

# Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888): Marrano Musical Composer

**Norman Simms**



Figure 1: Charles-Valentin Alkan (born Morhange) faces away from the camera, emphasising the mystery of his life. Photograph by Nadar.

## Introduction: The Musician Who Played the Right Tune on the Wrong Instrument

There's good reason for the assumption of the Russian-Jewish virtuoso, for the Jews were uprooted so often that the violin, travelling easily, became their comforting companion. The Jew is also deeply aware of his heritage. His traditional respect for Holy Law Makes him a devoted student and interpreter, good qualities for a violinist.<sup>1</sup>

Born Charles-Valentin Morhange, Alkan (1813-1888) took his father's first name rather than his last, which, by the way, means "the Lord has been gracious."<sup>2</sup> His father, a rabbi, bequeathed a more ambiguous and anxiety-ridden legacy to his musical son, insofar as Alkan, though a child prodigy, grew into an eccentric, bizarre and reclusive man, eventually dying under mysterious and pathetic circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Legend has delighted in constantly repeating in order to refute the story that this eccentric performer-composer reached to take a heavy volume of Talmud from a high shelf and then expired when this ponderous tome<sup>4</sup> hit him on the head, a story supposedly meant to

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<sup>1</sup> Yehudi Meuhin and Curtis W. Davis, *The Music of Man* (Toronto, New York, London, and Sydney: Methuen, 2000 [1979]), p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt, 'The Virtuoso Years, 1811-1847 (Vol. I)'* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987 [1983]), p. 186.

<sup>3</sup> It is the term *reclusive* that stands out in William Alexander Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and his Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) that needs to be carefully parsed, as it blocks out two key factors in Alkan's life. First, his nervous, anxious and sensitive reaction to the nature of Parisian life, even granted several changes in critical and pedagogical tastes during his lifetime; he was, as we attempt to show in this essay, like many other partly assimilated Jews, uncomfortable in the circles where he sometimes proved most successful, such as Chopin, Liszt and their friends and associates; and second, his Jewishness—not what Eddie keeps referring to his as his "Judaic" background and formative culture, as though being a Jew were a racial, biological or psychological determinant of his character, since there were many kinds of ways of being Jewish, not least in the linguistic distinction between Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim, including many from Alsace, Poland and Hungary; the Ladino (or Judeo-Español)-speaking Sephardim scattered by the expulsions of 1492, and often re-settling in cosmopolitan mercantile communities in North Africa, along the Levant and in Ottoman lands (where they also spoke Arabic, Turkish and local Slavic tongues). Elias Canetti recalls his grandfather, a Sephardi-Bulgarian merchant sailing up and down the Danube in the late nineteenth century, being conversant in nineteen different languages and dialects. See Norman Simms, 'Universal and Intimate: Acquired Languages in Elias Canetti', *New Zealand and the EU: Perspectives on European Literature*, ed. Hannah Brodsky (Auckland: The Europe Institute, vol. 32, no. 2, 2009), pp. 43-70.

<sup>4</sup> Some say it was the entire bookshelf and not just a single volume.

show the dangers of the Old Dead Law of Moses on a modern genius's mind, yet the actual facts tell of a much more pathetic conclusion to his life. Weak, ill and alone in his flat in Paris, the elderly Alkan collapsed and lay unattended on the floor for several hours (some say days) before his corpse was found. Perhaps worse, his reputation and his music was all but forgotten until the 1960s, his name at best connected with an aura of misunderstandings and half-truths, some of them festering in the skewered vision Richard Wagner gives about Jews lacking creativity and sensitivity in European (read Christian, or Aryan) culture.<sup>5</sup> Alkan's connections to the Jewish community and his commitment to Jewish learning (he was fluent in Hebrew and Greek) also tended to be lost or misunderstood, and this oversight often continues to our day.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike William Alexander Eddie who is rather dismissive of Alkan's Jewish background and the Jewish household of his father, and only goes as far as saying, "His religious beliefs were manifested by an invitation from the Paris *Consistoire* (the Jewish Governing body to become a committee member.)"<sup>7</sup> There is no hint at what those 'beliefs' could be, whereas any good Jew know that it is practices that matter (i.e., the performance of mitzvot) and participation in community that manifest one's adherence to the Law.

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<sup>5</sup> James Loeffler, 'Richard Wagner's 'Jewish Music': Antisemitism and Aesthetics in Modern Jewish Culture', *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2009), pp. 2-36.

<sup>6</sup> Irene Heskes, *Passport to Jewish Music: Its History, Traditions, and Culture* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994), p. 268 for a variant of this outline. Interestingly, Heskes precedes the discussion of Alkan with one on Jacques-François Fromental-Elie Levi (1799-1862), whose life has many features in common—rabbinical and cantorial background, juxtaposed careers in secular and Jewish liturgical music—but without the deep stress lines evident in Alkan's personality. Fromental seems to have been able to project into the operettas and popular plays he worked on as either or both librettist and composer the themes of dealing with discrimination, the internalization of anti-Semitic tropes and images, and the problems of being a successful Jew in a non-Jewish environment. This kind of relatively sane negotiation of the tensions within his mind and in his social relationships seems also evident in another contemporary, Jacques Offenbach, in whose lively stage music can still be heard, "according to Eric Warner in *A Voice Still Heard* ... 'trivial synagogue ditties',” although they are times “ennobled” in their new settings. See Heskes, *Passport to Jewish Music*, p. 159. Whether this constitutes, as Heskes suggests, a Jew boldly spoofing Christian authority or thumbing his nose at the dominant musical tradition, remains to be seen; in all events, as this essay shows, the cavalier and self-mocking mode can have serious consequences.

<sup>7</sup> Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan*, p. 8.

The *Wikipedia* entry on this composer and performer sets forth a much better view that stands up to modern standards of the historical record, and fits with the sophisticated appreciation of his oeuvre, secular and religious:

Alkan grew up in a religiously observant Jewish household. His grandfather Marix Morhange had been a printer of the Talmud in Metz, and was probably a *melamed* ([elementary] Hebrew teacher) in the Jewish congregation at Paris. Alkan's widespread reputation as a student of the Old Testament and religion, and the high quality of his Hebrew handwriting testifies to his knowledge of the religion, and many of his habits indicate that he practiced at least some of its obligations [*mitzvot*], such as maintaining the laws of *kashrut*. Alkan was regarded by the Paris Consistory, the central Jewish organization of the city, as an authority on Jewish music. In 1845 he assisted the Consistory in evaluating the musical ability of candidates for the role of cantor and he later contributed choral pieces in each of Naumberg's collections of synagogue music (1847 and 1856). Alkan was appointed organist at the Synagogue de Nazareth in 1851, although he resigned almost immediately for 'artistic reasons'.

On the other hand, to be fair to Eddie, he does feel compelled to note a "Jewish element" to his assessment of the influences on Alkan's music.

