

SAVIOLA, STEPHEN, D.M.A. *Virtuosity and Innovation: The Grotesque Aesthetic in the Piano Music of C.-V. Alkan.* (2021)  
Directed by Dr. Andrew Willis. 114 pp.

Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888) wrote some of the most individual and eccentric piano music of the nineteenth century. His scores, which often reach titanic lengths and levels of difficulty, have left critics and audiences somewhat bewildered to this day. This document proposes the grotesque aesthetic as a key to understanding Alkan's musical language, providing an expressive guide that synthesizes the technical demands, harmonic innovations, and explorations of keyboard sonority found in some of his more daring compositions. Alkan's virtuosity manifests the grotesque through his mechanical treatment of the piano, density of texture, and intensity of expression, which distort the normal capacities of the human body and its role in music making. Special consideration is given to three pieces drawn from Alkan's *Vingt-Cinq Préludes*, Op. 31 (1847) and *Esquisses*, Op. 63 (1861), each of which expresses the grotesque through non-virtuosic innovations in harmony and timbre. Finally, "Le Festin d'Ésope," a component etude of *Douze études dans tous les tons mineurs*, Op. 39 (1857) in the form of a large theme-and-variations set, is investigated as the epitome of Alkan's grotesque style. Topic theory is used to contextualize the virtuosic, harmonic, and structural distortions that pervade this sardonic masterpiece.

VIRTUOSITY AND INNOVATION: THE GROTESQUE AESTHETIC IN THE PIANO  
MUSIC OF C.-V. ALKAN

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to

the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Musical Arts

Greensboro

2021

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November 5, 2021

Date of Acceptance by Committee

October 15, 2021

Date of Final Oral Examination

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you goes to Dr. Keathley, Dr. Salmon, and all the family and friends who advised me and aided in the production of this document. Above all, I owe my deepest gratitude to my committee chair, Dr. Willis. His guidance, encouragement, and insight were indispensable to the formulation of my arguments and prose. He patiently supported and advised me through every stage of the research process, and for that I offer my sincerest thanks.

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## CHAPTER I: THE GROTESQUE AESTHETIC AND ITS CONNECTION TO ALKAN

Charles-Valentin Alkan belongs to an era of piano performance in which the virtuoso reigned supreme. Reception of virtuoso-composers from the mid-nineteenth century has been mixed, as many have not enjoyed a positive reputation or enduring legacy. Composers who helped define the virtuoso image such as Friedrich Kalkbrenner, Johann Peter Pixis, and Sigismond Thalberg are rarely performed nowadays. Although attention to Alkan has increased in recent decades, his music is seldom heard in concert halls, and he remains undeservedly neglected. His devotees rank the virtuoso pianist-composer as a generational genius alongside his more popular contemporaries Chopin and Liszt.<sup>1</sup> Detractors reject Alkan's bizarre pianism as banal and overwhelming, his music a vehicle for mere excessive technical showmanship.<sup>2</sup> The battle for validity is one faced by many virtuoso pianist-composers; for instance, a re-evaluation of the connection between virtuosity and the music of Liszt has only taken place in the past twenty years.<sup>3</sup>

Many factors account for comparative struggles faced by Alkan's legacy. For one, other virtuoso performer-composers from his era engaged in a certain degree of self-promotion to support the spread of their music, but Alkan did nothing to promote his own music during his life. For another, Alkan's music places exceptional technical demands on the performer, and this difficulty deters all but the most dedicated and brilliant of performers. Furthermore, Alkan's

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<sup>1</sup> Ferruccio Busoni, foreword to Franz Liszt, *Complete Etudes for Solo Piano*, (New York: Dover, 1988), v. Busoni places Alkan in the company of Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin, and Brahms. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji was also an ardent supporter of Alkan's in the early twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> John Irving, "The Invention of Tradition," in *The Cambridge history of Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 195-196. "Arguably, the co-ordination of virtuosity and musical coherence is less satisfying in the concertos of Hummel, Field, Weber, Kalkbrenner, Moscheles, Alkan, Liszt and Paganini, in whose work the overwhelming figurative assault at times threatens coherence."

<sup>3</sup> Robert Doran, *Liszt and Virtuosity* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020), Preface: vii-viii.

progressive, yet idiosyncratic treatment of the instrument can occasionally bewilder unsympathetic listeners. This is connected to a wider tendency to dismiss the Romantic virtuoso, which Samson blames in part on elitism in the reception of Western art music.<sup>4</sup> Virtuosity has long attracted pejorative reactions, whereas Samson argues it is a vital part of the artwork, worthy of celebration. Despite these obstacles, Alkan satisfies an interest among niche loyalists, who value the individuality of his voice. Waeber astutely notes: “Alkan’s music still raises interest, or at least curiosity, for two very misleading reasons: the first is that it demands prodigious technical abilities; the second is that his musical style is supposedly odd.”<sup>5</sup> Both aspects warrant further consideration and are the inspiration for this study.

Alkan scholarship has devoted considerable attention to his virtuosity, with research focusing on his innovations in the etude genre through a massive expansion of the form, novel technical devices, and a penchant for pianistic imitation of orchestral sonorities.<sup>6</sup> Many of these dissertations function as pedagogical performance guides. Waeber, who proposes that Alkan’s virtuosity has been largely misunderstood, investigates the connection between virtuosic figuration and programmatic narrative.<sup>7</sup> This important research follows Samson’s crusade to reimagine the artistic merit in Romantic virtuosity. Waeber connects figuration in three etudes to

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<sup>4</sup> Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental Studies of Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 103.

<sup>5</sup> Jacqueline Waeber, “Searching for the plot: Charles-Valentin Alkan’s *Souvenirs: Trois Morceaux Dans Le Genre Pathétique*, op.15,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 132, no. 1 (2007): 63.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Dale Marler, “The Role of the Piano Etude in the Works of Charles-Valentin Alkan,” DMA Diss., University of Cincinnati, 1990. Jose Raul Lopez, “Alkan’s *Symphonie*, Op. 39: An Analysis and Pedagogical Aspects,” DMA Diss., University of Miami, 1993. William Eugene Wellborn, “The Op. 39 *Symphonie* for Solo Piano by Charles-Valentin Alkan: Analysis and Perspective,” DMA Diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1995. May Phang, “Genres in Flux: Douze Etudes Dans Les Tons Mineurs, Op. 39 by Charles-Valentin Alkan,” DMA Diss., Temple University, 2004. Joshua Lester Hillmann, “Solving the Riddle of Alkan’s Op. 33 *Grande Sonate* op.33 ‘Les Quatre Âges’: A Performance Guide and Programmatic Overview,” DMA Diss., Arizona State University, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Waeber, “Searching for the plot,” 63-114.

genre markers that contribute to a sense of narrative. She demonstrates the expressive and structural implications of Alkan's pianism.

A fixation on virtuosity, while understandable, fails to take into account the diversity of Alkan's *oeuvre*. The composer's substantial output features numerous preludes, sketches, and character pieces that all reside outside the genre of the etude. These works exemplify harmonic and timbral creativity, without exhibiting extreme technical difficulty. Furthermore, a distinction must be drawn between traditional performative virtuosity and the kinds of difficulties found in Alkan's mature works. Many of his more challenging pieces, even those in the etude genre, demand advanced technical skill but do not necessarily rely on demonstrative, theatrical virtuosity. In many ways, Alkan's mature work developed as a reaction against the gaudy showmanship and stock pianistic tricks of the virtuoso scene. This distinction will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter Two.

With reference to Waeber's comments on Alkan's supposedly odd musical style, I propose that the grotesque is a driving aesthetic force in Alkan's mature voice. The grotesque, which seeks to disorient listeners through the conflict between the horrifying and the humorous or ludicrous, influenced aspects of virtuosity, pianistic innovation, and form in Alkan's more innovative piano works. The qualities which have bewildered listeners and negatively influenced his reception include extreme virtuosity, unorthodox timbres, relentless repetition, and structural oddities.<sup>8</sup> Through the lens of the grotesque, the stylistic peculiarities described above may be contextualized and validated, informing both reception and performance. This approach follows

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<sup>8</sup> William Alexander Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 63. Busoni's performance was supposedly met with 'outright hostility' following his Berlin premiere of Alkan's "En Rythme molossique."

the important work established by Waeber, who seeks new ways of contextualizing Alkan's pianism.

The present study begins by reviewing the history of the musical grotesque. There is existing research on the grotesque in several prominent composers that can help establish a framework through which to approach the genre in Alkan's music. Berlioz and Mussorgsky created important contributions to the grotesque and have close historical proximity to Alkan, while studies of works by Bartók and Shostakovich are referenced as examples of the grotesque in the twentieth century. Style traits found in their music such as a mechanical treatment of the piano, the sarcastic manipulation of themes, and the exploitation of unorthodox timbres are highly relevant to Alkan's own grotesque musical voice. Chapter Two explores the connection between virtuosity and the grotesque, using works of Paganini, Liszt, and Alkan as examples. These grotesque musical traits are then explored as they relate to selected shorter character pieces from Alkan's sets of short pieces titled prelude and *esquisses*. Finally, these findings will be traced through Alkan's substantial étude in theme and variation form, "Le Festin d'Ésope," where elements of the grotesque and virtuosity are synthesized in a unique masterpiece that distorts some popular music topics of Alkan's day and demonstrates his position as a link between nineteenth-century Romanticism and the twentieth century.

### **Overview of the Musical Grotesque**

The grotesque is an artistic phenomenon with a long history in literature, visual arts, drama, and music. The concept first appears in the fifteenth century when the Italian word *grotto* (cave) began to be used in reference to newly discovered Roman decorative art. It has since been applied to literature and drama to describe the satirical, horrifying, sarcastic, fantastical, and humorous. The humorous elements were especially emphasized via comedic characters in

*commedia dell'arte*. Hugo's "Preface to Cromwell" is perhaps the most significant nineteenth-century account of the grotesque, helping to elevate it to an aesthetic category.<sup>9</sup> Generally, the grotesque juxtaposes starkly incongruous elements, resulting in the ludicrous. This ludicrous mixture of opposites can distort the audience.

Recent studies of the musical grotesque have largely focused on music of the twentieth century. Esti Sheinberg's *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich*, Brown's *Bartók and the Grotesque*, and Fillerup's *Purloined Poetics: The Grotesque in the Music of Maurice Ravel* are three significant examples.<sup>10</sup> Pinson's *The Shattered Frame: A Study of the Grotesque in Nineteenth Century Literature and Music* provides the most detailed investigation of the nineteenth-century grotesque, as applied to the music of Berlioz and Mussorgsky. The present study will build upon this research, advocating a positive reception of the occasionally contentious elements in Alkan's grotesque style. Additionally, I hope to expand the understanding of the nineteenth-century musical grotesque, with specific attention to the connection between the grotesque and instrumental virtuosity.

For the grotesque in the realm of literature and the visual arts, Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* is a classic source. Kayser surveys various works of art and literature in an attempt to understand the nature of the grotesque. To this end, he identifies various elements commonly shared across grotesque subject matter. The grotesque may be interpreted as a kind of tragicomedy, involving the coexistence of the humorous and the

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<sup>9</sup> Patricia Testerman Pinson, "The Shattered Frame: A Study of the Grotesque in Nineteenth Century Literature and Music" (PhD Diss., Ohio University, 1971), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000); Julie Brown, *Bartók and the Grotesque: Studies in Modernity, the Body and Contradiction in Music* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007); Jessie Fillerup, "Purloined Poetics: The Grotesque in the Music of Maurice Ravel" (PhD Diss., University of Kansas, 2009).

horrifying, resulting in the ludicrous. It incorporates many fantastical and monstrous elements, such as certain animals (snakes, spiders, bats, insects), unusually vital plant life, the “fusion of organic and mechanical elements,” human insanity, death, and allusions to the devil.<sup>11</sup> The grotesque is a structure – one in which the familiar, natural elements of the world are distorted and become strange and ominous. It is ridiculous, absurd, and filled with cynical laughter.<sup>12</sup> Kayser’s definitive summation of the grotesque is: “an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world.”<sup>13</sup>

Kayser submits that the grotesque manifests on three different levels: the creative process, the work of art itself, and in its reception.<sup>14</sup> The role of reception is especially notable – without it, the grotesque is not fully realized. It is the audience’s engagement with the work on a psychological level that results in the ludicrous, disorienting effects of the grotesque aesthetic. Thus, the reception history to Alkan’s music will inform the presence and effect of the grotesque in it.

Pinson’s 1971 research on the grotesque is the first foray into the consideration of the subject in music. She first explores elements of the grotesque present in two pieces of literature, Edgar Allen Poe’s “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains” (1844) and E. T. A. Hoffman’s “Der goldene Topf” (1814). She then compares those findings to Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* and Berlioz’ “Dream of a Witches Sabbath” from *Symphonie Fantastique*.

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<sup>11</sup> Wolfgang Johannes Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 182-184.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 180.



Pinson finds that “disorientation, discontinuity, dissonance, incongruity, abrupt changes, surprise, [and] intensity of clash” are all words connected with the principles of the grotesque.<sup>15</sup> In relevant works of art, the grotesque is accomplished by first establishing one or more familiar frames of reference. Those frames are subsequently destroyed, often in jarring fashion. Frequently, mutually opposing frames of reference are simultaneously juxtaposed such that neither dominates the other. As a result, the audience experiences disorientation. Grotesque structures are unstable, and the results are bizarre, fantastic, and ludicrous. Aspects from both of Pinson’s case studies, *Pictures at an Exhibition* and “Dream of a Witches Sabbath,” will help inform the interpretation of Alkan’s work.

### **The Grotesque in Berlioz’s “Dream of a Witches Sabbath”**

“Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath,” from Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, is a quintessentially grotesque musical movement. The subject matter of the accompanying program is typical of the grotesque, involving a scene of witches, ghosts and monsters who dance diabolically and mock a young musician with cackling laughs and shrieks. The musician’s beloved is present at the satanic scene, represented by an *idée fixe* found in each of the first four movements. The twisted transformation of the *idée fixe* in this movement is the primary way Berlioz depicts the grotesque.<sup>16</sup>

Berlioz parodies the *idée fixe* primarily through his choice of instrumentation. The recurring melody is first presented in m. 21 of the fifth movement by the clarinet in C, with accompanying bass drum and timpani.<sup>17</sup> The melody is interrupted by an orchestral outburst,

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<sup>15</sup> Pinson, “The Shattered Frame”, 193.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 155.

before being stated again by the E-flat clarinet with accompanying C clarinet and oboe.<sup>18</sup> These previously unused timbres disrupt the audience's frame of reference for the *idée fixe*. Pinson applies ideas from Berlioz's *Treatise on Instrumentation* to demonstrate that the harsher, penetrating tones of these clarinets serve to parody and degrade the melody.<sup>19</sup> It undergoes further distortion via the addition of grace notes and trills and the intrusion of a low bassoon part. Pinson argues this transformation of instrumentation is the primary manifestation of the grotesque, given the context established in the rest of the piece. Throughout the first four movements, the audience has been given an expected frame of reference for the *idée fixe*, which is destroyed in the fifth movement and never reverts to its original character.<sup>20</sup>

Berlioz develops his grotesque scene further in m. 127 with the entrance of the *Dies Irae* theme. The *Dies Irae* was used frequently in the works of nineteenth-century composers, normally with a preconceived affect. What is generally a solemn, spiritual melody is given a menacing texture by Berlioz.<sup>21</sup> Rather than manipulating a previously introduced melody, as Berlioz does with the *idée fixe*, he twists the *Dies Irae* from the onset. Thus, he immediately shatters his audience's frame of reference for the expected mood of the *Dies Irae*, invoking a grotesque reaction.

Again, an unorthodox timbre produces the distortion, by using the bassoon and tuba in a low register. Berlioz acknowledges that the bassoons are "devoid of brilliance and nobility... and have a tendency toward the grotesque."<sup>22</sup> Following this initial instrumentation, the theme is

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<sup>18</sup> Pinson, "The Shattered Frame, 155.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 161

echoed first by horns and trombones an octave higher and twice as fast, then again by the higher woodwinds and strings another octave higher and twice again as fast. Other musical distortions are presented as well: the minor modality is interrupted with major mode scale runs, and the rhythmic accent shifts into syncopation, giving the *Dies Irae* a dance-like quality.<sup>23</sup> When the melody is combined with the *Ronde du Sabbat* theme in m. 414, the *Dies Irae* is parodied further. Its solemn darkness juxtaposed with the lively, sinister, yet joyful atmosphere of the dancing witches and demons.

Pinson mentions other general characteristics that contribute to the grotesque throughout the movement: the frantic nature of the fugal ending, the tonal instability caused by diminished seventh chords and prominence of the melodic tritone, and the use of dissonant chromaticism, syncopation, sudden dynamic outbursts, and strange instrumental effects (such as the ghostly bells suggested by the low bassoons).<sup>24</sup> These are stock grotesque musical devices, used frequently throughout the nineteenth century to depict dark subject matter and disorient the listener.

“Dream of a Witches Sabbath” demonstrates two primary methods for invoking the grotesque: the distortion of existing thematic material through unorthodox orchestral timbres, and the parody of a well-known musical topic. Alkan is similarly an explorer of timbre, but his medium is the piano rather than the full orchestra. Like Berlioz, he frequently employed popular musical topics of the day and subjected them to distortions in his own style. These procedures are prominent in “Le Festin d’Ésope,” as explored in Chapter Four.

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<sup>23</sup> Pinson, “The Shattered Frame”, 164.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 180.

