos by Roger Smalley on rocc 0070, performed by Anthony Goldstone and Caroline Clemmow.

⁹ William Blake, ‘The Argument’ to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1793.

¹⁰ Recorded on the organ by Kevin Bowyer on Toccata Classics rocc 0030.

¹¹ Professor of piano at the Paris Conservatoire, Philipp had befriended Alkan in the latter’s last years and had been a pall-bearer at his funeral; he had edited many of his works for republication.

¹² Édition Costallat, Paris, 1907, pp. i–ii (original in French and German; my translation).