This is not just a question of directed impositions of Jewish chant [though I do not know what this means—NS] to his music: such tendencies are relatively rare. It is the more general qualities of intense melancholic brooding [Has he never heard of Jewish jokes and self-mockery?—NS], the sharpest sense of wit and orgiastic joy [What in God's name is this?—NS] which permeates his music.<sup>8</sup>

The peculiarities in performance, eccentricities in personality and deliberate dissimulations in self-presentation make it hard to ascertain what kind of a person Charles-Valentin Alkan really was, and why he dropped out of sight

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<sup>8</sup> Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan*, p. x. Cp. Baron, "A Golden Age for Jewish Musicians in Paris" 35. It is clearer in Baron than in other authorities we cite that commitment to the synagogue through charitable donations, voluntary service on committees, and occasional performances for the congregation indicated Alkan's, Meyerbeer's, and Halevy's affiliations; not statements of faith or participation in worship, although Alkan's return to Scriptures, Talmud and occasionally to *piyyutim* (medieval poems and songs within services) suggests the Marrano's ambiguities and vacillations. That Alkan and the others composed Christian-themed operas, choruses and *lieder* does not take away from their Jewishness, as we have seen in the brief discussion of Potok's *Asher Lev* novels. Instead, they mark assimilation into the musical or artistic culture around them; they are ways of working within the culture and not the dominant religion, of proving their craft in traditional exercises, and asserting their independence from any religious commitment

so easily after a brilliant beginning as a pianist and composer, unless we probe further into his Jewish or Judaic personality in terms of what is known as ‘marranism’. In an online essay, the French linguist Jacques Coulardeau says,

No one really knows this composer who was considered when alive as some kind of an unacceptable person. He was forced, but was also willing to do so, to live in total reclusion away from the rare people who would consider him on friendly terms. He is hardly reconsidered in France and only starts getting out of this closet in Anglo-Saxon countries.<sup>9</sup>

Coulardeau lists some of the paradoxes in his life, including the fact that Alkan apparently spent years translating the Torah and then burned it before he died. However, in a statement that drips with misunderstandings about Jewish tradition, as well as confusing Torah with Talmud, he asks ingenuously:

Who could be more self-chastising to impose onto one’s long solitary hours translating all kinds of rules and stories that brandish commandments against any fault, any negligence of any ethical and oral rule, any constraint about any everyday event, choice, and necessity?

This assures that fair-minded and knowledgeable readers (perhaps including non-Jews as well) who read such a thing could well sympathise with Alkan for not wanting such people to desecrate his work. Yet what does this statement do but repeat a deluge of anti-Jewish slanders about the hysterical obsession with those who perform the *mitzvah* of studying and interpreting the Law, let alone the great honour in translating it?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Coulardeau, ‘Charles-Valentin Alkan: A Phenomenal Composer for his time’, at [https://www.academia.edu/4097425/CHARLES\\_VALENTIN\\_ALKAN\\_1813\\_1888\\_A\\_phenomenal\\_composer\\_for\\_his\\_time](https://www.academia.edu/4097425/CHARLES_VALENTIN_ALKAN_1813_1888_A_phenomenal_composer_for_his_time). Accessed 25/7/2021.

<sup>10</sup> If anti-Semites can charge Jews of not having the imagination and the depth of feeling to become great composers, though they may be considered technical experts in performance, we might suggest that some features of their character emerges in the nineteenth century to explain their abilities as composers, performers, conductors and impresarios. The mind that grows up with more than one mother tongue (at least Yiddish and one other West European language) is adept at complex thinking; the brain that learns to read and write with more than one type of script and directional articulation (left to right and right to left) is more able than many monolingual persons to coordinate their eyes, hands and ears to complicated, multi-layered expression; the realization that one belongs to and at the same time is rejected by the hegemonic civilization and thus has to find means of disguising, reconfiguring and creatively adjusting to new combinations of attitudes, feelings and dispositions in the world.

Coulardeau then adds his own speculations on why the nineteenth-century genius destroyed this much of his life's work:

And yet before dying this person burns it all as if he did not want anyone to see it, to soil it, or because he did not believe one word of it and had done that only to keep himself within narrow limits of acceptable behaviors, in spite of all desires and impulses and needs, as it were a leash, a pillory, a scaffold for exposition, a gladiator's net.

This is awkwardly stated, but it is clear that Coulardeau's view is that the Torah, or the Law of Moses, is a form of self-imposed slavery or a rack for torturing the troubled spirit of a man. Such a person, by his love for music, found himself forever struggling with the double-faced angel of assimilation and acceptance, on the one hand. On the other hand, he was hoisted on his own petard of guilt-bound adherence to traditional Jewish values and an impossible longing to return to the intellectual aesthetics of communal study. This moment of frustrated ambition and nostalgia at least gives us a hint at the peculiar place Alkan believed that he found himself in. This space of difference is now familiar territory, thanks to two novels penned by Chaim Potok about the painter protagonist Asher Lev, whose talent and aesthetic propensities can find no room within the confines of a narrow Hasidic sect in Brooklyn, New York.

Consequently, he must force himself to take on the burden of creating within the traditions of Christian art in order to prove himself, both to the dealers and connoisseurs who make or break an artist's reputation and career, and to himself, who, like Alkan, must wrestle like Jacob all night alongside the River Jabok with that angel of divine testing.<sup>11</sup> In the original biblical wrestling match, the consequence of the struggle is not victory to the future Patriarch, but a draw that earns him the name of Israel, and his injured foot is the mark of his divine favour. Asher Lev, at the price of alienating himself from his parents, his community, and his Hasidic *rebbe*, makes a compromise within himself to remain faithful to his art and to Judaism, though the Judaism in his heart and soul is broader than the restricted sect in which he grew up. Unfortunately for Alkan his immediate milieu was not ancient Israel but nineteenth-century Paris, and certainly not the more open and tolerant post-War and post-Shoah America in which Asher Lev found himself. Perhaps, as we shall soon show, when the musical prodigy did make that leap of faith from his rabbinical home into the paradise of Paris where

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<sup>11</sup> Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972); and Chaim Potok, *The Gift of Asher Lev* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

geniuses such as Georges Bizet, Frédéric Chopin, Franz Liszt, and Wagner were recreating modern music, he proved unable to tolerate his own successes as performer, composer and even man-about-town, as the psychological and moral compromises they entailed were beyond his personal capacity to sustain and perhaps his own mental limits to recognise or accept.<sup>12</sup> As for that early period in the nineteenth century in Paris where most unusually many of the leading musicians were Jewish, men like Meyerbeer, Halevy and Alkan, not “merely Jews by broth,” they “all took pride in Jewish identity and were committed to the practice of Judaism in their own personal lives,” at least according to John H. Barton.<sup>13</sup> However, just what such identity might look like and practices might consist of is not fully—or even partly—explained. This is a problem we have to wrestle with throughout this article.

### **Protecting the Ego from Itself: Projecting the Talmud into the Historical Text**

What a shame that those moments when man is noble and pure and akin to the gods are so transient, so fleeting, while that complicated nonentity the Ego is always with us—of which one can only speak in terms of protective tenderness and gentle irony.<sup>14</sup>

Frustration is, as we all know, a concomitant of many, if not most, artists’ journeys through life, with lack of recognition and desperation for the means by which to live and, more importantly, to work; the food to nourish one’s strength, but also the paint and canvases needed by painters, the quiet and the instruments required of musicians, and the inner space in which dance and drama may be conceived. Too often, moreover, in many of the instances of Jews—however divorced they may be or believe themselves to be from their own essential identities, backgrounds and frames of reference—discovered that success itself is worse than illusive. So much so, indeed, that there are increasing suspicions deep in the soul of the creator that the integrity he or she has sought to protect from hostile social forces is at risk even more from the seemingly cushioning friendships and supportive institutions, precisely

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<sup>12</sup> John H. Baron, ‘A Golden Age for Jewish Musicians in Paris: 1820-1865’, *Musica Judaica*, vol. 12 (1991), p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Baron, ‘A Golden Age for Jewish Musicians in Paris’, p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Antal Szerb, cited in Becca Rothfeld, ‘A Holocaust Victim’s Forgotten Masterpiece is Finally Available in America’, *The New Republic*, at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/19730/antisl-szerbs-journey-moonlight-review>. Accessed 25/07/2021.

because that very success exists to enhance ideals and ethical values very different from those that originally promoted the drive to be an artist of one sort or another. Art itself, conceived of in cultural terms that are antithetical to, ignorant of and incapable of accepting Jews and their Jewishness—let alone their Judaism as a systematic religious practice—looms up as a scandal to the creative mind of the seemingly-assimilated Jew. What can he or she do then but repress the core factors of artistic drive, blunder through them in an attempt to succeed under the mask of reconstituted terms on the other side, deny all consideration of success itself by withdrawal from the society, its institutions and its ranks of Maecenases who provide the matrix of fame and fortune, or withdraw into silence and invisibility—and therein lies madness.