### **The Grotesque in Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and "the Gnome"**

By citing several of Mussorgsky's personal letters, Pinson demonstrates that Mussorgsky had an innate fascination with grotesque subjects. He had a peculiar sense of humor, was fond of caricature and satire, and would often write letters "under the mask" of other people.<sup>25</sup> He also had an appreciation for ugliness as an artistic trait. Caricature, ugliness, and sarcasm often play a role in grotesque art, and Mussorgsky displays those qualities prominently in *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Pinson approaches the grotesque in *Pictures* on two levels. On one level, she explores the grotesque in the large-scale structure. The interplay between the recurring promenade and the various picture movements favors jarring contrasts and unpredictability. At the onset, each promenade presents the same melody in a predictable texture, whereas the pictures themselves are often erratic, capricious, and feature wildly imaginative and unorthodox textures. "The Gnome," "Tuileries," "Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks," and "The Market Place at Limoges" are especially disruptive of the stately promenade. The promenade itself is also disrupted as the piece progresses. By the fourth iteration, it disintegrates into a truncated form. While the fifth promenade largely returns to the scope of the initial, the final occurrence of the promenade is found within one of the pictures. The movement "Catacombs and With the Dead in a Dead Language" features a much darker transformation of the promenade theme; its tempo, timbre, and *lamento* marking reflect the morbid character of the picture. The promenade's function as portraying the walk to each painting in the gallery has disintegrated. In these ways, Mussorgsky uses the large-scale structure of *Pictures at an Exhibition* to disorient the audience.

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<sup>25</sup> Pinson, "The Shattered Frame", 92.

On a second level, Pinson examines grotesque traits focused within the movement “The Gnome.” The movement is thematically chaotic and unstable; highly disjunct, fragmentary phrases of radically contrasting dynamics and tempi shock the listener out of the promenade’s relative stability. Pinson points out metric ambiguity, chromaticism, unpredictable harmonic movement, and prominent melodic tritones as musical elements used to sow further instability.<sup>26</sup> These incongruous musical traits create a grotesque structure at the more focused level of a single movement.

Pinson’s analysis of *Pictures at an Exhibition* demonstrates how the musical grotesque can be generated in a structural sense. This is accomplished both at the macro-structural level of the entire suite, and at the more localized level of an individual movement. Pinson concludes that, similarly to literature, the musical grotesque thrives on the rapid interaction of structural units in a constant process of discontinuous movement.<sup>27</sup> Alkan similarly manipulates structure in order to disorient his listener in “Le Festin d’Ésope.” In Chapter Four the interactions of the variations will be seen to emphasize incongruity, enhanced by the use of pianistic timbre to foster that incongruity.

### **The Musical Grotesque in the Twentieth Century**

In recent decades, several studies have been published on grotesque music in the twentieth century. Fillerup explores the grotesque in several works by Ravel spanning his entire career.<sup>28</sup> She makes connections between the composer and a vibrant grotesque literary scene, demonstrating the vast influence of the grotesque on French artistic culture in the nineteenth and

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<sup>26</sup> Pinson, “The Shattered Frame,” 140.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>28</sup> Jessie Fillerup, “Purloined Poetics: The Grotesque in the Music of Maurice Ravel” (PhD Diss., University of Kansas, 2009).

twentieth centuries. Ravel's student work, *Sérénade Grotesque*, utilizes several strategies found in Alkan's piano music. Ravel subverts his audience's expectations in relation to the title word "serenade" in several ways: the piece features erratic tempo changes, capricious pianism, dry thematic material, and sudden dynamic contrasts.

Following the writing of other authors on the grotesque, Sheinberg considers the grotesque a hybrid genre that combines the ludicrous with the horrifying. She offers further insight into particular nuances that are relevant for Alkan's grotesque pianism. She points out that a key feature of the grotesque is hyperbole. "Being based on accumulation, the grotesque's imports are always exaggerated. The grotesque therefore conveys a distorted reality of a hyperbolic nature. A grotesque object is thus never 'comic', but rather 'ludicrous'; never just 'unpleasant', but rather 'repellent' or horrifying".<sup>29</sup> This element of exaggeration or hyperbole is prominent in Alkan's grotesque virtuosity. Comfortable musical frames of reference are often distorted by textures with an overwhelming volume and density of sound.

Sheinberg connects these exaggerations to what she calls "anthropomorphic sound-analogies." In other words, what is comfortable for the human body or voice - in terms of pitch, volume, speed, or register - is exaggerated to grotesque, inhuman proportions.<sup>30</sup> Musical material first presented in musically "human" parameters becomes grotesque when many of those parameters become distorted beyond the range of human normality. This phenomenon is common throughout Alkan's grotesque work, and will be examined specifically in Chapter Three in regard to Alkan's "Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer."

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<sup>29</sup> Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000), 210.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

Sheinberg illustrates her argument with Bartók's *Two Portraits*, Op. 5 for violin and orchestra. Solo violin introduces the principal theme of the "ideal portrait" with an *andante* tempo, a *piano* dynamic, a *semplice* character, and a comfortable mid-range register. The "grotesque portrait" features the same musical material, now violently exaggerated. The tempo is now *presto*, the register is uncomfortably high, the dynamic is *fortissimo*, and the rhythmic proportions have been distorted. The texture and instrumentation are thickened, with the inclusion of "special effects" like shrilling woodwind trills, *fortissimo* trumpet calls *con sordino*, and cymbal strikes *col legno*. The frame of reference established by the "ideal portrait" has been destroyed, and the resulting transformation is both ludicrous and jarring.

Brown expounds on this body-based conception of the grotesque in Bartók, with a focus on dance-based rhythms in the *Third String Quartet*. Brown demonstrates Bartók's long-term fascination with the human body and connects that fascination with the grotesque in art and literature. Crude distortions of the human body are a quintessential component to the grotesque, and her analysis of the string quartet incorporates that focus. Lively, syncopated dance rhythms are presented in fast, whirling triple time, accompanied by dynamic outbursts, timbral grotesqueries, and disorienting harmonies.<sup>31</sup> These extreme musical effects, which Brown often refers to as a kind of grotesque hyperbole, invite connections between a bodily reading of this music and the "*barbaro*" or primitivist style.<sup>32</sup>

This "*barbaro*" or primitivist style is found in many of Bartók's piano works, notably *Allegro barbaro*, the piano sonata, and parts of the first two piano concertos. Its characteristics include driving motor rhythms, cluster harmonies, frequent accent and *sforzando* markings, and

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<sup>31</sup> Julie Brown, *Bartók and the Grotesque: Studies in Modernity, the Body and Contradiction in Music* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 161.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

folk-like pitch sets (either pentatonic or modal). The style involves a visceral physicality, which relates both to Brown's notion of the grotesque and can often showcase the performer's virtuosity. She suggests that these features may have aided Bartók's own reception and popularity in the concert hall as compared with that encountered by composers of serialism or other less accessible modernist movements.<sup>33</sup> There is a bodily dimension to the Alkan's virtuosity which demands strength and endurance from the performer, and often explores a percussive, orchestral sound level. This connection will be discussed in Chapter Two.

### **Reception history of Alkan's music**

Critical to Kayser's definition of the grotesque is an emphasis on reception. The particular blend of seemingly contradictory elements in the grotesque makes it challenging to identify in the abstract. As Fillerup remarks, "the grotesque's inability to be classified according to discrete traits and types is emblematic of its presence."<sup>34</sup> Therefore the most reliable indicator of the grotesque is audience reaction. Reception history is key to demonstrating the presence of the grotesque and will serve as a foundation for its association with Alkan's music.

A survey of the kinds of titles found in Alkan's *oeuvre* suggests a life-long fascination with grotesque subject matter. A title related to the grotesque aesthetic alone is not sufficient to indicate its presence, but the frequency of these titles suggests that Alkan possessed a persistent interest in this realm. Several of his movement titles reference death. These include: "Morte", from *Trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique* Op. 15 (a piece which prominently features the *Dies Irae* theme), "Chant d'amour – Chant de mort: Et quando expectavi lumen, venit caligo," ("Song of love – Song of Death: and when I looked for light, darkness came") from *Douze*

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<sup>33</sup> Brown, *Bartók and the Grotesque*, 170.

<sup>34</sup> Fillerup, "Purloined Poetics," 7.



*études dans tous les tons majeurs*, Op. 35; and several funeral marches including the fifth etude from Op. 39, (itself the slow movement from the *Symphony for solo piano*), the final movement “50 ans: Prométhée enchaîné” from the *Grand sonate ‘Les Quatre Âges,’* Op. 33, and the stand-alone “Marche Funèbre, Op. 26. Three works reference the devil: “Scherzo Diabolico” from *Douze études dans tous les tons mineurs*, Op. 39; “30 ans: Quasi-Faust” (the second movement Op. 33); and “Les Diablotins,” from *48 Esquisses*, Op. 63. Two pieces contain the word “barbaro” in the title (foreshadowing Bartók): Etude no. 5 “Allegro barbaro” from Op. 35, and the third movement from “Concerto for solo piano: Allegretto alla barbaresca,” which also belongs to the Op. 39 set of etudes. Among Alkan’s shorter character pieces is “La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer,” the eighth prelude from Op. 31. “The song of the insane woman by the sea” depicts madness, a subject very close to the grotesque. This, along with several other small works will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

Descriptions of the grotesque quality of Alkan’s music abound writings on the composer’s style. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, one of Alkan’s most outspoken supporters, described “Le Festin d’Ésope” thus:

Full of astonishing harmonic quirks and twists, supremely masterly and ingenious treatment and a pianistic lay-out worthy of the composer himself – all informed with that verve and vitality, that delightful, eerie, bizarre, and somewhat eldritch quality that makes this master’s work so irresistible and fascinating to the sympathetic student.<sup>35</sup>

Sorabji goes on to describe the presence of devilry, black magic, sardonic gargoyles and cackling satyrs in “Le Festin d’Ésope.” This reaction to Alkan’s music is not uncommon and is perhaps manifested most directly by his timbral eccentricities and the speed and density of his textures.

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<sup>35</sup> Kaikhosru Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1932), 218.

In his book *The Art of the Piano*, David Dubal provides brief overviews of the great pianists and composers in the Western canon, from the most popular to the neglected. In his summary of Alkan, Dubal compiles several colorful descriptions of the composer's style. Raymond Lewenthal's review of *Le Tamour bat aux champs* ("The Drum Beats in the Fields"), is as follows: "one of the bitterest, most vehement and sarcastic commentaries on the folly of war that has ever been written."<sup>36</sup> Wilfred Mellers is quoted as describing the "necromantic quality of Alkan's pianism" and the tension, wry humor, and mocking fury of the op.39 *Etudes*.<sup>37</sup> Dubal quotes Sorabji's account of the op. 61 Sonatine: "vehement, droll, gargoylelike, childlike and naïve in turn...almost as if Berlioz had written a Beethoven sonata," while Dubal himself describes the "devastating sarcasm" in this grueling sonatina. William Eddie includes a chapter in *Charles Valentin Alkan: His life and Music* exploring the reception history of the *Concerto for solo piano* from the op. 39 *Etudes*.<sup>38</sup> In the various accounts compiled by Eddie, descriptions center on the works' dark power, demonic energy, sarcasm, madness, and progressive pianism, among other qualities.<sup>39</sup> Waeber's study of narrative in the three etudes of op. 15 addresses the importance of Alkan's titles and how they inform the listener's frame of mind. She speaks of the "vulgar sonic realism" in many of Alkan's titles, for instance the trivial *Le chemin de fer* ("the railroad"), as well as some of the more obviously fantastical and grotesque titles referenced above.

Elements of the grotesque are found throughout Alkan's music. This has influenced his reception negatively, leaving his work to be discarded amidst a plethora of neglected Romantic

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<sup>36</sup> David Dubal, *The Art of the Piano: Its Performers, Literature, and Recordings*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., rev. and expanded ed. (Pompton Plains, N.J.: Amadeus Press, 2004), 389.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>38</sup> Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: his life and his music*, 191-198.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 197-198.

piano composers. This partly stems from reasons that lie beyond the scope of this study, such as his reclusive nature and disinterest in promoting his own music. Nonetheless, I believe Alkan's grotesque style has strongly contributed to keeping his music from breaking into the standard Western canon. Early Alkan researcher Bloch wrote in 1941 that his music's "dry melodies, cutting dissonances, and everpresent rhythmic drive often approaches actual ugliness."<sup>40</sup> The grotesque aesthetic can validate and contextualize these qualities, which when interpreted as shallow ugliness can misrepresent Alkan's colorful musical personality.

Alongside the reception of Alkan's compositions, accounts of his own playing can provide further insight into Alkan's style that connects to the grotesque aesthetic in Alkan's style. As a pianist Alkan adhered to a category that came to be known as "*le style sévère*." Characterized by precision, dryness, and an almost ruthless deference to the score and the composer's markings, Timbrell notes that the style "can be traced from Alkan's teacher Zimmerman to Saint-Saëns and into the early twentieth century."<sup>41</sup> Its characteristics lie partly in opposition to popular trends of piano playing in Paris at the time: omnipresent legato, liberal *tempo rubato* and an abundance of pedaling. In this way Alkan's playing is distinguished from that of other virtuosos like Chopin and Liszt; his playing is "much drier, almost severe, and certainly less legato and less idiomatic."<sup>42</sup>

Reception of Alkan's performance style was mixed. On the one hand, his playing was praised for its clarity, elegance, and refined taste. Anton Rubinstein, Von Bülow, and Liszt were among those who admired his performances. Indeed, these qualities of elegance and sobriety of

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<sup>40</sup> Joseph Bloch, "Charles-Valentin Alkan," (PhD Diss., Harvard University, 1941), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Timbrell, *French Pianism: A Historical Perspective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1999), 46.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

expression, along with an avoidance of the excesses of Romanticism, came to embody a distinctive style of French pianism towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup> Alkan's virtuosic powers were never questioned, as his early playing was described as "effortless, light, brilliant, and rapid."<sup>44</sup>

In contrast, this "severe style" of playing was occasionally rejected as cold and lacking in feeling. Waeber notes several contemporary reviews of Alkan's early career criticized his inflexible and precise mechanism, which lacked charm and expression.<sup>45</sup> This "mechanical" style of playing seems to be the most common criticism. This mechanical playing likely defied the spirit of Romanticism that made traditional Parisian virtuosos such as Thalberg, Herz, and the young Liszt popular. "Mechanical" playing and restrained emotional expression are also related to the grotesque aesthetic, which often features mechanical or otherwise distorted depictions of human beings.

### **The Grotesque and the "Mechanical"**

According to Kayser: "The mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it. Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks."<sup>46</sup> One literary example is E.T.A. Hoffman's short story "Der Sandman." Its protagonist Nathanael, who struggles with insanity and childhood trauma, becomes enamored of the beautiful Olimpia, the daughter of a professor at the university. Most people in the story find her mechanical movements cold and sinister, but Nathanael is unconcerned. When he eventually

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<sup>43</sup> Timbrell, *French Pianism*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> William Alexander Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 203.

<sup>45</sup> Waeber, "Searching for the Plot", 64.

<sup>46</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, 183.

comes to find out that Olimpia is actually a mechanized automaton, he descends into insanity. The short story is filled with grotesque motifs, with Olimpia's mechanical nature as the most prominent theme. The story concludes with Nathanael, overwhelmed with madness, tragically killing himself. "Der Sandman" also served as the basis for the first act of Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman*.

Brown explores the presence of this mechanical trope in musical trends at the beginning of the twentieth century. Technology begins to play an increasingly important role in music making at this time, with the popularity of the player piano, the rise of new recording technologies, and the invention of electronic instruments such as the theremin. Brown relates these technological advancements to Bartók's fascination with the human body. Bartók was apprehensive about the increased role of technology, and believed music was becoming estranged from nature.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, Bartók recognized the positive aspects of mechanization in music making, as evidenced by his numerous recordings. He believed that all music making belonged on a spectrum between the bodily and the mechanized, depending on the instrumentation. For Bartók, the human voice was the most pure and bodily of musical instruments. Further along the spectrum was the piano, which requires the use of levers, and at the far end were twentieth-century technologies such as the phonograph and radio.<sup>48</sup> This establishes a general framework through which Bartók conceptualized music from humanly to mechanical in relation to modern musical and technological trends.

The embrace of the piano as a mechanical, percussive instrument is an important element of Bartók's mature style. While by no means the only characteristic of his music, several late

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<sup>47</sup> Brown, *Bartók and the Grotesque*, 72.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 71

piano works employ motoric rhythmic vitality as part of their musical expression. This style of pianism includes percussive articulation and dissonant cluster harmonies and is also utilized by several other early twentieth-century composers, including Prokofiev and Stravinsky. This style marks an important shift in style from nineteenth-century Romanticism into musical modernism.

For Brown, this motoric style was a key aspect of Bartók's grotesque compositions, as it operated within this spectrum of human to mechanical music making. The embrace of mechanical instrumentation functioned as a distortion of the human dimension, thus serving as a corollary to the bodily distortions found in grotesque works of literature and art. The motoric style is not solely a tool of the grotesque, as it also played an important role in Bartók's interest in folk music and his pursuit of modernist developments in musical language. None-the-less, a capacity for cold, mechanical expression can be of service to the grotesque in the proper context. The virtuosic piano writing found in Alkan's etude-style works expresses similar qualities and was a vital part of his own expression, grotesque or otherwise.<sup>49</sup> A mechanical approach to the piano was rather common among composers of the twentieth century but far less so during Alkan's life. Against the backdrop of Romanticism, this pianistic style may have been viewed as especially cold, as it in many ways defied the values of the Romantic era. A performer of Alkan's mechanical, virtuoso music may have been perceived at that time as part human, part mechanical, like Hoffman's Olympia.