### **To Fall into Oblivion and to Re-emerge Forgotten**

But throughout the longest period in the life of mankind there was nothing more terrible to a person than to feel himself independent ... For a person to be himself, to value himself according to his own measure and weight—that was then quite distasteful. The inclination to such a thing would have been regarded as madness...<sup>15</sup>

Alkan, as we have seen, uprooted himself from his family, community and religious heritage in order to try to make a successful career in the musical world that was Paris, but he found himself running away from assimilation and from the very success that would have given him a lasting place in the history of world music. It is not clear what he actually did during the years when he hid himself away from audiences and artistic friendships, though there are some hints that he spent a great deal of time engaged in a project to translate the Hebrew Scriptures and Talmudic treatises into French, an enterprise that thrust him back into the rabbinical world of the imagination and the Jewish concepts of time, space and history that had always been there, as seen in the very eccentricity of his musical compositions. While there was in the nineteenth century no place for a Jewish musician to be both a modernist composer and a traditional performer (a cantor or choir leader, for instance), Alkan could not make his secular French audiences comprehend the Jewishness of his modernity, though they often were on the verge of recognising his skills and originality as a form of genius on a par with that of Liszt or even Wagner.

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<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, trans. Thomas Common (London: T.N. Foulis, 1910), p. 161.

His disappearance from the concert hall for so many years and his failure to explain himself in terms his fellow-academicians could understand virtually ensured that his achievement would fade for at least a hundred years, that is, until long after he could find comfort or inspiration in a successfully rounded career. What would have been taken as commendable individuality was denigrated as racial madness, and like Alfred Dreyfus he felt himself lost in a phantasmagoric universe of hostile criticism, lack of appreciation by the audiences he wished to please, and frustration in being what he longed to become; a great Jewish composer in his own eyes. In that sense, he internalised the horrible slanders expressed by Wagner and other anti-Semites about the Jew's inability to create important compositions or to interpret in performance the so-called Aryan spirit of European civilisation.

*Ces querelles de race sont-elles autre-chose que fantasmagories?*<sup>16</sup>

These arguments about race, are they anything other than a phantasmagoria?<sup>17</sup>

### **Bavarian Madness and the Reaction against Wagner**

Only a Jew can remove himself that far from reality can place himself above it, and only a Jew can smile the kind of smile which embraces the world. The book of Ecclesiastes is in our blood; it is the first, the classic. The eternal book about the vanity of all things, the book of liberation.<sup>18</sup>

It was not only that Wagner overwhelmed almost all other composers and conductors with the power of his new kind of music and operatic performances and thus forced great changes in the way professional and general audiences conceived of music itself, but also that his ideas on Germanic superiority in the arts was difficult to resist. Yet not every music critic or musician accepted his achievement as the high point in European culture nor agreed with his denigration of Jewish creativity and aesthetic sensibility, or at least his view—and those of his followers—that Teutonic sensibility trumped that of all other nations. Catulle Mendès, for one, wrote a satirical novel about the grandiosity of Wagner and the megalomania of the composer's patron and lover Ludwig of Bavaria. Jacob Wassermann, another

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<sup>16</sup> Maurice De Waleffe, *Quand Paris était un Paradis* (Paris: Denoel, 1947), p. 510.

<sup>17</sup> Norman Simms, 'The Phantasmagoria of Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism', *Mentalities/Mentalités*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2010): pp. 52-64.

<sup>18</sup> Abraham Coralnik, 'The Magic of Uselessness: On the Occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Death of English Essayist Charles Lamb, 1775-1834' in *Across the Great Divide* (Vol. I), ed. Bronwen Douglas (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1998), p. 121.

self-confessed ‘confused Jew’, has one of the characters in his novel *The Goose Man*, Herr Corovius, a pedantic fool, express his disdain for Wagner:

Does the professor imagine that he knows better than I do who this Richard Wagner is, this comedian, this Jew who goes about masked as the German Messiah, this cacaphonist,<sup>19</sup> this bungler,<sup>20</sup> botcher,<sup>21</sup> and bully, this court sycophant, this Pulchinello [*sic*] who pokes fun at the whole German Empire and the rest of Europe led about by the nose, this Richard Wagner?<sup>22</sup>

Rolfe’s comments on Yehudi Menuhin seem to convey an acceptable view of musical sensitivity and composition in general and in Jewish minds in particular:

The musical interpreter looks at the printed score and tries to bring to life what was going on in the composer’s mind. To do this he has to have a kind of extra-sensory perception. And to interpret, he must know the score as it relates to its historic period as well. He therefore tends to live in his own construct of the past, which is part of what gives classical interpreters their conservative image. For to live in the past successfully as a recreator, one must have a view of the river of time that flows from the past through the present into the future. The interpreter’s mind must be, in this sense, broader than the creator’s.<sup>23</sup>

As for Alkan himself, he wrote to his friend the German composer Ferdinand von Hiller (1811-1885), “Wagner is not a musician, he is a disease.” This goes beyond Alkan’s more usual lack of taste for the music of most of his own contemporaries, and suggests another reason why he often backed off from participation in the concert life of Paris, and why his own compositions lost favour as musical fashions went on to follow those artists he disapproved of. “During his twenty-year absence from the public between 1853 and 1873,” we are told, “Alkan produced many of his notable compositions,”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Rather than *cacophonist*, a maker of ugly sounds, the *cacaphonist* is a ‘shitty musician’.

<sup>20</sup> This almost runs in this series of insults into *bugler* a non-symphonic instrument rather than a *bungler* who merely makes mistakes.

<sup>21</sup> Another of Herr Corovius’s cutting remarks is when he confounds the player who *botches* the music he plays with the one who *butchers* the music, the composer, and the audience.

<sup>22</sup> Jacob Wassermann, *The Goose Man*, trans. Allen W. Porterfield (New York: Grosset & Dunlap/Harcourt Brace & Company, 1922), p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Lionel Rolfe, *The Menuhins: A Family Odyssey* (San Francisco: Panjandrum/Aris, 1978), pp. 127-129.

<sup>24</sup> On Alkan’s tendency in his later so-called retirement and slower years, when he was writing mostly for himself, with a few smaller public concerts and private performances, when he tended to choose programmes of neglected older works and rarely his own highly original experiments, see Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan*, p. 222.

meaning that his withdrawal was not from music altogether—and we know it was also not from teaching or discussions with his musical friends—but rather a time to focus on ideas, feelings and traditions outside the mainstream of European culture, in other words, his personal engagement with Jewish sensibilities and logic.

To understand what is happening, in not only how Alkan's career and reputation suffered because of his personal problems and the change in tastes and attitudes at the end of the nineteenth century, but also why these issues came about and are fundamental to our understanding of what Jewish musical creativity means in a world poisoned by anti-Semitism, we cannot rely on the half-baked generalities expressed by 'Wagner' in Catulle Mendès's novel, in Wagner's own writings against acceptance of Jewish sensitivity in music, and in the tradition fouled by overt and covert Nazi assumptions. Rather, we must get back to the basic ways in which we think and talk about the brain, the mind, and neuroplasticity—our ability to forge new neural connections as we age, recover from injury, illness, and trauma, and adapt to new environments.

A whole range of shibboleths have to be silenced as tests for what the brain is in relation to the mind, and how the various senses evolved, or the tastes of diverse cultures came to be characteristic of their sensitivities and creativity in the arts. These unquestioned assumptions go back further than the nineteenth century, of course, although their specific colouring and points of reference took shape in the Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment. If the dichotomy of a spiritual soul in a material brain gave way, or so it seemed, to an increasing notion of an either completely mechanical version of the mind as the expression of the conscious will, it nevertheless became commonplace to describe each of the mind's cognitive and affective faculties as localised in a particular portion of the brain and having its own peculiar evolutionary—and more recently, genetic—history. These places, faculties and evolutionary development were described as discrete, fixed and thus liable to damage and loss in an irreparable way.

Recent research, however, has started to break away from that approach by dropping almost completely the clockwork machine or digital computer models as the explanatory discourses, metaphors so deeply embedded in thinking that it is virtually impossible to imagine what happens without speaking of safety valves, hard wiring and platforms. Not only do we more and more view evolution as a punctuated phenomenon that can also skitter about, regress to less specialised functions and interact dynamically with the release of hormonal stimulants and inhibitors that manage the

expression of the genetic code, instead of a smooth and progressive sequence of improvements and refinements; but we also investigate the highly complex and complicated organism that is the body,<sup>25</sup> with so many different chemical, electrical and emotive systems jockeying for control and relief, that we virtually reach the point of discarding all concepts of intelligent design and natural homeostasis or cybernetic balance:

The brain is not an optimized, generic, problem-solving machine, but rather a weird agglomeration of *ad hoc* solutions that have accumulated throughout millions of years of evolutionary history.<sup>26</sup>

### The Falling Bookcase

The war against the Jews was in many ways a war against imagination (and at bottom the Jewish conception of G-d)...<sup>27</sup>

The story goes, oft repeated and just as often refuted, that Alkan died alone in his apartment in Paris when, reaching for a volume of Talmud on the top shelf, the bookcase fell on him. No one found him for a day or two. Some have read this event as an allegory of his life, of how a Jewish composer sought to preserve his Jewish identity and his rabbinical heritage while at the same time hiding away from the world where he had tried and failed to make a successful musical career out of virtually unplayable scores written for an

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<sup>25</sup> A late October 2016 meeting in New York City of speakers at the Helix Center for Interdisciplinary Investigation on ‘Embodied AI’ advertises itself with this self-evident blurb: “The increasing appreciation of the body’s role in cognition—that the brain-mind is embedded in a physical, sensory-motor system interacting with the real world—is shedding the dualistic straitjacket that has characterized ‘classical’ artificial intelligence research,” as though anyone actually had to say this; and yet, of course, what is absent are not merely the emotional ups-and-downs of historical experience of the real world that is always in flux and in danger of flying apart from external forces (cosmic and interstellar, hurtling comets, stray black hole phenomena, etc.), but the intergenerational influences of dysfunctional genetic inheritance, domestic stress and random diseases and meteorological events. The mad, anarchic phantasmagoria that is life, in other words, forever impinges on our consciousness and unconsciousness, and we are yet saved from total madness by cultural and private belief systems that block out a great deal of awareness of what is actually happening, filters the rest through figurative lenses of acceptable images, ideas, narratives and gestures.

<sup>26</sup> David Linden, *The Accidental Mind: How Brain Evolution Has Given Us Love, Memory, Dreams, and God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> The expression is found in Leslie Donald Epstein’s parodic novel *King of the Jews* (1979), cited by Gregory M. Pell, ‘From Document to Fable: The Simulacrum of History in Mihailianu, Benigni, and Primo Levy’, *Forum Italicum*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2004), and then cited by Aviva Atlani, *Ha-Ha Holocaust: Exploring Levity Amidst the Ruins and Beyond in Testimony Literature and Film* (PhD Thesis, Western University, 2014), p. 143.

out-dated instrument. Moments of acclaim for his virtuoso performances faded away when he withdrew from public playing; significant work for the liturgy of the French synagogue repertoire were soon forgotten, even within the Jewish community after its ordeal of the Dreyfus Affair. He even destroyed all his attempts at translation of rabbinical and scriptural texts into French. He over-reached and he was crushed by the burden of the very tradition he wished to reject and could not.

The rumours are wrong, although, ironically—if not paradoxically—transferring to Alkan a legend associated with several medieval rabbis who died under an avalanche of their own books. More pathetically, it is likely that the old composer died alone in his top-storey flat, so alienated from his few friends, close neighbours and former associates, that no one found him for several days. What he had attempted to do in his personal life and professional was impossible—to mix or balance his Jewish heritage of learning and his mastery of classical musical composition, his participation in the cultural life of mid-nineteenth-century Paris through public performances and friendship with other artists and critics and his need for quiet withdrawal from the secularised Gentile world where reputations were made and sustained into the privacy of his own mind and the enclosed space of Jewish study and worship, in other words, his modernity and his traditionalism.

### **Enigma, Mental Illness or Cultural Withdrawal**

Our complicity, our opposition, grew from the assumption that pain is at the source of human imagination.<sup>28</sup>

Stephanie McCallum made a sustained attempt<sup>29</sup> to see in Alkan's peculiar personality and the symptoms of his enigmatic withdrawal from an active participation in the musical life of Paris a form of mental illness, and her argument has received wide currency, either accepted unquestionably or modified slightly to permit variations in the kind of emotional dysfunction afflicting the composer-performer. She based her analysis and suggested conclusions on the official criteria of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., or *DSM-IV*

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<sup>28</sup> John Berger, *A Painter of Our Time* (London: Granta Books/Penguin, 1992 [1958]), p. 198.

<sup>29</sup> Stephanie McCallum, 'Alkan: Enigma or Schizophrenia?', *Alkan Society Bulletin*, vol. 75 (April, 2007), pp. 2-10. This is a version of the talk McCallum gave at the Royal College of Music in London on 23 November, 2006.

(Washington, D.C., 1994), a perspective which, as a psychohistorian and historian of mentalities, I must reject on the following grounds:

1. The basic assumption is that mental illness is a condition of individuals whose lives are enclosed by their own personal and eccentric experiences, and whose symptoms manifest internal dysfunctional states more or less incommensurable with the social norms of the society around them. Instead, we believe that individuals are always born into and develop as part of a group or a suite of communities which are often inimical or even hostile to the individual, and the members of the group share many emotional and physically-induced features in common, even when they are contradictory and inconsistent. The groups into which individuals are born are constantly subject to historical changes, economic, political, religious or other, and these changes themselves are often inconsistent, disruptive and invasive.