### **Implications of the Grotesque for Alkan's Piano Works**

Many prominent composers throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have gravitated toward the grotesque aesthetic. As a mode of expression, it is especially well suited to

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Dale Marler, "The Role of the Piano Etude in the Works of Charles-Valentin Alkan", (DMA Diss., University of Cincinnati, 1990), 123. There is some evidence that Bartók may have heard and been influenced by Alkan's own *Allegro barbaro*.

formal experimentation and innovation in many musical parameters including harmony and timbre. As a result, we often see the grotesque displayed in progressive works foreshadowing the styles adopted in the twentieth century. The grotesque generally seeks to disorient its audience through the discordant coexistence of humor and horror. The elements involved are as numerous and varied as the grotesque works themselves, yet they commonly involve the juxtaposition of disparate expressive elements. Within the musical grotesque, some common traits include rapid dance meters, loud dynamics, extreme tessituras, stark contrasts, rhythmic drive, obsessive repetition, unorthodox timbres, severe harmonic dissonance, and a general subverting of formal expectations.

Alkan's own implementation of the grotesque bears similarities to the music of Berlioz, Mussorgsky, Ravel, Shostakovich and Bartók discussed previously, but Alkan's individual voice demonstrates qualities that warrant special consideration. His most important innovations are found in his expansion to the scope of piano music, which seeks to match the size, complexity, and sonic intensity of orchestral genres, and in his explorations in keyboard timbre. The grotesque aesthetic supports such innovations, and in Alkan's grotesque work is often found his most daring, progressive writing. The following chapter traces a connection between the grotesque aesthetic and the history of virtuosity, as it relates both to Alkan and to his contemporaries. In Alkan's mature work, virtuosity is by no means a superficial demonstration of skill. Rather, it functions as a vital aspect of the artistic expression. It facilitates bold piano sonorities, his interest in dark subject matter, and his potent sense of humor.

## CHAPTER II: VIRTUOSITY AND THE GROTESQUE

The ostentatious virtuosity exhibited by many famous performers of the first half of the nineteenth century has long been a controversial subject. Maligned by some as a shallow display of excess, intended only to thrill the unsophisticated public with superficial showmanship, virtuosity is undergoing a re-evaluation in scholarship. For some time even Chopin's legacy could not escape this denunciation, about whom Schnabel has said: "Chopin pieces were superficial, only virtuoso, not important."<sup>50</sup> Research on the subject has often centered around Liszt, considered by many to be the greatest from the golden age of virtuosos.<sup>51</sup> His legacy had for a long time suffered among critics and scholars due to his virtuoso status. The twentieth century saw an emphasis on musical modernism and to a lesser degree an increased appreciation for the values of the classical era, while the element of Romanticism involving the theatrical dimension of virtuosity was renounced.<sup>52</sup> Liszt's status as a respected composer emerged despite his virtuosity, as supporters have defended the musical substance hidden beneath his pianistic flair, particularly in the harmonically daring late-period compositions.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Doran, "Introduction: Virtuosity and Liszt," in *Virtuosity and Liszt*, ed. Robert Doran (University of Rochester Press, 2020), 20.

<sup>51</sup> Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.) Hamilton's exploration of the "golden age" of pianism examines the performance styles, recital conventions, and performers of the mid-nineteenth century, among whom Liszt is often the key figure. Present-day recital conventions are often proclaimed to have extended from this period, although such conventions hardly resemble those of the "golden age."

<sup>52</sup> Doran, *Virtuosity and Liszt*, 20.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. "Brendel was also advocating and drawing on a reappraisal of the minimalist, non-virtuosic virtue and forward-looking nature of Liszt's late works, what Shay Loya calls in his contribution (which discusses this issue at length) Liszt's 'modernist rehabilitation.' This rehabilitation began in the 1930s with fellow Hungarian composer Béla Bartók and English composer and Liszt scholar Humphrey Searle (the first to create a numbering system for Liszt's works), and picked up steam midcentury with pianists Louis Kentner and Brendel. This focus on the late works from the 1870s and 1880s, coupled with an emphasis on the greatness of the B-Minor Sonata—in particular its structural, thematic, and harmonic innovations—shifted attention away from the 'virtuoso Liszt' and toward the 'virtuous Liszt,' an ascetic and 'modernist' Liszt who could more easily be accepted by musicologists, music theorists, and classically oriented performers such as Brendel."



Since the second half of the twentieth century, writers have explored new ways of understanding the place of virtuosity in art music, seeking to legitimize its expressive role in the musical work. Rosen's comment that "Liszt taught the composers who followed him how aspects of music like texture and intensity of sound, violence and delicacy of gesture, could replace pitch and rhythm as organizing principles in the development of new forms," is at the heart of this revised attitude towards virtuoso pianism.<sup>54</sup> This undertaking to celebrate virtuosity and the ways in which it influenced art music of the Romantic era and the period that followed continued with Samson's *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental studies of Liszt*; Waeber, in "Searching for the Plot: Charles-Valentin Alkan's *Souvenirs: Trois Morceaux Dans Le Genre Pathetique*, op.15;" and the many contributors to Doran's symposium *Liszt and Virtuosity*.<sup>55</sup>

Alkan occupies an interesting position in the debate surrounding virtuosity. Whereas Liszt has emerged as a celebrated genius of the Romantic Era, many other figures of the virtuoso movement have been banished to near-obscurity, with perhaps Thalberg being the most notable example. Alkan himself occupies a kind of middle ground along this spectrum. He enjoyed the respect of many other prominent nineteenth-century pianists including Chopin and Liszt, and he received considerable admiration from Busoni and Sorabji in the twentieth century. His music has received increased attention since the 1960s, due in large part to the persistence of dedicated disciples like Raymond Lewenthal and Ronald Smith. Nevertheless, his music has failed to break into the standard concert repertory and his music is passed over by pianists of all levels. Alkan's

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 541.

<sup>55</sup> Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental Studies of Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Jacqueline Waeber, "Searching for the plot: Charles-Valentin Alkan's *Souvenirs: Trois Morceaux Dans Le Genre Pathetique*, op.15," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 132, no. 1 (2007); Robert Doran, ed. *Liszt and Virtuosity*, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020).

legacy has retained the reputation of the tragically underrated pianist-composer of the nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup>

Many of the above issues regarding Liszt's reception apply to Alkan as well; to disregard his virtuosic pianism is to overlook the ways in which his own innovations in keyboard texture, sonority, and intensity could impact developments in style and form that were progressive for the time. Viewing the role of virtuosity as a compositional process rather than merely a performance tool is key to appreciating Alkan's somewhat perplexing musical language. In reference to Liszt's *Grandes études*, Doran notes that their textural complexity and modernism (that is, qualities that were forward-looking for his era) made them ill-suited for typical public consumption.<sup>57</sup> Despite their virtuosic demands, by no means were they crowd-pleasers, and indeed Liszt rarely performed them during his touring years. Alkan's mature work often exhibits the same quality, and his complex scores have left audiences somewhat bewildered to this day.

The term 'virtuoso' dates back to the sixteenth century, where its definition differs slightly from its nineteenth-century conception. Originally a term of honor, derived from the Latin *virtus*, and indicative of tremendous skill or accomplishment in any intellectual or artistic field, its musical application would have signaled skill as a composer, performer, theorist, or conductor.<sup>58</sup> During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the term came to be associated with a soloist of exceptional skill, often one whose skills were theatrical in nature. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, a pejorative connotation began to be attached to

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<sup>56</sup> Hugh Macdonald, "Alkan [Morhange], Charles-Valentin" *Grove Music Online*, 2001; Accessed May, 11 2021. "Alkan's music has been seriously neglected. Pianists have been slow to explore the great range and variety of his music, not all of which is extravagantly difficult to play. But he was greatly valued by Liszt, Busoni and many others, and should eventually take his due place among the most important figures of his time."

<sup>57</sup> Doran, "Introduction: Virtuosity and Liszt," 2020, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Owen Jander, "Virtuoso," *Grove Music Online*, 2001; Accessed May 11, 2021.

the theatrical sort of virtuosity, in which delivering the impression of difficulty can be more important than mastering actual difficulty. Virtuosity of this kind emphasizes speed, accuracy, and power that are conspicuously conveyed to the audience. Additionally, it can include “subtler aspects of a superior technical command of the piano, such as the control of colors, volume, pedal, and articulation.”<sup>59</sup> This is close in spirit to Liszt’s own conception of transcendental virtuosity, which seeks to overcome technical difficulty altogether to facilitate the unimpeded expression of the musical work. This kind of virtuosity prioritizes the highest level of artistry over a demonstration of skill.

Despite Alkan’s affinity with the theatrical virtuosity described above, he epitomizes the original definition of broad musical excellence far more closely. Supplementing his recognized technical prowess, he won the Paris Conservatoire *premier prix* for solfège at the age of seven, and later taught solfège at the Conservatoire.<sup>60</sup> He also possessed an excellent command of compositional skills like part-writing, which allowed him to construct outrageously complicated structures like the eight-part fugue in *Grande Sonata: Les Quatre Âges*, Op. 33, mvt. II “Quasi-Faust” (Ex. 1). Alkan’s general musicianship reached prodigious levels, making him far more than a mere technician.

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<sup>59</sup> Doran, “Introduction: Virtuosity and Liszt,” 11.

<sup>60</sup> Hugh Macdonald, “Alkan [Morhange], Charles-Valentin” *Grove Music Online*, 2001; Accessed May 11, 2021.

Example 1. Alkan, *Grande Sonata: Les Quatre Âges*, Op. 33, mvt. II “Quasi-Faust,” mm. 256-257.



Alkan’s piano writing, while undoubtedly demanding and impressive, lacks some of the theatrical allure of his contemporaries’ compositions. Indeed, the question of perceived difficulty versus actual difficulty is often reversed in Alkan’s music. The performative challenges presented by the above fugue for example far exceed what is perceivable by the audience (Alkan even felt obliged in this case to offer a simplified version). Even so, in Alkan’s musical world theatrical, demonstrative virtuosity plays a role which will be explored in relation to other prominent virtuosi of his life.

Representative virtuoso pianist-composers who led successful careers in Paris during their lifetimes include Henri Herz (1803-1888), Friedrich Kalkbrenner (1785-1849), Johann Peter Pixis (1788-1874), and Sigismond Thalberg (1812-1871), as well as Chopin and Liszt who

achieved considerably more lasting success.<sup>61</sup> Chopin and Liszt emerged from this tradition as celebrated composers, while Alkan has generally been associated to the former group of mere virtuosos.<sup>62</sup> However, Alkan's career, temperament, compositions, and pianism were radically different from those of his contemporaries, and his virtuosity functions very differently.

The *brilliant style* exhibited by many of these virtuosos was popular in the period between 1810-1830. It was marked by rapid scalar passagework, a light touch, clarity, and a generally entertaining nature. Robert Doran equates the *brilliant style* with the salon style, the setting in which it was often displayed.<sup>63</sup> This style of pianism is found in concerto works by Weber, Hummel, Czerny, Moscheles, Kalkbrenner, early Chopin, and early Mendelssohn, and occupies a period of transition between Classicism and Romanticism.<sup>64</sup> This type of virtuosity highlighted the performer's skill through idiomatic figuration with an elegance that charmed audiences. Such pianism, while certainly worthy of its kind, was marked in some ways by its conservatism and conventionality. It was less suited to the bold experimentation represented by the virtuosity of the mature Liszt or Alkan.

Doran argues that the brilliant style of the youthful works of Liszt's touring virtuoso period gradually gives way to a bravura style predominant in his mature compositions.<sup>65</sup> The bravura style is marked by "violent runs in double (or interlocking-chromatic) octaves, gargantuan tremolando effects, treacherous leaps, and the astonishing thickness and bewildering

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<sup>61</sup> Jeffery Kallberg, *Piano music of the Parisian virtuosos 1810-1860: a ten-volume anthology*. New York: Garland, 1993.

<sup>62</sup> Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, ix-x. "A minor figure like Alkan is omitted because he became interesting essentially after 1850 by his extension of the Liszt tradition and the way he opened up piano music to the operatic effects of Meyerbeer."

<sup>63</sup> Robert Doran, "From the Brilliant Style to the Bravura Style Reconceptualizing Lisztian Virtuosity," in *Virtuosity and Liszt*, ed. Robert Doran (University of Rochester Press, 2020), 271.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

complexity of texture.”<sup>66</sup> The Sonata in B minor, the *Dante Sonata*, and the third and final version of the *Transcendental Etudes* are examples of this style, while the brilliant style is primarily found in earlier virtuoso staples such as the operatic fantasies and the “Grand Galop Chromatique.”<sup>67</sup> Doran goes on to equate the bravura style to a kind of modernist virtuosity that prioritizes musical and poetic intensity and strives for avant-garde innovation in timbre and sonority.<sup>68</sup>

Like Liszt, Alkan was a child prodigy who was immediately successful as a virtuoso pianist. His first appearance took place in 1826 at the age of thirteen, and he premiered his *Variations sur un theme de Steibelt*, op. 1 the following year.<sup>69</sup> This first composition was praised for its charm, and it showcased Alkan’s effortless, light, brilliant playing, which aligned perfectly with the brilliant-style virtuoso pianism popular in Paris at the time. Alkan’s early virtuoso career continued until 1839, when he briefly retired from the concert stage. He would, however, offer sporadic public performances for the rest of his life, including a more consistent series of concerts in the 1870s and 80s. During the youthful stage, Alkan’s compositional voice remained within the generic virtuoso style in vogue at the time, although glimmers of a more innovative pianism began to emerge.

The *Saltarelle* op. 23, first premiered in 1844 after a six-year period of withdrawal from performance, was emblematic of Alkan’s early brilliant-style virtuosity and was among the most popular of his works in this vein. Eddie points out that it was the only one of Alkan’s early works

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<sup>66</sup> Doran, “From the Brilliant Style to the Bravura Style,” 289.

<sup>67</sup> The “Grand Galop Chromatique” was by far Liszt’s most commonly played original composition during the touring years.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>69</sup> William Alexander Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 4-5.

frequently performed by other pianists.<sup>70</sup> This showpiece is episodic, with sections like the one displayed in Ex. 2 featuring the delicate, light, embellished passagework popular among the salon virtuosos. Certain characteristics look forward towards Alkan's mature pianistic style, including the driving rhythmic repetition, thick bass chords, and the percussive, rumbling grace notes seen in Ex. 3.

**Example 2. Alkan, *Saltarelle*, Op. 23, mm. 167-172.**



**Example 3. Alkan, *Saltarelle*, op. 23, mm. 239-244.**



This style of virtuosity is largely abandoned in Alkan's mature work, which coincides with his departure from the concert lifestyle. Eddie attributes much of this transition to Alkan's dislike for the Parisian musical scene, which was overly fixated upon precisely this kind of virtuosity.<sup>71</sup> In his later compositions Alkan sought new sonorities and new uses of the instrument, and consequently the charming, classical nature of the brilliant style appealed less

<sup>70</sup> Eddie, *Alkan: His Life and His Music*, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Eddie, *Alkan: His Life and His Music*, 7.

and less to him. A similar trajectory occurred in the careers of Liszt and Chopin; youthful salon-style virtuoso pieces give way to more innovative and probing works. Virtuosity maintains an important role in the music, without the purpose of satisfying mainstream audiences.

Waeber claims that the assessment of Alkan's virtuosity from a Lisztian perspective is responsible for the misconception of his music.<sup>72</sup> This is mostly true: Alkan's pianism contains a distinct lack of cadenza passages, grace notes, invitations to *rubato* qualities, and metrical modifications via *accelerando* or *ritardando*.<sup>73</sup> These performing gestures were closely aligned with the showmanship of the virtuoso aesthetic but were avoided in Alkan's *style sévère*.<sup>74</sup>

The "Lisztian perspective" Waeber cites refers primarily to his early touring days. To fuse her ideas with those presented by Loya and Doran,<sup>75</sup> I propose that Liszt's mature style, which avoids the sensual, crowd-pleasing elements favored in his youth and relied on by virtuosos, is indeed very similar to Alkan's virtuosity. The bravura style of virtuosity favors daring explorations of keyboard sonority, separating Alkan and Liszt from other more conservative brilliant-style virtuosos. Both composers pushed contemporary instruments to their limits in search of powerful orchestral sounds. Passages from the second movement from Alkan's *Grande Sonata*, op. 33 and Liszt's *Après une lecture du Dante: Fantasia quasi-Sonata* demonstrate thick, octave-based chordal textures that span an enormous range of the instrument. Pianism of this variety defied the spirit of early brilliant-style salon virtuosity; such powerful sounds were taxing

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<sup>72</sup> Jacqueline Waeber, "Searching for the plot: Charles-Valentin Alkan's *Souvenirs: Trois Morceaux Dans Le Genre Pathétique*, op.15," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 132, no. 1 (2007): 63.

<sup>73</sup> Grace notes do appear with some frequency in Alkan's music, but often as novel percussive effects rather than lyrical decoration.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Timbrell, *French Pianism: A Historical Perspective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1999), 46.

<sup>75</sup> Shay Loya "Virtuosity in Liszt's late piano works," in *Virtuosity and Liszt*, ed. Robert Doran (University of Rochester Press, 2020), 392.



for listener and performer alike, rather than elegant and pleasant. The instances of bravura writing shown in Ex. 4 and 5 have clear poetic and structural purposes and occur at climactic moments.

**Example 4.** Alkan, *Grande sonata: Les Quatre Âges*, op. 33, mvt. II. “Quasi-Faust”, mm. 262-265.



**Example 5.** Franz Liszt, *Après une lecture du Dante: Fantasia quasi-Sonata*, mm. 304-307.



Although an adverse attitude toward virtuosity has tainted the legacies of Liszt, Alkan, and others, it is only relevant for a small portion of their early compositions. Recent scholarship has rehabilitated the role of virtuosity in Liszt, and a similar reassessment of Alkan is due. I aim to connect Alkan’s virtuosity to the grotesque aesthetic, a perspective that contextualizes his advances in piano technique. Alkan’s emphasis on physical endurance, dense textures, ‘ugly’

sonorities, and extreme velocity is used to depict grotesque subjects, in addition to the programmatic and orchestral purposes discussed by other writers.

### **The Connection Between Virtuosity and the Grotesque: Paganini**

A connection between the grotesque aesthetic and virtuosity was prominent in the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the devilish reputations of performers such as Tartini, Paganini, and Liszt. In fact, such a connection may have been embraced long before the traditional virtuoso era. Kawabata cites an example from the thirteenth century in which a priest's virtuosic singing is attributed to demonic possession:

There was once a priest whose singing was a joy to all... until one day another priest heard it, and realized that such a perfection must come not from a human being but from a demon. So he exorcized the demon, which promptly departed... whereupon the singer's body fell lifeless to the ground, showing that for some time it had been animated by the demon alone.<sup>76</sup>

A similar relationship is exhibited in twentieth-century heavy metal music. Walser draws connections between heavy metal guitarists and tropes of violence, sexuality, power, and classical virtuosity.<sup>77</sup> The association between transcendental virtuosity and a certain kind of vulgarity is found in many different periods and styles throughout history. The most influential instrumental virtuoso in history is undoubtedly Paganini, who also boasts perhaps the strongest affiliation with demonism. Paganini influenced Alkan and fostered the relationship between virtuosity and the grotesque in the following ways: by drawing connections between technical skill and devilry, by using virtuosity to achieve new, mystifying timbres, and by developing

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<sup>76</sup> Mai Kawabata, *Paganini: The 'Demonic' Virtuoso* (Woodbridge: Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2013), 33-34.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).

violent techniques such as ricochet bowings and mechanical techniques such as perpetual motion that highlighted the role of the human body in performance.

Nowadays, Paganini's demonic persona is as notorious as his music, if not more so.

Kawabata's *Paganini: The Demonic Virtuoso* explores the myriad of musical, social, and cultural factors that fueled this image. The diabolical mystique surrounding Paganini is complex; much of the legend stems from non-musical factors such as his bizarre body proportions, his predilection for women and gambling, his eccentric temperament both on and off-stage, and his dubious criminal record. These factors, while not correlated with musical scores or performances, helped establish a connection between his virtuosity and the grotesque. Paganini's legacy ensured that transcendental instrumental skill would forever be laced with dark influences; supreme virtuosity was a mysterious super-power that could only be explained as a manifestation of nefarious wizardry. Kawabata sums up this phenomenon:

His virtuosity harnessed, enabled, channeled, and symbolized various kinds of power – military, political, economic, social, and sexual – which he wielded to his advantage. Because his virtuosity was coded as 'demonic', as he was himself, and these forms of power were self-serving, egoistically driven, and self-gratifying, they became enmeshed as a big jumble of anti-virtues – the seven deadly sins with violin virtuosity thrown in. His *Geldsucht*, his lust for social standing, his personal autonomy, his heroic image, his celebrity – all of this was driven and supported by his virtuosity, and inseparable from its demonicism.<sup>78</sup>

Violin techniques such as left-hand pizzicato runs, double harmonics, and flying staccato were so spectacular and mystifying that they defied explanation, suggesting to the ignorant that the violinist was a magician.<sup>79</sup> Other techniques had produced striking visual effects. The

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<sup>78</sup> Kawabata, *Paganini: The 'Demonic' Virtuoso*, 77.

<sup>79</sup> Kawabata, *Paganini: The 'Demonic' Virtuoso*, 16.

*ricochet* technique involved the lashing of the bow on the string like a weapon, signifying power and violence.<sup>80</sup> The visual dimension of Paganini's performances invites a connection to Brown's ideas about the link between the grotesque aesthetic and the human body.<sup>81</sup> Extreme technical demands for speed, power, and dexterity appeared to push the human body far beyond its natural capabilities. Seemingly, a pact with the devil would have been required for such feats; no mere human could achieve such wizardry.

*Le Streghe* (The Witches) was one of Paganini's most famous and frequently played showpieces. It features several of his trademark techniques, including *ricochet* bowing, parallel octaves, *una corda*, and double harmonics. Kawabata stops short of attributing Paganini's musical language to his demonic image, noting a distinct absence of the typical musical vocabulary of the "musical diablerie" such as tritones, diminished seventh chords, and quotes from the *Dies Irae*.<sup>82</sup> She concludes that Paganini's virtuosity promoted the violinists' demonic reputation purely through its dramatic visual component. I propose that while Paganini avoided the above compositional devices, the sonic dimensions of his virtuosity may well have contributed to a demonic/grotesque image, in that particular figurations produced striking timbral effects. Several of these examples are found in *Le Streghe*.

The *minore* section of *Le Streghe*, shown in Ex. 6, contains descending chromatic parallel octaves that produce an ominous effect. Variation 3, which follows the *minore* section, contains several phrases employing double harmonics (Ex. 7). Their extremely high pitch evokes a ghostly, sinister quality. Paganini also indicates the use of the G string for a melody with a rather

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>81</sup> Julie Brown, *Bartók and the Grotesque: Studies in Modernity, the Body and Contradiction in Music* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007): 161.

<sup>82</sup> Mai Kawabata, "Virtuosity, the Violin, the Devil... What Really Made Paganini 'Demonic,'" *Current Musicology* 83, no. 83 (2007): 100-101.

high tessitura in this variation, generating another uncanny sonority. These sound qualities seem appropriate for a piece which takes its title and theme from the witches' dance from the Süssmayr ballet "Die Zauberschwestern im Beneventer Walde" (The Magic Sisters in the Beneventan Woods). Paganini's virtuosic theatrics were not merely visually and technically impressive but were also occasionally deployed in service of musically relevant timbral effects. Virtuosity achieves new sonorities that challenge what was previously thought to lie within the instrument's capabilities. This directly connects virtuosity with the grotesque aesthetic, a connection transferred into the realm of the piano by Liszt and Alkan.

**Example 6. Niccolò Paganini, *Le Streghe*, op.8, minore variation.**



**Example 7. Niccolò Paganini, *Le Streghe*, op.8, variation 3.**



Paganini's *Twenty-four Caprices* demonstrate the use of virtuosity to achieve unorthodox timbres in a wide variety of ways. Kawabata indicates that Paganini frequently imitated human voices, animal cries, and musical instruments other than the violin.<sup>83</sup> As argued in Chapter One, the imitation of animals is often linked to the grotesque. "[in the *Twenty-four Caprices*] Paganini went about imitating flutes and hunting horns (no.9), trumpets (no.14), birdsong (no.19) and even donkey brays (no.7 and no.17)." Paganini, and later Alkan, used virtuosity to mimic animals and popular musical topics in ways that no one else had previously achieved on their instruments.

Paganini influenced every great performer that followed him, regardless of their instrument. While Alkan may not have borrowed melodies or written arrangements of Paganini's works, as Liszt and others did, the spirit of Paganini's virtuosity impacted Alkan's own pursuit of transcendental technical skill. Alkan applied this high skill level to explore new ways of using the piano, including and especially in service of the grotesque.

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<sup>83</sup> Kawabata, *Paganini: The 'Demonic' Virtuoso*, 12.

## Liszt and Grotesque Virtuosity

Liszt continued Paganini's legacy into the second half of the nineteenth century, achieving the greatest fame of any solo performer and receiving similar accolades as the greatest technician ever seen at his instrument. Labels such as the 'second Paganini', the 'German Paganini,' and the 'Paganini of the cello' became marketing clichés following the violinist's career, and Liszt assumed the title of the 'Paganini of the piano.'<sup>84</sup> In an era saturated with Paganini imitators and successors, Liszt emerged as the truest heir to the violinist.

Not only did Liszt continue the spirit of Paganini's virtuosity, but he also inherited Paganini's devilish associations. Liszt's demonic reputation, much like Paganini's, developed from a complex web of factors. Liszt's performances invoked similarly frenzied and exhilarated responses from audiences. He had a supposedly mystical power over women, and he had frequent sexual liaisons throughout his life. Accounts of his playing routinely suggested devilish powers (Clara Schumann notoriously described him this way),<sup>85</sup> and devilish subject matter often inspired his compositions. Like Paganini, Liszt was thin and pale, although he was generally regarded as handsome. His performances featured a similar sense of theatrical showmanship: dramatic performance gestures, broken strings, and improvisations on spontaneous tunes were all part of the virtuoso spectacle.

Elements of Liszt's pianism continued the spirit of Paganini in fostering a relationship between technical skill and the grotesque. His innovative treatment of the piano, his creative use of texture and sonority, and his ability to accomplish previously impossible feats matched the innovations of Paganini and set him apart from other virtuosos performing in Paris at the time.

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<sup>84</sup> Kawabata, *Paganini: The 'Demonic' Virtuoso*, 96-100.

<sup>85</sup> David Larkin, "Dancing to the Devil's Tune: Liszt's Mephisto Waltz and the Encounter with Virtuosity," *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 38, no. 3 (March 2015), 195.

These innovations helped shift the focus of virtuosity in composition from technical display to musical expression. Liszt modernized the brilliant style of pianism in his mature years, implementing bravura qualities previously mentioned. The pleasing, graceful sounds of the salon are abandoned for more daring, powerful, often orchestral textures. Pieces portraying the devil or death often feature this kind of pianism. These developments coincide with progressive advances in tonality.

Liszt's *Csárdás Macabre* demonstrates this intersection of harmonic innovation, mature virtuosity, and grotesque subject matter. It belongs to a category of late works that contain similarly progressive traits, including the third and fourth *Mephisto Waltz*'s, the *Bagatelle sans tonalité*, and the last four Hungarian Rhapsodies. Here virtuosity is still present to varying degrees (although less than in the operatic fantasies or the *Grand Galop Chromatique* that defined his touring years), but without emphasizing the crowd-pleasing aspects.

The opening of *Csárdás Macabre*, shown in Ex. 8, employs bare, parallel fifths, used in a low register as a driving, percussive rhythmic figure. The crude use of the 'forbidden' parallel fifth is a key timbral and structural device used throughout the piece. Edgcombe discusses the frequent use of naked fifths to convey the grotesque in several nineteenth century operas.<sup>86</sup> In many ways, pure fifths have an even more poignantly grotesque effect than the use of tritones, as their hollow timbre has little place in traditional tonality of the common practice era. Here the purest intervallic consonance invokes discordance and undermines the overall sense of tonality.

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<sup>86</sup> Rodney Stenning Edgcombe, "The Musical Representation of the Grotesque in Nineteenth-Century Opera," *The Opera Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (January 2000): 34.



**Example 8. Franz Liszt, *Csárdás macabre*, S.224, mm. 49-52. Theme A.**



The potent harmonic device is reinforced by percussive pianism; dry articulation, repetitive rhythms and repeated notes, and weak beat accents foreshadow the music of Bartók. This grotesque treatment of the instrument looks forward to modernism and mocks many traits of Romanticism. Later in the piece, octave-based chordal textures predominate, often with loud dynamic markings, as Ex. 9 shows. Lyrical melodies, free-flowing cadenzas, rubato, and liberal pedaling - hallmarks of romantic era pianism - are all absent from this avant-garde style. Any strong melodic element is largely absent. The melody in Ex. 10 is the only definitive example, although it is angular, fragmented, and tonally ambiguous.

**Example 9. Franz Liszt, *Csárdás macabre*, S.224, mm. 133-135.**



**Example 10. Franz Liszt, *Csárdás macabre*, S.224, mm. 40-48.**



More than melody, Liszt uses figuration and texture as organizing principles for the structure of *Csardas Macabre*. Thematic material is developed through thickening textures – tremolo figures and dense chords – and expansion of the range of the register as the piece progresses. Ex. 11 and 12 illustrate these textural transformations: theme A is first transformed via tremolo and is later given a more powerful, octave-based bass texture.

**Example 11. Franz Liszt, *Csárdás macabre*, S.224, mm. 566-571.**



**Example 12. Franz Liszt, *Csárdás macabre*, S.224, mm. 633-642.**



These increasingly aggressive textures connect to Kawabata's arguments that gender and 'masculine' power played a significant role in Paganini's demonic on-stage persona.<sup>87</sup> Violent

<sup>87</sup> Kawabata, *Paganini: The 'Demonic' Virtuoso*, 58.

bowings, often involving Paganini striking his instrument, were an important element in spectacle of his performances. This sense of ‘powerful’ playing is mirrored in Liszt’s *fortissimo*, percussive chordal textures. Paganini was frequently known to break strings and bow hairs,<sup>88</sup> just as Liszt was known to frequently break the strings of his Érard piano. This phenomenon continues well into twentieth century rock and roll, as Walser points out in regard to the power dynamics displayed in the heavy metal guitar theatrics of Eddie Van Halen and Yngwie Malmsteen.<sup>89</sup>

Overall, *Csardas Macabre* demonstrates how Liszt used virtuosity to supplement the progressive musical trends that defined his later years. Liszt’s virtuosity is no longer primarily a source of public spectacle; it is now a key musical device used to catalyze new developments in musical language. This pursuit of innovation aligns with an increasing interest in grotesque subject matter, and an interest in more powerful piano sonorities.

### **Alkan and Grotesque Virtuosity**

Alkan’s mature compositions bear many similarities to Liszt’s mature style. Rather than functioning as a display of skill, virtuosity now supplements new developments in musical language that often involve grotesque subject matter. Current research into Alkan’s music generally focuses on aspects of virtuosity, particularly in his op. 35 and op. 39 sets of etudes.<sup>90</sup> Notable aspects include the sheer size and scope of these works in comparison to traditional etudes, and the tremendous strength and stamina required to play them. Taxing chordal passages

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<sup>88</sup> Kawabata, *Paganini: The ‘Demonic’ Virtuoso*, 64.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), ch.3.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Dale Marler, "The Role of the Piano Etude in the Works of Charles-Valentin Alkan," (DMA Diss., University of Cincinnati, 1990). Marler’s study is one example, it investigates the various technical devices found throughout Alkan’s etudes.

require large hands and strength, and rapid figuration supported by extreme tempo markings pushes the limits of possibility for most pianists. Here, to please casual public listeners is far from the aesthetic goal. As noted earlier, Joseph Bloch perceives qualities approaching ugliness in Alkan's music."<sup>91</sup>

Bloch's assessment may seem harsh, but it reflects an attitude that affects Alkan reception to this day. One possible cause is that Alkan's music, much like that of all great piano composers, is very much dependent upon the instruments of his own time. The accumulation of sound through thick textures and repeated chords, and the frequent use of the extreme ends of the instrument benefit from the greater clarity of the Érard pianos Alkan played. These instruments have a lighter touch and greater registral clarity as compared to modern concert grands. While this topic stands outside the scope of the present study, it should be noted that many of Alkan's more jarring textures yield a very different effect on period instruments.

Virtuosity is an especially challenging subject in Alkan's music due to the conflict between the extroverted nature of virtuosic performance and Alkan's reserved musical temperament. In this sense he is very different from Paganini and Liszt, for whom the technical dimension of their music played an obvious performative purpose. Indeed, Alkan did not inherit the devilish reputation of his more famous contemporaries. In the limited concerts of his later years, Alkan hardly played any of his own mature music. To fully understand Alkan's music aesthetic, the performative aspects of traditional virtuosity (as in Paganini, Liszt, and others) must to some degree be divorced from the sonic and expressive aspects.

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<sup>91</sup> Joseph Bloch, "Charles-Valentin Alkan," (PhD Diss., Harvard University, 1941), 4.

Alkan's pianism exhibits certain qualities more commonly embraced in twentieth century composers. The 'dry melodies, cutting dissonances, and rhythmic drive' criticized by Bloch celebrated when they appear in the musical language of composers such as Stravinsky, Bartók, and Prokofiev, whereas they seem to be less tolerated in Romanticism. If categorized only as a composer of generic Romantic showpieces, Alkan could understandably be labeled an insignificant composer. Alkan's music becomes more noteworthy when viewed as a forward-looking link between romanticism and the twentieth century.

"Scherzo Diabolico," like *Csardas Macabre*, demonstrates the union between pianistic innovation, virtuosity, and the grotesque. It belongs to the same op. 39 set of minor key etudes as "Le Festin d'Ésope." The title is the only hint Alkan offers of a programmatic allusion, and it immediately presents a clash of musical affects that perfectly establishes a grotesque scene. It implies a mix of 'joking' with the devil, equally jovial and evil. As discussed in Chapter One, the combination of the comic with horror is where the grotesque thrives.