2. This environing community, though historically distinct and coherent, is neutral, even if laden with economic or political factors that exacerbate the condition of the suffering patient or provide specific terms and rationalisations for the unacceptable behaviours and feelings experienced. Each constitutive generation also has its own aspirational contradictions and strategies, more or less conscious, to maintain, against real historical conditions, a sense of coherence and continuity. It is often unaware of the nature and extent of the myths and ideologies by which it accepts or rejects new members and monitors their beliefs and behaviours. Even though individuals have their own specific genetic and emotional personalities developed in response to all these environmental factors, they have a relatively limited range of acceptable models of articulation, including deep-rooted dream images and affective language, leaving a fairly large field open for usually non-verbal and unimaginable idiosyncratic rage, frustration and fearful attempts at escape.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Himelfarb almost deals with the ideological and ritual differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, when she points to Alkan's attitude during the siege of Paris and Commune; he writes to his friend Hiller in terms of "des sentiments pacifistes et anti-nationalistes" (pacifist and anti-nationalist feelings); in other words, the more cosmopolitan tendencies of urban Jews along the Mediterranean littoral and islands—not those of Jewish in ghettos, shtetls and persecuted enclaves. See Constance Himelfarb, "Affinités esthétiques et musicales", *Revue belge de Musicologie / Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap*, vol. 45 (1991), p. 41.

3. While there may be some predisposing genetic and social conditions. On the whole the individual is constituted by his or her own ontological development, and thus any treatments, psychoanalytical or psychotherapeutic, have as their goal easing of the discomforts in the patient and (re)integration into normative society. However, the supposedly supportive (loving and caring) and monitoring (prescriptive, corrective and punitive) society (from small family through local communities to larger entities, such as state and nation) is often anything but neutral towards deviants and eccentrics.

4. It is also assumed that there are degrees of consciousness and unconsciousness, subconsciousness and lack of awareness, or forgetting with blockage due to trauma or physiological illness and though the Freudian notion of relatively discrete levels into which these forms of ego can be placed, with some allowance for overlapping or slippage, there is little knowledge or apprehension by one of the other. Popular locutions such as ‘I guess I must have done that unconsciously’ or ‘I had no intention to say what I did’ have little truth content at all. Instead, what we attempt to describe and investigate is something much closer to the Marrano mentality (or its close cousin the Crypto-Jewish phenomenon), namely, the sense of needing to suppress one’s instinctive feelings, mask expressions that rise too quickly to articulation, dissemble and disguise beliefs, and generally perform one way in public, another in private, and keep one’s true (conscious) feelings and thoughts sufficiently under control while acting in conformity to the expectations of the general society and its institutions without, however, ever committing oneself to the belief system or ethical norms pressing in against the inner protected self. Yet this situation also includes ironic perceptions of the questioned assumptions of the secret mind, discovering in the ironies which ensue spurs to artistic creativity and speculative breakthroughs of thought.<sup>31</sup> Though painful to endure, the sustaining of such a tenuous and ambiguous cluster of personalities could become a treasured sense of uniqueness, a quality of belief that was felt to outstrip the merely accepted and unexplored features of conventional religious identity, and also as a point of particular pride when confronted by one or the other of the nominal alternatives and accused of being a heretic or a renegade.

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<sup>31</sup> On the presence of and penchant for ‘cryptograms’ and other enigmatic codes in his music, see Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan*, p. 16.

Thus, when we turn back to the life history and career achievements of Alkan, they make more sense as qualities defining the Marrano mentality rather than merely symptoms of a private mental illness. Nevertheless, Stephanie McCallum makes a *prima facie* case worth considering. In this summary I have emphasised certain words and phrases and inserted numbers to each section of her claims:

[1] In excerpts from the letters to his friend, Hiller, we see clearly that *total* withdrawal, *obsessional* behaviour ([2] particularly as related to daily regime and food purchase and preparation), [3] refusal to leave the home and *paranoia* were all well established in Alkan, [4] to an extent which, by his own admission, impinged on a *normal, healthy existence*. We could speculate that *Asperger Syndrome* led to *psychiatric complications* of mild *schizophrenia*. [5] Alkan himself was certain throughout his life that he was ill, and this seems to have caused him to feel guilty. [6] In his letters he often refers to his moral infirmities: and apologises for them.<sup>32</sup>

I have emphasised the italicised words and phrases as they are anachronistic and subjectively intrusive—they may be, if not discarded, at least put to the side for the duration of this analysis. In the first long sentence, consisting of four numbered sections, there are symptoms which may be diagnosed differently and ascribed to an alternative set of causes: thus [1] may indicate a more complex situation of withdrawal that is at least is conscious and wilful, as a sense of unease among both a Bohemian crowd of artists and musicians whose lax morals and raucous gatherings did not conform with the more traditional Jewish habits of study, meditation and prayer Alkan had grown up to respect; while the secular and yet still quintessentially French Christian customs still operative in the middle of the nineteenth century<sup>33</sup> made him uncomfortable, particularly if his sensitivities and personality structures were already put into a state of distress by specific events, such as the birth of an illegitimate son, the failure to secure a position at the Academy of Music and the death of his close friend Chopin.

Hence by claim [2] in the parenthesis concerning food purchases and preparations, there may have been times, made acute under the stresses mentioned before, when he felt he ought to return to a more traditional Jewish cuisine and its laws of *kashrut*. Indeed, the editor to the *Alkan Society*

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<sup>32</sup> McCallum, 'Enigma or Schizophrenia', p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> The crucial period was in the 1840s.

*Bulletin* in which Stephanie McCallum's essay appears appends a note to this effect:

Another possible explanation is that Alkan's obsession with food may reflect his observance of the Jewish dietary laws, *kashrut*, which could forbid the consumption of 'unclean' food or food prepared by non-Jews.<sup>34</sup>

The triple speculative intrusion—"possible explanation," "may reflect" and "could forbid"—suggests an even more complicated situation for this "obsession with food," since purchasing, preparing and consuming food requires a rabbinical communal structure of monitoring, a domestic regimen of knowledge and skill supervised by both the female and male members of the household, and a network of social relationships based on awareness of the religious affiliation of the members, wherein it is easier (less complicated and threatening) for Jews to bring *goyim* (non-Jews) into their own home than either to sit at table in a non-kosher restaurant or a friend's house. It is so that Alkan may have avoided meals he could not supervise, even alone, rather than transgress these rabbinical rules. The Crypto-Jew would have strategies for transforming transgressive or questionable situations into varying degrees of compromise that lessen the possible sinfulness of the occasion, while the Marrano would either seek to satisfy the contextual event, diminish chances of discovery as the non-conforming 'other' or finding piquancy and pride in the struggle to be both acceptable to non-Jewish custom and to rabbinical tradition.

In section [3] the self-isolating behaviour may not have been as total or absolutely consistent as both others and Alkan himself observed in letters, sufficient to indicate a need to avoid outside influences and to construct a Jewish environment for himself in which he could read, translate and compose according to his own lights. But this isolation (or 'paranoia') has other aspects to it which need to be addressed, one being the more historically contextualised Marrano or Crypto-Jewish experience where individuals and groups are in a state of perpetual alertness against hostile powers and the overwhelming seduction of a majority culture that leaves little or no room for alternative perceptions and models of articulation; and the other, of an ironic perspective that comes from having taken oneself outside of two different and to some extent competing belief-systems and finding not only that they are essentially incompatible but also that they may be used as masks for a very highly eccentric model of personal development, one that employs

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<sup>34</sup> McCallum, 'Alkan: Enigma or Schizophrenia', p. 8, note 11.

wit, parody and riddling as its preferred instrument of self-fashioning. Like others in the Sephardic tradition, there was a pride even among Marranos, and thus a preference for aristocratic circles and elite salons—not boisterous and unkempt bohemians and radicals.<sup>35</sup>

An approximation of this view is found in Peter McCallum's analysis of Alkan's five-volume *Song Collection* composed between 1857 and 1872, wherein, however, the musicologist uses terms that need to be isolated and contextualised in an alternate space of musical and cultural tradition. I have broken up his long paragraph into four parts for ease of discussion:

It is a characteristic of all of Alkan's best music that—although he works within the harmonic and tonal language, the range of genres and the stylistic parameters of the nineteenth century—he brings to each of them a singular personality defined by the sense of far-sighted clarity that comes from isolation. Such isolation finds beautiful, poignant and varied expression in G minor Barcarolles that conclude each set of the five volumes of *Chants*.<sup>36</sup>

Here the harmonies, tonalities, genres and stylistic parameters of nineteenth-century Europe are the mask of assimilation and acceptance into society that the Marrano musician seeks to don, so that what is hidden or dissembled are the Jewish traditions, not only the Ashkenazi musical forms Charles-Valentin heard and played in his father's home and continues to hear in the synagogues of Paris where he attends and often serves as adjudicator of potential organists and *hazzanim* (cantors),<sup>37</sup> but also occasionally writes liturgical chants, but also the Sephardic music and more ancient melodies, tones and harmonies that are implicit in the ancient Torah and medieval Talmudic writings he studies and translates.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Himelfarb, 'Affinités esthétiques et musicales', p. 58.