Despite this seeming clash of spirits, many qualities overlap between the scherzo as a genre and the grotesque. The traditional scherzo is generally characterized by a humorous, capricious nature. Elements of surprise, fast tempos, and comic moments are commonplace. A touch of the sinister is all that is needed to suggest a grotesque affect. In Prokofiev's account of the five most significant components of his compositional voice, he describes as the "fifth" line:

...and to regard the fifth, 'grotesque' line which some wish to ascribe me, as simply a deviation from the other lines. In any case I strenuously object to the very word 'grotesque' which has become hackneyed to the point of nausea. As a matter of fact the use of the French word 'grotesque' in this sense is a distortion of the meaning. I would prefer my music to be described as 'Scherzo-ish' in quality, or else by three words describing the various degrees of the scherzo – whimsicality, laughter, mockery.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> S. I. Shlifshtein, *S. Prokofiev: Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1900), 7.

Prokofiev's aversion to the word grotesque aside, this quote ascribes an intrinsic connection between the scherzo and many of the qualities associated with the grotesque.

As discussed in Chapter One, the grotesque aesthetic often depicts distortions of the human body. The scherzo, taken as an outgrowth of the minuet, can be interpreted as a grotesque transformation of a dance form. The faster speed of the scherzo transforms the three-beat pulse of the minuet to a one-beat pulse. The ability to dance at such a tempo is generally lost; the human body can no longer move with the tempo of the music. Alkan's blistering *prestissimo* marking (132 to the dotted half note) certainly exemplifies this phenomenon. Other capricious elements, including sudden contrasts and disjunct thematic material, can also distort the dance-like quality.

"Scherzo Diabolico" follows a standard ternary form. The A section presents broken octaves, rapid arpeggios, and tremolo figurations as recurring virtuosic devices with structural significance. Ex. 13, 14, and 15 indicate these devices in the order in which they appear.

Example 13. Alkan, “Scherzo Diabolico,” op. 39, no. 3, mm 1-12.

Example 13 shows the first 12 measures of Alkan's "Scherzo Diabolico," op. 39, no. 3. The score is in 2/4 time and B-flat major. The first system (measures 1-4) is marked "Diabolicamente," and features a bass line with a *p* (piano) dynamic. The second system (measures 5-8) is labeled "Broken octave figuration" and shows a complex bass line with a *p* dynamic. The third system (measures 9-12) continues the bass line with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic. The right hand is mostly silent in these measures.

Example 14. Alkan, “Scherzo Diabolico,” op. 39, no. 3, mm. 19-24.

Example 14 shows measures 19-24 of the same piece. The score is in 2/4 time and B-flat major. The first system (measures 19-22) features a complex arpeggio figure in the right hand, highlighted by a red box and labeled "Arpeggio figure". The left hand has a "Ped:" (pedal) marking. The second system (measures 23-24) continues the arpeggio figure. The right hand has a *p* (piano) dynamic. The left hand has a *p* (piano) dynamic.

**Example 15. Alkan, “Scherzo Diabolico,” op. 39, no. 3, mm. 31-36.**



These figurations utilize elements of the *ombra* (supernatural) and *tempesta* (storming) topics.<sup>93</sup> These topics are often associated with fast, agitated textures, which here are compounded by Alkan’s transcendent virtuosity. McClelland notes that elements of both topics are often combined in infernal scenes, and this pertains to “Scherzo Diabolico.”<sup>94</sup> The rapid arpeggios are emblematic of the *tempesta* topic, and the tremolo figure is commonly seen in both *ombra* and *tempesta*. Much of this musical material is evocative, though it does not necessarily create a strong thematic or melodic presence. The tremolo section introduces a clear melody, but the other figurations lack melodies. Thus, musical expression and imagery are derived from virtuosic figuration more than from melodies or themes. The transitions between these sections are sudden, with stark dynamic contrasts that occur abruptly.

Ex. 16 shows the final episode of the A section. All three thematic figurations are combined in a chaotic whirlwind, as each fights for supremacy. The rapid contrast of sonorities in such a short period further elevates the diabolic character and disconcerts the listener.

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<sup>93</sup> Clive McClelland, “Ombra and Tempesta,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



Example 16. Alkan, “Scherzo Diabolico,” op. 39, no. 3, mm. 146-175.

The image displays a musical score for Alkan's "Scherzo Diabolico," op. 39, no. 3, measures 146-175. The score is written for piano and features several technical exercises and performance instructions:

- tremolo**: Indicated above the first system of the score.
- arpeggio**: Indicated above the second system of the score.
- tremolo**: Indicated above the third system of the score.
- Espress.**: A performance instruction (Espressivo) appearing in the third system.
- descending scalar runs**: A label pointing to the fourth system of the score.
- diminished arpeggios**: A label pointing to the fifth system of the score.
- broken octaves**: A label pointing to the sixth system of the score.
- Sempre ff**: A performance instruction (Sempre fortissimo) appearing in the sixth system.

The score is divided into five systems, each containing two staves (treble and bass clef). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings (p, f, ff).

**Example 16 continued. Alkan, “Scherzo Diabolico,” op. 39, no. 3, mm. 176-185.**

broken octaves

quasi-timpani

The harmony of “Scherzo Diabolico” is largely diatonic and conventional. Alkan’s prominent use of the Neapolitan sixth chord is noteworthy, considering its thematic significance, and the historic connection between the Neapolitan and the supernatural. Schubert frequently resorts to the Neapolitan chord for his own pieces dealing in supernatural subject matter, such as “Erlkönig” and “Der Doppelgänger.”<sup>95</sup> Masloski argues that the Neapolitan is closely associated with devilish piano music, referencing Scriabin’s *Poème Satanique* as one example.<sup>96</sup> Alkan seems to be following this trend; the Neapolitan is highlighted as the first vertical harmony of the piece in m. 18 (Ex. 17). Alkan favors the Neapolitan throughout his career, a characteristic that will be demonstrated in “Le Festin d’Ésope” in Chapter Four.

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<sup>95</sup> Debbie Ann Masloski, “The Demonic Piano: A Comparative Study of the Devil and Piano Literature,” (DMA diss., Northwestern University, 1999), 103-105.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

**Example 17. Alkan, “Scherzo Diabolico,” op. 39, no. 3, mm. 12-18.**



The contrasting trio section employs a thick octave-based chordal texture deep in the bass register of the instrument (Ex. 18). Textures of this kind are rarely used in nineteenth century pianism because their forceful and muddy sound quality can undermine clarity. Such a timbre is especially suitable for infernal scenes. Liszt similarly utilized dense textures and heavy use of the bass register to depict the darkness of hell in his *Dante Sonata*, as seen in Ex. 19. This texture strongly contrasts with the rapid figuration of the opening A section, and is here the primary source of the expected musical contrast in the scherzo/trio genre.

**Example 18. Alkan, “Scherzo Diabolico,” op. 39, no. 3, mm. 196-207. Trio Section.**



**Example 19. Liszt, *Dante Sonata*, mm. 242-244.**



Thick chordal textures like this are a favorite sonority of Alkan's. They illustrate once again the connection of masculinity and power discussed above in regard to Paganini's virtuosity. Whereas Kawabata argues these elements manifest in primarily theatrical, visual ways in Paganini's performances, in the case of this trio the effect is purely sonic. Scherzo trio sections very often express lighter, more lyrical qualities to contrast with the energy of the A section. Alkan achieves contrast by doing the opposite. This powerful, intense texture displays a fierceness that overrides any sense of lyricism.

The reprise of the A section recycles the original material in typical fashion, with a significant alteration: it is now marked *sempre pianississimo e colle due pedale*. The fury of the dynamic contrasts in the opening is eliminated in favor of a ghostly, muted timbre. The change in sonority both mocks the character of the opening and places additional technical demands on the performer, who must now perform this taxing material with the lightest of touches.

"Scherzo Diabolico" illustrates the unique union of virtuosity, grotesque subject matter, and progressive pianism that defines much of Alkan's mature music. Despite Alkan's reclusive nature and aversion to certain banalities of the virtuoso ascendance, he absorbed influential traits from Paganini and Liszt that he realized through his own individual voice. Alkan's virtuosity functions poetically and structurally, allowing him to explore a variety of sonorities in search of

new developments in musical style. In this case, provocative textures are employed in service of a grotesque aesthetic.

### CHAPTER III: THE GROTESQUE IN ALKAN'S PRELUDES AND SKETCHES

Discussion of Alkan's musical style is disproportionately focused on his large-scale works. As a result, his remarkable technical abilities and the subsequent demands found in his sonatas and etudes are often the primary points of interest. To define Alkan's musical identity entirely through his virtuosity is to neglect a large portion of his varied *oeuvre*. The Op. 31 Preludes and the Op. 63 *Esquisses* offer some of Alkan's most imaginative, charming, and occasionally eccentric music. Also noteworthy are Alkan's five books titled *Recueil de Chants*, modeled after Mendelssohn's *Song without Words*. These miniatures are by and large playable by the competent amateur (although virtuosity is occasionally found). Their musical quality is measured not by developments in virtuosic piano technique, but rather by creativity in sonority and the remarkable variety of styles they contain.

This study focuses on those character pieces illustrating dark humor, fantastical subjects, and unorthodox timbres. The pieces discussed explore some of the ways in which Alkan creates grotesque music without resorting to virtuosic extremes. Eccentric uses of the instrument are found in "Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer" and "Les Diablotins," while bizarre harmonic motion is found in "Les Enharmoniques." In many ways the grotesque aesthetic allowed Alkan to explore innovative musical devices foreshadowing the musical language of the twentieth century. Unorthodox chromaticism, cluster chords, and unsettling sonorities disorient the listener and challenge the conventions of nineteenth-century piano writing.

#### **"Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer," no. 8 from *Vingt-Cinq Préludes*, Op. 31 (1847)**

This prelude in A-flat minor, whose title translates to "The Song of the Madwoman by the Seaside," is a model of Alkan's grotesque use of the instrument. Two primary grotesque motifs are demonstrated in this prelude: the distortion of the human body and the distortion of

the mind. These are depicted through the striking texture, repetitive thematic material, and manipulation of tempo and timing.

Madness as a trope of the nineteenth-century grotesque is expounded in Kayser's *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. In grotesque literature, madness is a foreign force that invades the soul and distorts the sense of humanity. Insanity is perhaps the most common form in which grotesque subject matter is experienced in real life.<sup>97</sup> This madness motif is examined in detail in Hoffman's story *Der Sandman*.<sup>98</sup> Its protagonist Nathanael, a poet, is tormented by childhood trauma which is simultaneously a source of artistic inspiration and a cause of fading sanity. Other grotesque subjects shape the narrative as well, including the legendary sandman, who supposedly steals the eyes of little children in order to feed his own children, and the doll-like automaton Olympia, whose life-like features deceive the story's characters and attract Nathanael's love. Nathanael's madness serves as a point of contact between the real world and these ominous forces. Hoffman makes the line between imagination and reality intentionally ambiguous.<sup>99</sup> This madness distorts reality, in a quintessentially grotesque manner.

The human body serves as a reference point that is often distorted in the grotesque. Brown states "The most characteristic property of grotesque imagery is that it is conceived through, and objectified in, images of the body."<sup>100</sup> While this more obviously applies to the visual arts, the concept still has a fundamental place in the musical grotesque. Brown argues that whatever is comfortable for the human body or voice functions as the reference point which is

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<sup>97</sup> Kayser, Wolfgang Johannes. *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963: 184.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>100</sup> Brown, *Bartók and the Grottesque*, 54.

subject to grotesque manipulation.<sup>101</sup> This comfort level is dictated by what is generally possible for the human voice or body in terms of velocity, register, and volume. Thus, a song in which the tessitura lies far outside a normal range, or a gigue in which the tempo far exceeds what could reasonably be danced to, might be interpreted as grotesque distortions.

“Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer” uses these concepts, madness and the distortion of the body, to paint a chilling grotesque scene. The eponymous mad singer is represented by the unsettling right-hand melody. The tessitura of this hypothetical vocal line is inhumanly high, beginning on B-flat<sup>5</sup> and extending nearly two octaves up to A-flat<sup>7</sup> in the A section, and later on B-flat<sup>7</sup> in the B section. Such a consistently high range would be impossible for any soprano to sing. The melody has a dream-like quality to it and blurs the line between imagination and reality. Alkan is distorting our conception of the human bodies capabilities, and as a result our conception of the *chanson* genre.

Obsessive motivic repetition and a scarcity of expressive markings contribute to the depiction of the singer’s madness. To an obsessive degree, the melodic material in the prelude is derived from motif X, as demonstrated in Ex. 20. Obsession is a common trope associated with the insane, particularly in literary works. This obsessive melody is supplemented by Alkan’s relative avoidance of expressive markings regarding phrasing and dynamic shaping. This lack of phrasing indications creates a feeling of endless wandering, without any sense of the natural direction normally found in an art song. An effective evocation of this eerie atmosphere requires the pianist to maintain a complete uniformity of sound quality that avoids dynamic shaping.

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<sup>101</sup> Brown, *Bartók and the Grotesque*, 54.



Example 20. “Chanson de la folle” mm. 1-9.

The musical score is for a piece titled "Chanson de la folle" by Maurice Ravel, measures 1-9. It is written for Piano or Organ. The tempo is marked "Lento." The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The right hand part begins with a melodic line, and a specific motif is highlighted with a red box and labeled "Motif X" and "Tristo." The left hand part consists of thick, four-note chords in the extreme bass register. Pedal markings include "Ped. sostenuto" and "Pedale sempre molto sostenuto." The score is presented in two systems, with the first system showing the right hand and the second system showing the left hand.

The left-hand accompaniment also contributes to this grotesque scene. Alternating cadential 6/4 and dominant chords are, aside from the final two measures, the only two harmonies used throughout the prelude, and the denial of tonic resolution keeps the audience in an anxious state. Additionally, thick, four-note chords are placed in the extreme bass register of the instrument, producing a muddy effect that makes the harmonic quality of each chord difficult to distinguish. Alkan used a similar texture in “Scherzo Diabolico,” discussed in Chapter Two, and it is more commonly seen in his ‘orchestral’ piano works, where he attempts to match the sound level of a full orchestra. Its appearance in the *chanson* genre, however, is unexpected. This relates closely to Sheinberg’s ideas about comfortable music using a comfortable register.<sup>102</sup>

Here the texture lies outside of the piano’s normal ‘comfort zone’ as well as outside of our aural

<sup>102</sup> Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich*, 210. What is comfortable for the human body or voice - in terms of pitch, volume, speed, or register - is exaggerated to grotesque, inhuman proportions.

comfort zone. Not only is the overall atmosphere disconcerting, but the sonority is also difficult for the listener to process.

The prelude's A section carries on in this wandering manner, with minimal melodic variation and no variation in harmony or rhythm. The B section, beginning at m. 17, continues with similar material, now modulated to the parallel major. The development of Alkan's theme is achieved through an extended *piu forte ed animato poco a poco*. This gradual increase in musical energy and speed in m. 26 begins the approach to the climax (Ex. 21). The C-flat returns in each cadential 6/4, which along with the melodic D and F form a secondary diminished seventh of the dominant and foreshadows a return to tonic minor. Here, the rhythmic motif develops into constant sixteenth notes, illustrating the height of the subject's distress. The energy peaks at m. 28, with the sustained repetition of the ascending B flat – E flat fourth that opens the piece. The repetitions are supported with a *diminuendo e molto rallentando* that begins to temper the preceding chaos. The entire episode can be interpreted as a manic outburst from the subject.

**Example 21. Alkan, "Chanson de la folle" mm. 26-33. Climax.**

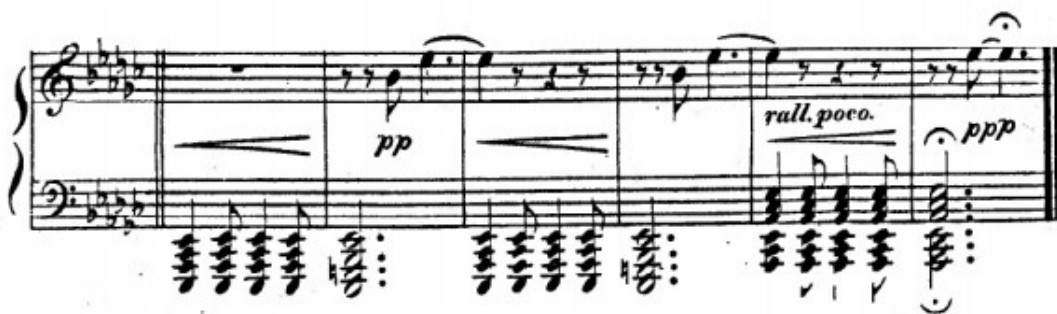
The image displays a musical score for the climax of Alkan's "Chanson de la folle" (mm. 26-33). The score is written for piano and features two systems of music. The first system (mm. 26-28) is characterized by rapid sixteenth-note runs in the treble staff and sustained chords in the bass staff. Annotations include "cres." (crescendo), "augmento." (augmentation), "Musical Climax", "sempre Ped." (pedal point), and "diminuendo e". A red box highlights a specific chord in the bass staff labeled "Pedal point" and "vii°7/V". The second system (mm. 29-33) shows a transition to "molto rallentando." and "pp a tempo." (pianissimo at tempo) with a final melodic flourish in the treble staff marked "A".

The reprise of the A section at m. 32 contains a new distortion. The melody returns in a fragmented state, with sporadic sections omitted and replaced with rests. Ex. 22 shows that the subject appears to be singing only part of her original melody. The missing sections of melody reinforce the impression of the singer's disordered state, as if she is losing her train of thought or is succumbing to exhaustion. The melody eventually reverts to the B flat – E flat motif that opens the piece and finally ends ominously on E-flat, never resolving to the melody to the tonic root (Ex. 23).