<sup>36</sup> Peter McCallum, 'Charles-Valentin Alkan and his *Recuils de Chants*, Volume One', CD inlay card of *Charles-Valentin Alkan: Complete Recuils de Chants, Volume One, Books 1 and 2, Op. 38; Book 3, Op. 65; Une Fusé, Op. 55*, performed by Stephanie McCallum on piano (Toccata Classics, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> What seems remarkable is that in 1844 both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi synagogues installed organs into the prayer hall, though as Baron points out, these instruments were not used during liturgical services (Baron, 'A Golden Age for Jewish Musicians in Paris' 34). After the Fall of the Temple, the rabbis forbade the use of musical instruments in prayer, or supposedly deferred it until the Temple was restored; for the same reason, Orthodox communities do not call their synagogues 'temples', leaving that to Conservative and Reformed Jews who are no longer waiting for that miraculous event.

<sup>38</sup> Constance Himelfarb, 'Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888) et Cesar Franck (1822-1890) affinités esthétiques et musicales de deux pianistes romantiques', *Revue belge de*

This makes ‘far-sighted’ not just an epistemological term expressing Peter McCallum’s praise for Alkan’s ability to see beyond the confines of his own period’s musicological propensities and tastes but a striking and probably implicit metaphor for a different kind of vision, *hyperomia*, yet again not as a defect of only being able to see distant objects clearly while nearby things are blurry, but a moral capacity to see in the blurred—or hostile, uncomfortable, and disturbingly anti-Jewish cultural models within which he has to work to be understood and accepted as a composer and performer—features of a Jewish reality denied or trivialised by Wagner and other leading composers.

Similarly, the next sentence contains words, images and allusions that can be transposed into a more historical context, picking up especially the terms underlined that resonate with Jewish, if not anti-Semitic tones—again, I have added emphasis to sections that require our attention and/or re-evaluation:

His *sentimental moods* (often found in the E major pieces that open each set) are tinged with *yearning* and a sense that such comfort is for others; instead, as later with Mahler and Shostakovich, he is *haunted by visions of parody, the banal, and the grotesque*.<sup>39</sup>

The allusions to Gustav Mahler and Dmitri Shostakovich, while they seem to point to a Slavic and East European culture that includes and often draws from Jewish harmonies, genres and tonalities, yet is not necessarily by Jewish composers, or not even by those Jews who make a conscious effort to separate themselves from their ancestral traditions and social ties. It is nevertheless a characteristic of such fuzzy Jews and pseudo-Jews to manifest their personalities through the parodic, the banal and the grotesque, that is, to imitate and mock the ironic distance between the dominant society and its often most despised minority, to seem to descend to that lowest level of sophistication and achievement in cultural matters that is often charged against Jews, even when they believe themselves to be participating at a creative level in the host national community, and to produce a mixing of styles and genres that is impossible to think within the dominant civilisation.

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*Musicologie/ Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap*, vol. 45 (1991), pp. 41-59. Himelfarb categorizes the Alkan/Morehange family as ‘ashkenaz’, with no further discussion of either the tendencies of French Jewry to divide around mid-nineteenth century between its older deep roots in Mediterranean Jewishness (Sephardi and Italian) history (especially after 1870 Franco-Prussian War) and the Ashkenazi *Yiddishkeit* of Middle and Eastern Europe.

<sup>39</sup> McCallum, ‘Charles-Valentin Alkan and his *Recuils de Chants*’, p. 2.

Of a completely different order of historicisation are these concepts appears in Hilaire Belloc's essay on 'The Death of Danton', abstracted from his *Danton* (1911):

But if it was a tragedy, it was a tragedy of the real that refused to follow the unities. All nature was at work, crowded into the Revolutionary time, and the element that Shakespeare knew came into itself—the eternal comedy that seems to us, according to our mood, the irony, the madness, or the cruelty of things, was fatally present to make the day complete; and the grotesque, like a discordant note, contrasted with and emphasized the terrible.<sup>40</sup>

Though the last of these two sentences comes closest to characterising how Alkan felt as a Marrano caught in the madness and terror of what must have seemed like a world beginning to hurtle down the track towards a pernicious Jew hatred that we know would culminate in the Holocaust, the conjunction of terms such as *comedy*, *irony*, *grotesque*, *discordant* and *terrible* nevertheless let us be aware that Alkan's Jewish plight is also that of modern man in general.

In the next two sentences, Peter McCallum makes specific evaluations of some of the songs Alkan composed during a period when his deviant personality traits seemed most disturbing to himself and to others as being 'vigorous', 'keen' and 'artistic', while simultaneously marking the composer out as someone whose uncanny mind is obsessed with the need to both conform to and challenge the generic limits of his own imagination. Often, too, the rabid haters of Jewish art and the promoters from within of its peculiar character speak of the Jew as a "boundary crosser or breaker," a transgressor of essential cultural taboos.

As seen sometimes in the third number of each set, most of them vigorous pieces in A major, he often uses these elements to create a keen edge to his artistic tone of voice. These individual traits inform and sometimes challenge the boundaries, both formal and expressive, of the genres in which he worked, and yet it is equally symptomatic of his personality that he adheres to formal and musical strictness with obstinacy bordering at times on obsession, even when his imagination was stretching them to the utmost.<sup>41</sup>

The paranoia of the transgressive personality is also a feature typical of Marrano experience wherein the individual or small group, always in a

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<sup>40</sup> Hilaire Belloc, *Stories, Essays, and Poems*, ed. A. G. MacDonell (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1938), p. 233.

<sup>41</sup> McCallum, 'Charles-Valentin Alkan and his *Recuils de Chants*, Volume One', p. 2.

state of hiding from persecution, as often as real as it is imagined, can be located in the rising tide of anti-Semitism, and in rumours, innuendos, and published writings, such as Wagner's essay on the Jewish lack of sensibility and imagination in regard to music. Each performance of Wagner's operas or favourable comment in the press on a concert featuring Wagnerian compositions could be taken as warning, threat or jibe at Alkan's own career and accomplishments.

What may be considered normal and healthy<sup>42</sup> in section [4] differs according to who is making the judgment, including Alkan's own shifting assessment of his standing in the community of musical artists celebrated in Paris and the rest of Europe at varying moments in his career, his sense of nostalgia, obligation and guilt towards his father's home, family and education, and his strength and mental stability to deal with the emotional stresses and strains normal to his contemporaries, all of whom, more or less, defined themselves by the Romantic notions of struggle and rebellion against the bourgeois expectations of nineteenth-century European society, celebrated the very symptoms of emotional instability that alienated them from their families and original communities, and the unstable and extreme passions considered the *sine qua non* of Romantic genius. Like many other Jewish artists and composers of the period, Alkan had not only to identify himself with this modish Bohemianism and narcissistic exaltation of self in what Shelley called "the egotistical sublime"; but at the same time to emulate the normative and conventional patterns of bourgeois society which was also a rebellion against their Jewishness, although, to be sure, long-term Spanish (Judeo-Espanyol)-speaking Sephardim in France had an easier show at achieving this than more recent migrants to France from the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim. In his letters to others, Alkan tries to rationalise his behaviour in terms that they would understand, but not all his friends were Jewish, though Ferdinand Hiller, his friend and fellow Jewish composer, certainly was. Still in this kind of relatively public communication it is likely that even two Jewish composers would not have a mutual lexicon to express their painful inner lives, such expressions emerging rather in their musical

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<sup>42</sup> Besides who wants to be normal and healthy as an artist or musician if that means being satisfied with the world as it is or your own achievement measured strictly in commercial terms? Thus when McCallum asserts, "It is clear Alkan battled all his life with problems many would characterise as an eccentricity of personality" (McCallum, 'Alkan: Enigma or Schizophrenia', p. 10), surely it is more worrisome for a pianist and a critic such as herself to even bring up such a question.

compositions, performances and, in Alkan's case, translation projects. Stephanie McCallum maintains her non-historical position when she says that

The dramatic changes in Alkan from childhood to adult personality is typical of the of the changes after [the] onset of psychosis, or its prodrome, that is, the period of changes leading to psychotic symptoms.<sup>43</sup>

In each instance, a symptom is abstracted from its social and historical setting and made a manifestation of a stage in the aetiology of a mental disease, so that whatever the specifics of the moment or place of presenting—a stressful event, a sense of sudden frustration, a close and dependable friend's passing, an unexpected career failure—the inner experience falls into place as part of the logical progression of an individual illness. Yet these same symptoms arise out of situations that are experienced by individuals with a particular historical, religious and moral background, and which therefore speak in a different and more or less coherent language of Jewish anxiety, shame, longing, confusion and weakness, a language which in addition—though it is not fully recognisable to the individual who experiences these mixed and painful feelings nor to other Jews who react with some degree of cultural sympathy depending on their particular backgrounds and circumstances—*midrashes*, that is, playfully and wittily transforms the experience of an event into a series of narratives, riddles and witty conceits.

Looking at claims [5] and [6], much of Stephanie McCallum's evidence comes from the letters Alkan wrote to Ferdinand Hiller. For instance, in one letter to Hiller from 1862, seems to expose himself to the charge of slipping into a clinical depression over his behavioural tics:

My turn to ask forgiveness for taking so long to reply: It's true my permanent excuse is the one you had for the shortest while, that is, too much time. As usual I'm doing nothing, not even making my bed at the moment (to come back at your little gibe), and if it wasn't for a bit of reading, I'd be living more or less like a cabbage or a mushroom; a fungus with a taste for music though.<sup>44</sup>

In a sense, Stephanie McCallum is correct in seeing here a list of symptoms that are indeed distressing because they fit with modern diagnostic notions

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<sup>43</sup> McCallum, 'Alkan: Enigma or Schizophrenia', p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Reinhold Sietz (ed.), *Aus Ferdinand Hillers Briefwechsel (1826–1861): Beiträage zu einer Biographie Ferdinand Hillers* (Cologne: Arno Volk-Verlag, 1958). Alkan's epistles in Volume II are translated from the French by Tom Gillard.

of mental illness: debilitating lethargy, constant neglect of personal hygiene and tidiness, and punitive self-abasement. In another, it is possible to see self-mockery, exaggeration, and witty appeal to understanding and fellow-feelings, responding off Hiller's own teasing or 'gibes'. But it was not only to Hiller that Alkan displayed a "sense of humour," as the anonymous editor of the *Alkan Society Bulletin* puts it in regard to a letter the musician wrote to his friend François Fétis probably in 1848: "it is written in an elaborately obsequious style which demonstrates that Alkan and Fétis shared a similar sense of humour..."<sup>45</sup> As we shall see soon, this kind of wit and playfulness with tonality and allusion can also be seen in Alkan's musical compositions, and may be as much a part of his *midrashic* personality (his predilection for the manipulation of the constituent elements in life in order to make bad things bearable and to ward off melancholia and feelings of guilt arising from within himself)<sup>46</sup> as those neurotic or 'eccentric' qualities Stephanie McCallum finds so distressing to a modern bourgeois sensibility.<sup>47</sup>

There is a joke, too, in Alkan's claim that, if it were not for some study ('reading' of whatever books, manuscripts or remembered texts of his childhood) he would be either a common vegetable, a cabbage or a mushroom, but especially the latter, "a fungus with a taste for music." This weird and ridiculous locution of the musical mushroom or tuneful toadstool resonates in two way in Jewish tradition, the one positive insofar as

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<sup>45</sup> 'Alkan to Fétis (2)', *Alkan Society Bulletin*, no. 75 (April, 2007), p. 11. The editor adds all necessary bibliographical details for the letter, except who did the translation.

<sup>46</sup> As his personality and music matured, what comes through are what Eddie called "a more creative introverted, melancholic nature to Alkan's style (Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan*, p. 7). But many musicians experience such inner gloom and brood over their inspirations; what makes Alkan stand out is the complex of Jewish historical roles he has to negotiate and, like other Marrano artists, the need to achieve success in precisely what their Christian peers rebelled against before they could begin rejecting the bourgeois and Romantic ideals. But his trajectory back-looped itself when he refused to move forward with the new trends, typified by Berlioz and Wagner, and held fast to earlier classical traditions. This kind of vacillation and self-analysis marks him more than a middle-class Jew in Paris: these are characteristics of the Marrano's need to keep testing himself and his place in the world. Just as Sigmund Freud felt a release from old anxieties when his father died, allowing him to push away many sexual inhibitions, yet at the same time feel guilty about what he was doing; so too with Alkan. Cp. Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan*, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> I have addressed this question before in terms of a suggestion that all artists and other geniuses by their very nature must be dysfunctional anti-social. See Norman Simms, 'The Artist and the Soul of Genius: A Sidelong Glimpse', *Clio's Psyche*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2012), pp. 442-445.

commentators have understood the mana that fed the Children of Israel in the desert of Exodus as a form of an edible fungus that appeared like dew on the ground, a gift from Heaven, and the other in a negative way as a disease (similar to leprosy) that imparts uncleanness to inanimate as well as living beings—as we are told in Leviticus 14:1, diseased houses, infested with mould and fungus, must be demolished. Finally, yet more pernicious, however, is the anti-Semitic notion that the Jew himself is the poisonous mushroom or fungus, as shown in this piece of 1930s Nazi propaganda:

A mother and her young boy are gathering mushrooms in the German forest. The boy finds some poisonous ones. The mother explains that there are good mushrooms and poisonous ones, and, as they go home, says:

‘Look, Franz, human beings in this world are like the mushrooms in the forest. There are good mushrooms and there are good people. There are poisonous, bad mushrooms and there are bad people. And we have to be on our guard against bad people just as we have to be on guard against poisonous mushrooms. Do you understand that?’

‘Yes, mother’, Franz replies. ‘I understand that in dealing with bad people trouble may arise, just as when one eats a poisonous mushroom. One may even die!’