**Example 22. “Chanson de la folle” mm. 34-37.**



**Example 23. “Chanson de la Folle” mm. 40-45.**



“Chanson de la folle au bord de la mer” provides an important example of Alkan’s grotesque style. The unusual, evocative texture creates a haunting timbre in a similar fashion to

Berlioz's "Dream of a Witches' Sabbath," discussed in Chapter One. Alkan's pursuit of novel pianistic sonorities echoes Berlioz's pursuit of strange orchestral sonorities.<sup>103</sup>

**"Les Enharmoniques," No. 41 from *Esquisses*, Op. 63 (1861)**

"Les Enharmoniques" is an important example of grotesque music that lacks any reference to explicitly grotesque subject matter. This rather theoretical character piece is saturated with chromaticism and deceitful resolutions. The listener is constantly tricked as to the true key center, and many strange chromatic harmonies defy the traditional system of root-based analysis using Roman-numeral analysis. The playfulness of the deceptive harmonic motions is sarcastic, while certain dissonant chords would have shocked the listeners of the 1860s as crude and unpleasant. These harmonic peculiarities occupy a traditional four-part chorale texture. Such a texture provides a familiar frame of reference for the listener that carries certain expectations about harmony and voice leading. Alkan's marking of *Cantabile Dolce e Sostenuto* aligns with the chorale texture, but is somewhat inconsistent with the spirit of the grotesque. The conflict between startling harmonic twists and a sweet, singing style ultimately exacerbate the sense of irony. Without referencing the devil or other typically grotesque images, Alkan paints a compelling grotesque portrait purely through the manipulation of theoretical conventions.

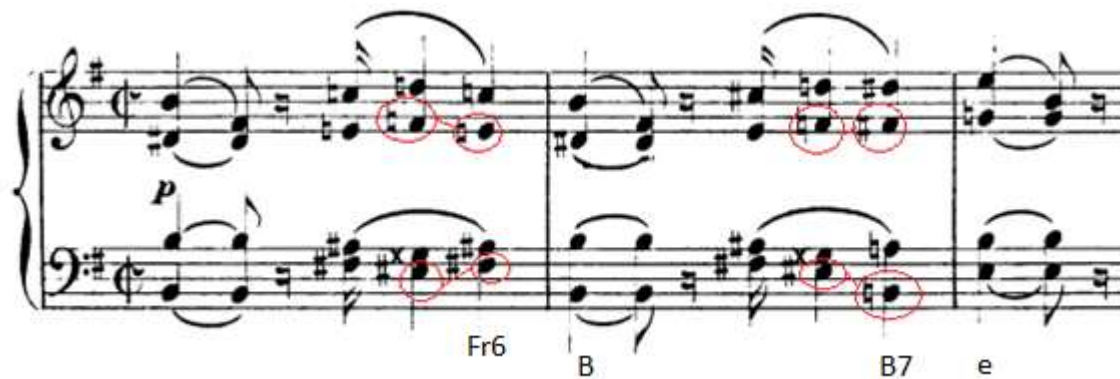
The first two measures present a harmonic event that recurs throughout the rest of the piece. The circled E-sharp and F-natural in Ex. 24 both 'correctly' resolve to the subsequent French augmented sixth chord in m. 1, only to 'incorrectly' resolve towards the dominant B<sup>7</sup> of e minor in the following measure. When isolated, the chord appears to be an enharmonic first-inversion D minor triad. The context however reveals that the chord functions as a startlingly

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<sup>103</sup> Pinson, "Shattered Frame," 161. Pinson discusses several such examples of grotesque orchestral sonorities taken from Berlioz' *Treatise on Instrumentation*. The use of four bassoons which are "devoid of brilliance and nobility... and have a tendency toward the grotesque" is one such example.

unorthodox chromatic embellishment. Alkan further disorients his listener with different resolutions. Using this chord as a kind of pivot, Alkan modulates to many different keys throughout the piece in rapid succession.

**Example 24. “Les Enharmoniques” mm. 1-2.**



M. 9 contains several jarring chromatic embellishments of a fully-diminished seventh chord. This instance belongs to a phrase of successive diminished harmonies, resulting in tonal ambiguity and an elusive arrival point. The chromatic moments highlighted in Ex. 25 serve to prolong the diminished chord played on the downbeat of the measure. These harmonies are fiercely dissonant; featuring a major seventh followed by a minor ninth. The melody and bassline both consist of four-note chromatic motifs that steadily rise in register towards a brief climax that abruptly transitions towards the B section. Eddie suggests that the potent chromaticism in “Les Enharmoniques” may possibly be a parody of a Wagnerian sickness rebuked by Alkan.<sup>104</sup> This level of chromaticism is also a form of grotesque hyperbole, and the result is a period of incredible instability.

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<sup>104</sup> Eddie, “Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and Music,” 129.

**Example 25. “Les Enharmoniques” mm. 9-10.**

Maj 7th

Min 9th

*cresc. sempre.*

Vii°7

Chromatic Embellishments

Alkan provides more harmonic twists and turns in mm. 26-30. After arriving on a relatively convincing dominant C<sup>7</sup> harmony, Alkan progresses to a German augmented sixth chord, which is deceptively miss-spelled and instead resolves to secondary dominant B-flat<sup>7</sup> (Ex. 26). This is one of a series of devious harmonic resolutions that repeatedly subvert the listener's anticipations.

**Example 26. “Les Enharmoniques” mm. 26-30.**

*p*

*ten:*

*Sempre Dolce e Sostenuto*

*p*

*p*

C<sup>7</sup>

Ger<sup>6</sup> (miss-spelled)

B<sup>b</sup>7

E<sup>b</sup>7

A<sup>°</sup>

Thus, in quick succession Alkan has used (or mis-used) harmonic function to invoke the grotesque in three different ways. The overwhelming frequency of these events in such a short piece illustrates the role of hyperbole in Alkan's humor. Alkan's ruthless adherence to proper

voice leading procedures and avoidance of enharmonic substitutions results in myriad double-flats and double-sharps, a maddeningly complex notation that reveals Alkan's obsessive personality.

**“Les Diabolins,” No. 45 from *Esquisses*, Op. 63 (1861)**

“Les Diabolins” is an audacious foreshadowing of twentieth-century pianistic effects. “The Imps” features absurd contrasts and bold cluster chords. The devil has been a frequent subject for the grotesque, and has often been depicted through “outlandish or unpleasant” sounds.<sup>105</sup> Alkan curiously avoids the tritone in his depiction of the devil, and much of the imp's theme is quiet and mysterious. Instead, Alkan relies on the novel tone color of cluster chords and the volatility of rapid register shifts to portray the imps. These little devils are especially well-suited for the grotesque. They are scary, yet their small stature and mischievous nature give them a rather comical rather than purely evil affect. Pinson explores the grotesque of the gnome creature portrayed in Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, one that exhibits similar characteristics to the imp.<sup>106</sup> A similar creature is used as the subject of Ravel's “Scarbo.” Imps typically annoy or torment their targets rather than cause severe pain.

“Les Diabolins” once again demonstrates how hyperbole can be used to invoke absurdity and the grotesque. The crude, cluster chord texture is reinforced by driving rhythmic repetition and persistent *staccatissimo* articulation markings. This texture treats the piano as a percussive, mechanical instrument, anticipating techniques seen in the music of Bartók and Cowell (among others) in the twentieth century. Despite the heavily dissonant chord clusters, Alkan maintains a strong sense of tonality by cleverly embedding a diatonic melody in his clusters (Ex. 27). The

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<sup>105</sup> Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque*, 125.

<sup>106</sup> Pinson “The Shattered Frame,” 28.



final iteration of this theme occurs in its most ludicrous texture, where the dynamic level increases to *fortissimo*, the distance between the hands expands to four octaves, and rhythmic values are halved, doubling the speed (Ex. 28).

**Example 27. “Les Diablotins” mm. 11-12.**



**Example 28. “Les Diablotins” m. 52.**



Alkan establishes a grotesque setting in the introduction to the principal theme at m. 11. A heroic E-flat major declaration in the opening bar evokes a fanfare, establishing a conventional frame of reference. Alkan immediately shatters this frame in the following measure with high register rolled clusters. Similar high register clusters are also found in Variation 13 of “Le Festin d’Ésope,” which will be explored in the following chapter. These two textures alternate in an argumentative manner before arriving at the primary theme in m. 11 (Ex. 29). The amusingly



trite E-flat major theme consists solely of chords that simply outline the tonic triad. As the dialogue progresses, the thickness of these chords is increased. The absurd grandiosity of this theme as it builds in mm. 8-10 is ironic, and the cluster chords that follow are clear mockery. The arrival at m. 11 indicates that the menacing imp has overcome this E-flat character, and it never returns for the remainder of the piece.

Example 29. “Les Diablotins” mm. 1-10.

Op. 45  
Lentement.

*ff et sonore.* *p*

*Pédale soutenue.*

*ff* *p*

*Sempre Ped.*

*ff* *p* *ff* *p*

*ff* *Sempre Ped.*

*Slargando.*

Later in m. 31, Alkan interrupts the imp theme with an incongruous *Quasi-Santo* (saint-like) theme. This brief four-bar phrase (shown in Ex. 30) features a chorale texture and a lyrical melody, portraying a sublime affect to contrast the surrounding devilry. This subject appears one more time at m. 41, in the same four bar form. This second iteration is marked *Quasi-Santa*; this

feminine version is signaled by the higher tessitura. The abrupt, brief nature of this theme gives it an insincere and sarcastic effect.

**Example 30. “Les Diablotins” mm. 29-36, 41-42.**

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system (mm. 29-36) is in 3/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It begins with the instruction *Sempre p* above the staff. The right hand features a melodic line with frequent triplets and sixteenth-note patterns, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and single notes. Dynamic markings include *p* (piano) and *rf* (rassordito forte). The system concludes with the tempo change *Quasi-Santo.* and the instruction *Dolce e sosten.* (Dolce e sostenuto). The second system (mm. 37-42) continues the piece, featuring a more active right hand with many sixteenth-note runs and a left hand with sustained chords. A forte (*f*) dynamic is marked at the beginning of this system. The third system (mm. 41-42) returns to the *Quasi-Santo.* tempo and features a slower, more sustained texture. The right hand has long notes, and the left hand has a simple bass line. The dynamic marking *p, e Sost.* (piano, e Sostenuendo) is present.

#### CHAPTER IV: THE GROTESQUE IN “LE FESTIN D’ÉSOPE”

The *Douze études dans tous les tons mineurs*, Op. 39 (1857) have been written about extensively in recent decades and are perhaps the most celebrated of Alkan’s major compositions. This is deserved, as these 12 minor key études contain some of Alkan’s most innovative piano writing and showcase his finest stylistic qualities. These enormous works demonstrate the potential of creative virtuosity to unlock new sonorities, and to express sarcastic humor, intense passion, and a profound sense of drama and excitement.

The set’s 275 pages of music are steeped in the grotesque aesthetic. Although many prominent grotesque traits are found throughout the set, this analysis will focus exclusively on the last étude, “Le Festin d’Ésope.” Rhythmic drive, dry thematic material, dense pianism, and abrupt contrasts are ubiquitous in these études and are generally consistent with the grotesque. Alkan manipulates harmony, texture, and structure in novel ways to foster a combination of humor and horror.

Alkan’s somewhat vague title has invited some discussion as to its origin. The story of Aesop’s feast involves the story-teller preparing a banquet for his master, Xanthus, who instructs him to provide the finest meats available. Every dish consists of some variation of tongue, which Aesop proclaims represents both the best and worst qualities of humanity. A banquet of variations on a single dish is metaphorically represented in music as a theme and variations. Aesop’s clever, yet ironic sense of humor is appropriately depicted in Alkan’s musical language.

Alternatively, several writers<sup>107</sup> have imagined Le Festin to depict the various animals that appear throughout Aesop’s fables. This conception is primarily inspired by Alkan’s

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<sup>107</sup> May Phang, “Genres in Flux: Douze Etudes Dans Les Tons Mineurs, Op. 39 by Charles-Valentin Alkan,” (DMA Diss., Temple University, 2004), 67. Robert Dale Marler, “The Role of the Piano Etude in the Works

*abbajante* (barking) marking in Variation 22. Proponents of this theory have suggested instances of animal imagery found in other variations. This theory is somewhat problematic, as variation 22 is the only irrefutable animal reference. Other animalistic referents are purely speculative. Here, barking is more likely a grotesque distortion of the hunting horn topic, as will be discussed below.

Overall, I find the banquet explanation to be far more compelling. The animal theory has partial merit in that Alkan's crude textures can occasionally sound animalistic. There is also a historical connection between the grotesque and animal imagery. I will argue that these intriguing sonorities are a product of Alkan's grotesque distortions of musical topics rather than of an explicit objective to represent the animals of Aesop's fables.

### **“Le Festin d’Ésope:” Forerunners**

Alkan was in many ways a classicist. This is reflected in all aspects of his musical life. His preferred teaching material included Bach, Beethoven, and Weber, in addition to contemporaries such as Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Schumann.<sup>108</sup> His *Petits Concerts* of the 1870s always featured one substantial Baroque work and one substantial Classical work in addition to Romantic composers such as Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Schumann. Earlier composers such as Couperin, Scarlatti, and Rameau also appeared on occasion.<sup>109</sup> Reviews of the *Petits Concerts* praise Alkan's strict faithfulness to the score, with few liberties taken.<sup>110</sup> His

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of Charles-Valentin Alkan”, (DMA Diss., University of Cincinnati, 1990), 58. William Alexander Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 73.

<sup>108</sup> William Alexander Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 205.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>110</sup> Eddie, *Alkan: His Life and His Music*, 180.

dedication to classicism reveals much about Alkan's musical language and possible sources of inspiration.

Two earlier theme-and-variation works, Beethoven's *Thirty-two Variations in C minor*, WoO 80 (1806) and Mendelssohn's *Variations Sérieuses*, Op. 54 (1841) are likely models for "Le Festin D'Ésope;" both feature virtuosic explorations of piano texture and organize many of the variations into unified pairings. This structural device is an essential component of the grotesque distortions found in *Le Festin*.

Beethoven C-minor variations contain several challenging technical devices, including rapid scalar and arpeggiated figuration, parallel-thirds, tremolo patterns, and various kinds of octave techniques (both *legato* and of the more powerful *bravura* style). The eight-bar theme is built upon a descending chromatic-bass line, giving the variations a strong harmonic component. Beethoven offers only one explicit tempo marking for the whole piece: the opening *allegretto*. Although the various affects and figurations explored require the performer to adopt subtle changes in tempo over the course of the piece, this singular tempo conception is a source of unity that distinguishes this work from many other variation sets (for example *Variations Sérieuses*) that contain several fundamentally different tempo markings.

Beethoven frequently organizes his variations in pairs and occasionally in groups of three or four. Beethoven accomplishes this by exchanging the roles of the hands in variations 1-3, 10-11, and 20-21. Ex. 31 and 32 illustrate these relationships.

Example 31. Beethoven, Variations in C minor, WoO 80, Var. 1-3.

**VAR. I.**



*p leggiermente*

**VAR. II.**



*leggiermente p*

**VAR. III.**



*p*

Example 32. Beethoven, Variations in C minor, WoO 80, Variations 10-11, 20-21.

The image displays four systems of musical notation for piano variations. Each system is a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The key signature is C minor (two flats). The variations are labeled 'Var. X', 'Var. XI', 'Var. XX', and 'Var. XXI'. Each variation begins with the instruction 'sempre forte' (sf). Variation X features a rapid sixteenth-note pattern in the bass and a melody in the treble. Variation XI features a rapid sixteenth-note pattern in the treble and a melody in the bass. Variation XX features a rapid sixteenth-note pattern in the bass and a melody in the treble. Variation XXI features a rapid sixteenth-note pattern in the treble and a melody in the bass. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and fingerings.

In variations 7-8 and 13-14, the texture introduced in the first variation is embellished or thickened (Ex. 33). In each of the groupings in this piece, the musical character of the first is preserved in the second, strengthening the link in each case.



**Example 33. Beethoven, Variations in C minor, Var. 7-8, 13-14.**

The image displays four musical staves from Beethoven's Variations in C minor. 
   
Var. VII: Treble and bass staves. Treble has a melodic line with a slur and a fermata. Bass has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics include *p*.
   
Var. XIII: Treble and bass staves. Treble has a triplet of eighth notes. Bass has a simple accompaniment. Dynamics include *p*.
   
Var. VIII: Treble and bass staves. Treble has a complex melodic line with slurs and fingerings (3, 2, 4, 2). Bass has a steady eighth-note accompaniment.
   
Var. XIV: Treble and bass staves. Treble has a rapid sixteenth-note passage with fingerings (4, 5, 5, 4, 4, 2, 4, 2, 1). Bass has a simple accompaniment. The instruction *sempre staccato* is written above the bass staff.

The structural device of paired variations in which the musical character of the first variation is preserved in the second is also found in Mendelssohn's *Variations Sérieuses* (Ex. 34). Mendelssohn introduces a triplet figuration in Variation 8 that is developed further in Variation 9. In Variation 16 he uses a broken-chord figuration; the roles of the hands are exchanged in the following variation.

**Example 34. Mendelssohn, Variations Sérieuses, op. 54, Var. 8-9, 16-17.**

The image displays two musical staves from Mendelssohn's Variations Sérieuses.
   
Var. 8: Treble and bass staves. Treble has a triplet of eighth notes. Bass has a simple accompaniment. Dynamics include *sf* and *p*. The tempo marking *Allegro vivace* is present.
   
Var. 9: Treble and bass staves. Treble has a triplet of eighth notes. Bass has a simple accompaniment. Dynamics include *sf* and *cresc.*

**Example 34 continued.**



Pairings like this occur throughout *Le Festin*. The manipulation of these pair-relationships is the primary structural means Alkan uses to produce grotesque distortions. Whereas Beethoven and Mendelssohn maintain substantial similarity between the members of each pair, Alkan often maintains just enough of a musical connection to indicate that a link is present. The musical ideas in the first variation are then mocked, distorted, or exaggerated to extremes in the second. Frames of reference are routinely shattered immediately after they are presented, continuously disorienting the audience. Alkan frequently selects various popular musical topics of the nineteenth century as the subjects for these pairings, and thus it is the style of the topic itself that becomes distorted.

**“Le Festin D’Ésope:” Analytical contexts**

Alkan’s theme is simple, concise, and emblematic of many of his style traits. It contains dry articulation, blocked chordal texture, a conventional phrase structure, and economical

motivic unity. Alkan's tempo marking *allegretto senza licenza quantunque* instructs the performer to play 'without any license whatsoever,' discouraging all rubato or fluctuation in speed. Such rigidity differs from certain Romantic performance conventions that encourage flexibility, and it may even be construed as cold or mechanical. This strictness differentiates Alkan from Beethoven and Mendelssohn, creating a musical environment in which the grotesque thrives.

## Harmony

Alkan's predilection for Classicism is partially reflected in his harmonic language. Smith describes Alkan's language as "basically diatonic, simple and direct."<sup>111</sup> Alkan was indeed a bold harmonic innovator, however eccentric harmonic moments tend to appear abruptly in otherwise conservative harmonic environments. This distinguishes Alkan from other contemporary harmonic innovators such as Wagner, whose more daring harmonic events tend to manifest organically out of environments of gradually increasing chromatic complexity. The theme and variations structure is ideally suited for this manner of harmonic invention; Alkan's theme provides a familiar harmonic framework in which jarring moments can be injected unexpectedly.

The theme of "Le Festin D'Ésope" is an eight-bar phrase, constructed from two four-bar phrases that can be divided further into two-bar sub-phrases. The first four bars consist entirely of conventional diatonic harmony. The second four bar phrase employs a harmonic progression in descending fifths, including several secondary dominants (Ex. 35).

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<sup>111</sup> Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Enigma* (London: Kahn & Averill: 1976), 104.

Example 35. Alkan, “Le Festin d’Ésope,” theme, mm. 1-8. Harmonic scheme.

Allegretto senza licenza quantunque (126 = )

9<sup>no</sup> 12

*p*



i V i i iv V



V<sup>7</sup>/iv V<sup>7</sup>/vii V<sup>7</sup>/III III VI iiø<sup>7</sup> V<sup>7</sup> i

Strange dissonances are often generated by Alkan’s obsessive motivic repetition. When that repetition inevitably clashes with the harmonic motion of the theme, the motivic motion does not yield. Rather, Alkan embraces the contrived dissonance, with sarcastic and humorous results. A notable example of this phenomenon found outside of *Le Festin* is *Recueil de Chant* Op. 38b, No. 2 in which an F is repeated in the middle of the texture throughout the song, despite the fact that the song is in A minor and traverses several incompatible key areas.

The technique is introduced immediately in Variation 1 of *Le Festin* (Ex. 36). The melody of the original theme is transplanted to the bass, while the right hand develops the chordal motif of the theme. M. 5 combines these two components in such a way that the tonic E aligns with its dominant, putting some inflection on the dissonance between the two. In each of the following measures, the chordal motif is transposed up by a third. Still harsher dissonances are found in m. 8, where the tonicization of the dominant implied by the right-hand conflicts with

the theme, which remains diatonic. The result is a brief but jarring harmonic moment where A, E, A-sharp, and D-sharp are played simultaneously. This instance mocks the harmonic language of the theme.

**Example 36. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 1, mm. 5-8.**



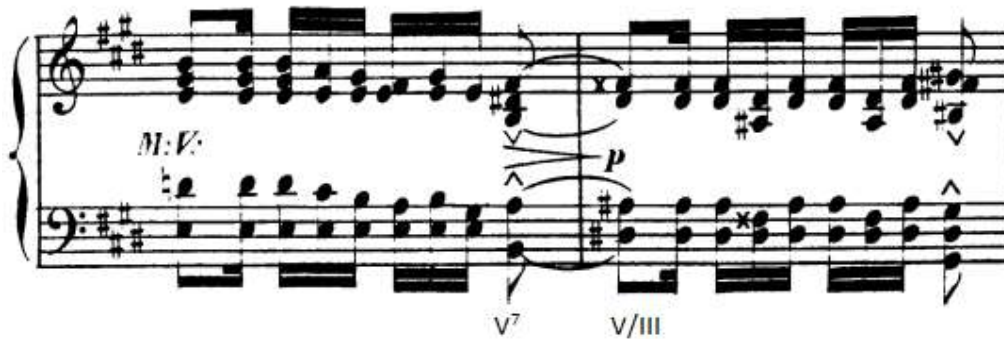
A similar clash occurs in Variation 10, which belongs to a group of four variations in the parallel major that is predominantly lyrical and legato, in contrast to the dry articulation utilized in much of the rest of the piece. This particular variation is characterized by the *Scampanatino* (bell-like) descending four-note motif in the upper register. The E, D-sharp, C-sharp, B figure coexists sweetly with the underlying harmony for the first five bars of the variation, but as the phrase moves toward several applied dominants, the refusal of the bell figure to alter its pitches creates sarcastic dissonances (Ex. 37).

**Example 37. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 10, mm. 85-88.**

The musical score for Example 37, Variation 10, mm. 85-88, is presented in two systems. The first system shows a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a supporting line. A red circle highlights a specific interval in the treble staff, labeled 'Min 9th'. The second system continues the melody and bass line. Another red circle highlights an interval in the treble staff, labeled 'Maj 7th', and a third red circle highlights an interval in the treble staff, labeled 'Min 9th'.

As observed earlier in “Les Enharmoniques,” Alkan occasionally resolves cadences in an unusually deceptive manner. Ex. 38 illustrates this kind of resolution, which defies the harmonic progression, otherwise relatively consistent up to this point. Half-way through the eight-bar phrase, the harmonic scheme of the theme moves from  $V^7$  to  $V^7/IV$ , beginning a sequence of descending fifths embellished with secondary dominants. In Variation 21 Alkan substitutes a move from  $V^7$  to  $V^7/IV$  with a move from  $V^7$  to  $V^7/III$ , subverting the listener’s expectations with an uncommon resolution. The leading tone remains as a common tone, while the chordal seventh resolves up to the fifth of the new chord.

**Example 38. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 21, mm. 172-173.**



Several variations consist of extended sections of extremely unstable harmony, another form of grotesque hyperbole in which Alkan prolongs dissonant harmonies to such a degree that the sense of tonality is threatened. These variations are often saturated with fully diminished seventh chords. Rather than operating within the conventions of dissonance and resolution, these successive diminished chords function as a grotesque sonority that mocks the harmonic scheme of the theme.

For example, in variation 8, each melodic note of the theme is embedded into a diminished seventh chord (Ex. 39). Alkan is cleverly demonstrating the versatility of diminished sonorities, which can theoretically function with any melody note. Instability is enhanced further by the tremolo bass figure and the syncopation of the melody. As Sheinberg states: “Being based on accumulation, the grotesque’s imports are always exaggerated.”<sup>112</sup> Here the accumulation of diminished chords approaches absurdity. This extremely persistent use of diminished chords is similarly found in variations 13, 19, and 24 (Ex. 40).

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<sup>112</sup> Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000), 210.

Example 39. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 8, mm. 65-67.

**VIII.**

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 65-66) features a treble staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. The melody begins with a half rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a half note A4, and a quarter note B4. The bass staff plays a continuous eighth-note accompaniment, starting on G3 and moving up stepwise. The second system (measure 67) continues the melody in the treble staff with a half note C5, a quarter note D5, and a half note E5. The bass staff continues the eighth-note accompaniment, now starting on A3 and moving up stepwise. The piece concludes with a final chord in the treble staff.



Example 40. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variations 13, 19, 24, mm. 105-106, 153-154, 198-199.

**XIII.**  
 C pedal point  
 Diminished chords

**XIX.**  
 Lamentevole.  
 rinf. p  
 Ped.  
 Diminished chords

**XXIV.**  
 Cresci poco a poco.  
 ff  
 Ped.  
 Diminished chords

Variation 3 introduces a harmonic system that Alkan revisits several times of the course of the piece. The theme is reharmonized entirely over a C pedal point, at first implying a C dominant seventh. Isolated, the variation is highly unstable, as chromatic passing tones D-sharp,

F-sharp, F-natural, and C-sharp conflict with the apparent underlying harmony. Close dissonances also arise from the ostinato C and B-flat in the middle of the texture. The melody of the theme stays largely intact, aside from B-flat in place of the B-natural. However, the ‘tonic’ E takes on a new function as it seems to be an apparent leading tone.

In the context of its surrounding variations, this harmony can be understood as a prolongation of a German augmented sixth chord, which resolves properly to the cadential 6/4 chord in the following variation. Variations 3 and 4 form a complementary pair; harmonically, rhythmically, and texturally. The extended prolongation of the tense German augmented sixth in variation 3 creates an unusual sonority that briefly undermines tonality but is resolved in variation 4. (Extended periods of harmonic instability prolonged over a pedal C also occur in variations 13 and 24.) The rhythm of the left hand in variation 4 displaces the two-sixteenth-note pattern of variation 3 and situates it in the deep bass in an ironic commentary (Ex. 41).

**Example 41. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variations 3 and 4.**

The image displays two musical staves, labeled III and IV, representing Variations 3 and 4. Both staves are in G major (one sharp). Variation III (labeled 'Ger<sup>5</sup>') features a piano (*p*) dynamic. The right hand plays a melody of eighth notes, while the left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Variation IV (labeled 'Cad<sup>6/4</sup>') begins with the instruction 'Con ducto' and a piano (*p*) dynamic. The right hand plays a melody of eighth notes, and the left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The notation includes various musical symbols such as clefs, key signatures, dynamics, and articulation marks.

Variation 4 follows the harmonic instability of variation 3 with a grotesque textural sonority. The second half of the phrase, shown in Ex. 42, utilizes a voicing of octaves divided at the fifth in the right hand, giving the timbre an eerie, hollow quality. The doubling of the melody note causes apparent parallel fifths and is typically avoided in the common practice era, however

it is occasionally used in grotesque operatic moments.<sup>113</sup> The repeated E in the bass texture also produces occasional dissonances against the right-hand material. This hollow sonority is enhanced by the widely spaced registers. This pair of variations illustrate how Alkan's pursuit of grotesque sonorities is achieved through relationships of rhythm, harmony, and texture.

**Example 42. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 4 mm. 37-40.**



In those variations that mostly adhere to the theme's original harmonic progression, a notable departure is often found on the ii<sup>7</sup> which precedes the final V-i cadence. Alkan frequently substitutes a lowered second scale degree here, whether operating as a part of a Neapolitan harmony or a more horizontal passage. As noted in the Chapter Three, the Neapolitan is commonly invoked in instances pertaining to the supernatural or the devil, as in Schubert's "Erlkönig," Scriabin's *Poème satanique*,<sup>114</sup> and Alkan's own "Scherzo Diabolique" (Ex. 43 and 44). In "Le Festin d'Ésope," the lowered supertonic often corresponds with other grotesque musical devices, including powerful octave-based chords, eerie timbres, and virtuosic figuration. Notable is the use of the dominant F<sup>7</sup> in variation 20 (mm. 167-168 of ex. 45), which resolves by tritone to B<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>113</sup> Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, "The Musical Representation of the Grotesque in Nineteenth-Century Opera," *The Opera Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (January 2000): 34,46.

<sup>114</sup> Debbie Ann Masloski, "The Demonic Piano: A Comparative Study of the Devil and Piano Literature," (DMA Diss., Northwestern University: 1999), 200.

Example 43. Alkan, “Scherzo Diabolico,” mm. 32-39.

*p, e molto espressivo*

*f*

Example 44. Schubert, “Erlkönig,” mm. 109-118.

ä - ch - zen - de Kind, er - reicht den

*ff*

Hof mit Müß und Noth; in seinen Armen das Kind war todt.

*Recit.*

*Andante.*

*fz*

*fp*

*pp*



Example 45. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variations 5, 7, 20, mm. 47-48, 62-63, 167-168.

The image displays three staves of musical notation from the piece "Le Festin d'Ésope" by Camille Saint-Saëns. The first staff features a complex texture with red circles highlighting specific passages. The second staff includes the instruction "Sempre cresc:" and "pp", with a red circle highlighting a passage. The third staff includes the instruction "Sempre" and a red rectangle highlighting a passage.

### Virtuosity and Hyperbolic Textures

Alkan’s innovations in keyboard texture are his most commonly recognized contributions to piano writing. The theme and variations offered him a form through which he could freely explore the widest ranges of textures and sonorities, and “Le Festin d’Ésope” showcases some of his most creative pianistic writing. Often these textures produce shocking effects, and as a result they are a key manifestation of the grotesque in *Le Festin*.

Alkan’s technical demands push the instrument far beyond what had previously been perceived as possible, and thus his virtuosic figuration becomes a grotesque distortion of the human body’s capabilities. This style is characterized, among many other aspects, by extreme levels of density and velocity. According to Sheinberg, the grotesque is often of a hyperbolic

nature, distorting the environment that it inhabits through extreme exaggeration.<sup>115</sup> Belonging to the étude genre, *Le Festin* includes many virtuosic sections that distort the thematic material to disorient the audience.

Variations 14 and 15 form a unified pair imitating a trumpet call. The trumpet can be a signifier of several closely related topics, including marches (both military and non-military) and theatrical processions or overtures.<sup>116</sup> In all cases, the trumpet generally assumes a heroic affect,<sup>117</sup> which is appropriately found in Variation 14. Using a single line doubled by both hands in the treble register, the dynamic marking, staccato articulation, rapid repeated notes, and arpeggiation create a bright, heroic affect. In the second half of the phrase, imitative counterpoint is introduced providing greater momentum and excitement. Technical difficulties begin moderately, but the texture gradually increases in density from single notes to double notes and finally to triadic figures as the variation progresses (Ex. 46).

This increased power drives forward into Variation 15, where Alkan expands the texture to mammoth virtuosic proportions. The chordal texture has become octave based, the left hand has travelled to the deep bass register, and the left hand now plays a counter-melody to the continuing trumpet call motif in the right hand. The texture is so massive in its volume and intensity that the heroic character of the trumpet call is overwhelmed by the grotesquely powerful wall of sound. This level of bravura pianism would have been extreme even for Liszt; Alkan uses it to disorient the listener and distort the affect of the trumpet topic.

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<sup>115</sup> Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich*, 210.

<sup>116</sup> Andrew Haringer, "Hunt, Military, and Pastoral Topics" in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, (Oxford University Press:2014).

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

Example 46. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variations 14-15, mm. 113, 115, 117, 121.

**XIV.**

*Trombata*  
*f*

**XV.**

Variations 17 and 18 are linked as a depiction of the brilliant style, signified by the *piano* dynamic, the *leggiermente* marking, and the rapid decorative passagework.<sup>118</sup> The brilliant style, a mainstay of Classical-era pianism, is often associated with Mozart's keyboard concertos and continues to be a common element of the Nineteenth-century keyboard concerto language. This brand of virtuosity is defined not by bravura or power, but rather by a light, quiet touch, and an emphasis on delicacy and clarity. As discussed in Chapter Two, the brilliant style is found occasionally in Alkan's youthful works but is later supplanted by the bravura style; pianism which is in many ways starkly contrasting to the brilliant style.

The figuration in Variation 17 is exceptionally virtuosic (Ex. 47). Restricted by Alkan's opening tempo marking *Allegretto senza licenza quantunque* (without any license whatsoever), the pianist is required to maintain the metronome marking of eighth note equals 126. At this tempo, unforgiving velocity and the saturation of embellishing figures undercut the charming, pleasing nature generally associated with the brilliant style. While the variation is undoubtedly impressive, the sonic effect of the relentless speed is jarring rather than pleasant.

Variation 18 intensifies this style. The left-hand accompaniment figure is divided into a more rapid texture, with occasional off-beat countermelodies, as shown in Ex. 48. The embellished diminished figures found in the right hand of m. 148, also shown in Ex. 48, create quasi-cluster effects at the required tempo. This variation has become a caricature of the brilliant style; the charming, graceful affect commonly associated with this topic has been subverted through hyperbolic virtuosity.

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<sup>118</sup> Roman Ivanovitch, "The Brilliant Style," in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, (Oxford University Press:2014).



Example 47. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 17, m. 137.

XVII.

*p, e leggermente.*

*pp*

Example 48. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 18, mm. 145-146, 148.

XVIII.