‘And do you know, too, who these bad men are, these poisonous mushrooms of mankind?’ the mother continued.

Franz slaps his chest in pride: ‘Of course I know, mother! They are the Jews! Our teacher has often told us about them’.<sup>48</sup>

While he composes within the acceptable norms of his own time and place in Western Europe during the mid-nineteenth century, Alkan nevertheless makes a peculiar and specific use of these commonplaces, approaching in this way what would later be termed in racialist, derogatory term ‘degenerate’.

Put more politely by Peter McCallum, Alkan’s “musical ideas ... were often pursued with experimental, sometimes obsessive rigour” and reached

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<sup>48</sup> Randall L. Bytwerk maintains the German Propaganda Archive where he notes, “This story comes from *Der Giftpilz*, an anti-Semitic children’s book published by Julius Streicher, the publisher of *Der Stürmer*. He was executed as a war criminal in 1946. This summary and partial translation is taken from a 1938 publication issued by the ‘Friends of Europe’ in London, an organization to which I have not been able to find a successor to request permission to reprint.” See Bytwerk, *Bending Spines: The Propagandas of Nazi Germany and the German Democratic Republic* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004).

a “persistent obtrusive dissonance”<sup>49</sup> that became later the marks of radical musicological sounds in the ten-tone row and other post-modernist forms. But that is not all. “With wry humour, Alkan inserts dog barks in the central section” of one of *Chants*, “a joke he seemed to like, for he also used it in *Le Festin d’Ésope*, the bizarre set of variations that concluded the *Études*, Op. 39.”<sup>50</sup> If these stylistic quirks and jokes seem, on the one hand, to stigmatise the composer’s character as qualities of mental illness, at the same time, at the very least, they show him to be aware of his own status as the outsider and willing, as a Marrano-like Jew to make fun of himself as well as of the society that barely tolerates him.

He might have felt uncomfortable at many times and in many ways because of these neurotic symptoms, but not enough to be debilitated by them or even to wish to be rid of them since they were spurs to his creativity. In respect of an *Allegretto* in this collection of songs that Peter McCallum is commenting on, the musicologist suggests a reading that could just as well be generalised to the whole of Alkan’s mental condition and his career, “the work begins and ends in with an unresolved dissonance, which is relieved only during the central section, like a sharp emotional pain that one manages to forget for a moment.”<sup>51</sup> For both the technical analysis of the Jewish musician’s compositions and the more psychohistorical evaluation of his mentality reveals that he alternated—not always evenly, not always in a sustained way—periods marked by “manic and grotesque moods”<sup>52</sup> and intense serious concentration on the historical and intellectual roots of the rabbinical personality in Scripture, Talmud and speculative philosophy.

## Conclusion

...he insisted on preserving the right to appreciate amidst the mockery, the right—if not the privilege—to maintain a kind of distance that included within it, along with the ridicule and laughter, the possibility of sympathetic acceptance, of conditional approval.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> McCallum, ‘Charles-Valentin Alkan and his *Recuils de Chants*’, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> McCallum, ‘Charles-Valentin Alkan and his *Recuils de Chants*’, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> McCallum, ‘Charles-Valentin Alkan and his *Recuils de Chants*’, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> McCallum, ‘Charles-Valentin Alkan and his *Recuils de Chants*’, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adam Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Vintage Books/ Random House, 1999), p. 75.

This article opened with Nadar's photograph<sup>54</sup> of Alkan facing away from the camera and holding a furled umbrella, which we interpreted as an emblem of the ambiguities and defensiveness about the tempestuous conditions of his life. In an almost hidden statement in his study of Jewish composers in the Golden Age, Barn says, Alkan "did not want to place his creativity and his Jewish identity in a confrontation that might have required or led to the diminution of both."<sup>55</sup>

The mystery of Alkan's life as a composer and performer is thus not so much that he was a Jew, but that he could not decide what kind of Jew he was nor how intently he should assimilate as a musician. Zionist leaders, like Max Nordau,<sup>56</sup> and later Joachim Prinz<sup>57</sup> and Shmuel Trigano,<sup>58</sup> saw in those ambiguous and troubled assimilating Jewish artists, musicians, philosophers and novelists who thought they could cut themselves off from Jewish beliefs and communities without moral or psychological consequences, a new version of the Marranos. Alkan seems a perfect example of such a person.

His life ended, tragically, by dying alone and without his corpse being discovered until days later. The rumors that spread of how he fell from a stool or ladder while reaching for Talmudic books on the top shelf of a cabinet also may be read as an emblem, though factually untrue: the spreaders of this myth saw him as a failed musician and Jew, who was crushed by his attempt to rise above his actual achievements under the weight of the ancient religion he could never fully commit himself to.<sup>59</sup>

Unlike Conversos, who accepted baptism and treated themselves and their children as Catholics, no matter how often they were denounced and persecuted by the Church; or Crypto-Jews, who led more or less double-lives, behaving and claiming to believe in the new Christian faith, yet maintaining

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<sup>54</sup> *Nadar* was the professional-name of Gaspard-Félix Tournechon (1820-1910), one of the first celebrity photographers of the nineteenth century.

<sup>55</sup> Baron, 'A Golden Age for Jewish Musicians in Paris', p. 46. Baron goes on, however, to say of this 'ambivalence': "Such suggestions...are dispelled by the unequivocally Jewish nature of his last will and testament, drawn in 1886 and 1888" (pp. 48-49). Such 'unequivocal' wills are formulaic and drawn up by rabbinical courts, not private statements of faith.

<sup>56</sup> Max Nordau, address to the Second Zionist Congress in Basel, 28 August, 1898.

<sup>57</sup> Joachim Prinz, *The Secret Jews* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> Shmuel Trigano, *Le Juif caché: Marranisme et Modernité* (Paris: Pardés, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> The various rumours and legends of how he died are set forth in Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan*, p. 25. Bookcase, kitchen cabinet, or umbrella stand are suggested, and historians take their choice.

so far as possible their old Jewish identities within their homes and minds: the Marranos, as we suggested, were either confused about who and what they were, playing out their lives as though they needed neither to be Jewish or Catholic, or proud of their ancestral heritage through many generations of standing apart from any belief-system and quietly reassuring themselves that the persecution their families endured and their own independent stance made them better Jews, as well as better Christians. They needed neither rabbis nor priests to mediate between their souls and God.

Alkan moved out of his father's Jewish household and into the circle of a modern sophisticated Frenchman as an outstanding musician of the caliber of Chopin and Liszt and then removed to the margins of Parisian society where bourgeois assimilated Jews lived, rarely attended synagogue occasionally, worked with the Paris Consistory, and occasionally wrote liturgical music. But while he could have probably achieved lasting fame as a musician, he backed away, made a half-hearted attempts to return, writing fantastic scores that were then, as now, almost unplayable, and attempted to translate the Bible into contemporary French, that is, transforming an affiliated Judaism into a secularised learning. He could not play the game that many other Jews attempted, to slough off most of their 'Oriental' backgrounds and work inside the parameters of partly tolerant, cosmopolitan society. He couldn't commit sufficiently to either side—Jewish or Christian; or even somewhat modern secularising Judaism or a superficially liberal and not-so-egalitarian French civilisation.

Though his music is far more acceptable today than it was in the years after he ceased to perform in public, with a small group of aficionados happily taking up the practical challenges of his piano scores, he still remains an outsider to the mainstream. His name is still hardly listed in standard histories of nineteenth-century French culture or even in discussions of Jewish intellectuals, artists and performed. His original works at best make a rare and exotic appearance in concert halls or on dedicated classical musical radio stations.