*Sempre p, e leggerissimamente*

*pp*

Counter melody

Diminished clusters

Variations 21 and 22 employ the hunt topic, evoking the hunting horn, which served to enliven the hunters and summon the dogs.<sup>119</sup> The staccato chordal texture and arpeggiated melodic motion of the horn motive recall the trumpet figuration of Variation 14. Aside from the noteworthy harmonic resolutions previously discussed, variation 21 is a rather conventional portrayal of the hunt.

Variation 22, however, a notable example of Alkan's sarcastic humor, portrays the dogs that would have been part of the hunt. Dogs themselves would not ordinarily have been portrayed musically in connection with the hunt topic. Kayser's argument that animal imagery is closely connected to the grotesque applies here.<sup>120</sup> Human-animal hybrids are often used to evoke the grotesque in the visual arts, and animalistic effects are likewise found in the musical grotesque.<sup>121</sup>

The right-hand theme from variation 21 remains in place, while the *abbajante* (barking) chromatic rolls in the left hand represent the dogs (Ex.49). The percussive barking figures are initially placed on the beat, but after two measures, the barks increase in frequency and become rhythmically disjointed. At m. 179, the beat is divided into triplets, with chromatic rolls occurring on every fifth division. Two measures later, the barks increase in frequency again to four per measure. At m. 183, the barking doubles in frequency again and increases in loudness, overwhelming the horn call figure (Ex. 50).

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<sup>119</sup> Andrew Haringer "Hunt, Military, and Pastoral Topics" in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, (Oxford University Press: 2014), 3.

<sup>120</sup> Wolfgang Johannes Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 182-184.

<sup>121</sup> Julie Brown, *Bartók and the Grotesque: Studies in Modernity, the Body and Contradiction in Music* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 132.

The playful rhythmic distortions and the increase in frequency of the barking gestures give the variation a humorous affect, mimicking the interruptive, frenzied nature of actual dog barking. The rolled figures appear scattered across high and low registers. This erratic and abrasive sonority, along with its humorous rhythmic manipulations, fosters a grotesque reaction. Alkan has taken a familiar musical topic and sarcastically twisted it with an innovative effect not commonly heard from the piano.

**Example 49. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 22, mm. 177-181.**

The image displays a musical score for Variation 22 of "Le Festin d'Ésope" by Alkan, measures 177-181. The score is written for piano in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It consists of four systems of grand staff notation. The first system is marked "XXII." and "M.F." (Moderato Forte). A red box highlights the first two measures of the first system. The second system is marked "Abbajante". The third system is marked "cresc." (crescendo). The fourth system is marked "f" (forte). The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and dynamic markings such as "f" and "cresc.".

Example 50. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 22, mm. 183-184.



Variations 19 and 20 are situated between other pairs of variations. Even though they lack unifying musical traits, they both utilize eccentric textures and will therefore be analyzed as a complimentary pair. Variation 19 utilizes the *lament* topic, characterized by a descending bass tetrachord and a mournful affect (Ex. 51).<sup>122</sup> Caplin notes that the fundamental tetrachord is often adorned with some chromaticism.<sup>123</sup> Alkan harmonizes each melodic note with a diminished seventh (similarly to variation 8), and these are each followed by interlocking descending chromatic octaves. This sonority uses hyperbole of the chromaticism often found in the *lament* to mock its typically sorrowful nature. The effect is compounded by the restriction of Alkan’s opening tempo marking. Also notable is the instruction to hold the pedal for the entirety of the variation, which blurs the tonality further. The *rinforzando-piano* dynamic gesture is crucial for making the topic reference clear; without the rapid hairpin the lamenting effect is enveloped by the pedal and the chromaticism.

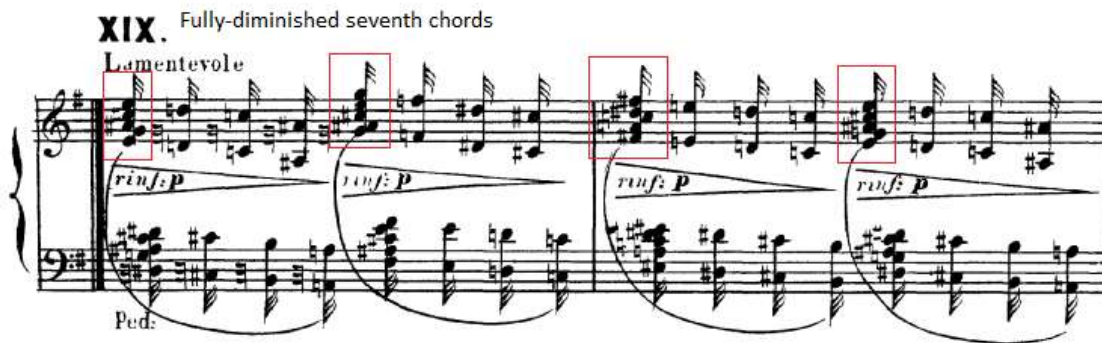
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<sup>122</sup> William Caplin, “Topics and Formal Functions: The Case of the Lament” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, (Oxford University Press:2014), 5.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

Alkan's texture invites comparison to the *lamentoso* theme from Liszt's *Après une lecture du Dante: Fantasia quasi-Sonata*. Liszt's theme similarly makes use of interlocking octaves, a common Lisztian device, and involves extensive chromaticism (Ex. 52). Despite the ingenuity in Liszt's own texture, it remains a genuine portrayal of the *Lament*'s affect and a sincere representation of Dante's hell. Alkan's hyperbolic virtuosity and relentless chromaticism distort the spirit of the *lamentoso* to the level mockery.

**Example 51. "Le Festin d'Ésope," Variation 19.**



**Example 52. Liszt, *Après une lecture du Dante: Fantasia quasi-Sonata*, mm. 34-37.**



Variation 20 complements Variation 19 by matching its shocking nature while radically contrasting against its texture and affect. This texture consists of low register, octave-based chords in both hands. The 32<sup>nd</sup>-note chords are marked *fortississimo*, and the pianist is instructed to play *Impavide* ("fearlessly"), and to strictly avoid rolling (Ex. 53). The short length of the

chords and Alkan's insistent *fff* markings produce an incongruity that underscores the percussive nature of the texture. This approach produces a harsh, violent sonority that is fiercely opposite to Variation 19 and mocks the expressive conventions of nineteenth-century pianism. The variation partly functions as a reduction of the Alkan's theme rather than a development. Stripped to the minimum of its melodic and rhythmic elements, the motif is left as a pure version of the harmonic scheme. This musical simplification further emphasizes the brutal pianism, producing an ingeniously shocking moment steeped in irony.

**Example 53. "Le Festin d'Ésope," Variation 20.**



Alkan explores the *tempesta* and *ombra* musical topics in Variations 23 and 24.<sup>124</sup> Both topics have their origins in eighteenth-century opera. Elements of both are combined in infernal scenes; Alkan used this effect in "Scherzo Diabolico," as previously discussed in Chapter Two. This pair of variations utilizes rapid figuration, sweeping chromatic scales, tremolos, and a low bass register. This texture is dense, fast, and obsessive. The final cadence of Variation 23 embellishes the tonic E-minor arrival with a tremolo between tonic and the sinister lowered supertonic.

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<sup>124</sup> Clive McClelland, "Ombra and Tempesta," in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.



**Example 54. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 23.**

93

Example 55. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 24.

**XXIV.** Quasi-Alberti bass figure

The musical score for Variation 24, titled "XXIV. Quasi-Alberti bass figure", is written for piano. It consists of two systems. The first system shows the left hand playing a continuous eighth-note pattern in G major, with a "Poco cresc." marking. The right hand has a melodic line with some chromaticism, also marked "Poco cresc.". The second system continues the left hand's pattern, with a "Cresci poco a poco" marking. The right hand has a melodic line with some chromaticism, also marked "Cresci poco a poco.". Pedal points are marked with "Ped." and "ff".

### General Structural Grotesqueries

Many general traits have been identified as common among grotesque structures employed by various composers writing in various musical styles. According to Sheinberg, the following musical traits often create the grotesque:

Tendency to triple meter, which enhances the feeling of whirling, uncontrollable motion, sudden unexpected outbursts, loud dynamics, extreme pitches, marked rhythmical stresses, dissonances or distortions of expected harmonic progressions, and many repetitions of simple and short patterns. These traits not only contribute to the sweeping atmosphere, but also enhance a feeling of compulsive obsession that relates to the insane, bizarre side of the grotesque and to its unreal, unnatural aspects.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich*, 221.



Aside from the tendency toward triple meter, many of these general characteristics are relevant to “Le Festin d’Ésope” and warrant attention. The theme is delivered *staccatissimo* and is built upon repetitions of short and simple patterns. Alkan uses dry, repetitive textures in the development of most of his variations, often creating a feeling of driving motion. This is especially prominent in march-based variations. The sequence of variations often favors stark contrasts, manifested by abrupt changes in character from one variation to the next. Alkan often uses repetition to an obsessive degree: long stretches of repeated figuration accumulate musical momentum and culminate in climaxes of grotesquely huge proportions.

The theme and first eight variations of “Le Festin d’Ésope” all feature *staccato* articulation (variation 4 is a partial exception, opposing a right-hand *legato* texture against the left-hand *staccato*). This persistently dry touch lends much of the piece a driving, rhythmic character. Variations 9 through 12 form a group of four lyrical major-mode variations laced with sarcasm and irony. Their *Dolce e sostenuto* touch would not normally indicate a grotesque structure, but in the context of its surroundings such an abrupt change raises suspicions of insincerity (Ex. 56). The previously discussed bizarre harmonic moments in variation 10, the technically demanding texture of variation 11 (Ex. 57), and the unresolved dominant at the end of variation 12 (Ex. 58) all suggest to the listener that this brief transition to beautifully lyrical piano writing is sarcastic.

Example 56. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 9.



Example 57. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 11.



Example 58. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 12.



Variations 5 and 6 adopt the manner of a military march enhanced with powerful rhythmic drive and thick octave textures. This driving energy culminates in an exciting

ascending double-octave scale in *crescendo*. This gesture arrives on the and of beat two in m. 48, propelling the musical energy forward (Ex. 59). The following variation begins abruptly with a stark change in dynamic and register. Marked *piano*, with both hands placed in comfortable middle registers, and supplemented with a trilling undercurrent to the march, this C-major continuation imparts a radically different temperament to the military march. After four bars of peaceful transformation, the thunderous octaves of the previous variation return with overpowering force. The concluding octave ascent, now in contrary motion, surpasses that of the previous variation in ferocity. The shock of the gesture is reinforced harmonically; the first two beats of the octave ascent suggest a G-major arrival, only to suddenly resolve to E minor at the final beat of m. 56. Thus, rapidly contrasting affects applied within a single musical idea create both animation and discordance.

Example 59. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 5-6, mm. 47-56.

VI.

*p*

*Sempre p*

Suggests G major

Returns suddenly to E minor

Variation 1 and 2 illustrate Sheinberg’s comment that “sudden unexpected outbursts”<sup>126</sup> appear frequently in the grotesque. Both variations shift the melody to the lower part of the texture, while the right hand explores two obsessive patterns. Variation 1 is derived from the sixteenth-note motive heard in the last measure of the theme, only to be invaded by powerful

<sup>126</sup> Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich*, 221.

octaves in its final measure, following a *diminuendo* to *piano*. Variation 2 consists of a quasi-grace-note figure in which large, often comically dissonant intervals are accentuated on the beat (Ex. 60). The clumsy sounding gesture is once again interrupted in the final measure of the variation, this time by a rapid broken octave outburst (Ex. 61).

**Example 60. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 2.**



**Example 61. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Variation 2, mm. 23-24.**



Variation 16 provides a unique moment within this variation-étude that conveys mockery through reserved pianism. The quiet *preghevole* (“prayerful”) marking, and double-dotted rhythm all indicate a funeral march (Ex. 62). This solemn and simple variation is situated between two variations of sensational virtuosity. The more reserved soundscape contrasts radically with its surroundings and with the temperament of the piece as a whole. Following

Pinson's thesis regarding shattered frames in the grotesque, this variation functions as a divergence from the frame of reference established in the rest of *Le Festin*.<sup>127</sup>

Furthermore, this funeral march itself represents a scornful distortion, as Alkan also shatters the frame of expected funeral march conventions. As discussed above, many generic markers are indeed present. The tempo, however, restricted by Alkan's opening indication, is far too fast for a typical funeral march, and the texture is too thin to convey the heavy, somber tone expected of a funeral march. A repeated high register E6 that punctuates the second half of this variation suggests some sort of death knell, but its register is far too high and light to represent tolling, and its off-beat placement is more whimsical than solemn. In place of a typically serious affect, we find a comically lively one. As discussed in Chapter One, Berlioz employs similar tactics in his distortion of the *Dies Irae* subject in *Symphonie Fantastique*, where the fast, lively meter and high woodwind instrumentation mock the solemn mood of this chant for the dead (Ex. 63).<sup>128</sup> In both Berlioz's and Alkan's portrayals, they shatter the expected emotional response to familiar musical topics and produce something both humorous and sinister.

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<sup>127</sup> Patricia Testerman Pinson, "The Shattered Frame: A Study of the Grotesque in Nineteenth Century Literature and Music" (PhD Diss., Ohio University, 1971).

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 166.

XVI.

*p<sub>3</sub><sup>v</sup> preghiera*

Quasi-death knell

*pp*

*p* Ped.  $\diamond$  Ped.  $\diamond$  Ped.  $\diamond$  *p* Ped.  $\diamond$

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P. Fl.

F1.

Hb.

P. Cl. (Mib)

Cl. (Ut)

Bns

M

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According to Waeber, the “Alkanesque conception of virtuosity is defined by repetition, superimposition, and parataxis.”<sup>129</sup> She calls the obsessive repetition of small motifs or figures an “aesthetic of repetition” aimed at developing musical ideas; in the case of *Le Festin* this is

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done in a grotesque manner. This aesthetic of repetition usually has powerful structural and/or narrative implications, often resulting in exciting, and occasionally disturbing musical climaxes.

Alkan concludes his variations with a gigantic, sprawling coda that traverses several seamless iterations of the theme. It begins at Variation 25, with a *trionfalmente* (triumphantly) march of thick, octave-based chords, to be played *trionfalmente* (triumphantly), spanning an enormous range of the instrument. This is the last structurally unadulterated statement of the eight-bar theme. Following this powerful march, Alkan summarizes this monstrous set of variations with a series of starkly contrasting, grotesquely extreme treatments of the theme.

The technique of ending a variation set with an episodic coda extending from the final variation can be traced back to Beethoven and Mendelssohn. *Thirty-Two Variations in C minor*, WoO 80 and *Variations Sérieuses*, Op. 54 both conclude with exciting codas that employ virtuosity for drama and excitement. “Le Festin d’Ésope” follows this trend but surpasses both works in terms of length and virtuosic intensity. Alkan also explores a wide range of sonorities, often utilizing the extremes of register and dynamic.

The diabolical march presented at variation 25 continues in m. 209, tonicizing B major before eventually arriving at E major in m. 217. Alkan enhances the already dense texture with imitative counterpoint at m. 213, shown in Ex. 64. Following a thunderous cadence in E major at m. 224, Alkan radically shifts the sonority to *pianissimo*, in the low register with a thin texture. This leads into a *sostenuto* chorale texture at m. 229, which once again utilizes imitative counterpoint. This brief period of calm transitions into an explosive texture of widely spaced, octave-based chords at m. 237. At m. 244, Alkan keeps his audience disoriented with another jarring musical contrast, a textural shift recalling that of the variation 1, now with both hands in a lower register and the theme in octaves. This menacing sonority precedes the coda’s final



episode, which begins at m. 252. In this chaotic section, excerpts of which are shown in Ex. 64, Alkan has borrowed the structural formula for his coda from Beethoven and Mendelssohn.

Whereas Beethoven and Mendelssohn generate musical cohesiveness through organic transitions between their episodes, Alkan generates grotesquely disjunct changes through the juxtaposition of extreme contrasts in character and texture.

**Example 64. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Coda: mm. 213-215, 224-230, 235-247.**

The musical score for the Coda of "Le Festin d'Ésope" by Alkan is presented in three systems. The first system shows measures 213-215, with a red box highlighting measures 213-214. The second system shows measures 224-230, with a red box highlighting measures 224-229. The third system shows measures 235-247. The score is in E major and 3/4 time. It features extreme contrasts in texture and dynamics. Measures 213-215 are marked *mf* and *Dim*. Measures 224-230 are marked *pp* and *Sostenuto*. Measures 235-247 are marked *p, e sostenuto*. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Example 64 continued. Mm. 235-247.

The musical score for Example 64 continued, measures 235-247, is presented in three systems. The first system (mm. 235-240) shows a steady rise in register and density, marked 'Cresc: sempre' and 'ff'. The second system (mm. 241-246) continues the crescendo, marked 'sf' and '8va'. The third system (mm. 247-252) features a gradual decrescendo, marked 'Dim:' and 'p'. The texture is characterized by repeated sixteenth notes and dense chords.

At m. 252 begins the longest gradual accumulation of momentum in the work, marked by repeated sixteenth notes, a steady rise in register, dense chords, and a gradual, inexorable crescendo. The section begins with a short two-bar fragment which is repeated three times, each time rising in register and density. The passage then ascends to several jarring sonorities like the one highlighted in m. 259 of Ex. 65, where the repeated E dominant-ninth chord in the left hand is adorned with passing chords that produce several fierce dissonances. The texture continues in

m. 263, now derived from a simpler arpeggiated harmonic structure. As in other parts of the étude, octave-based chords that exploit the extreme registers of the instrument produce a grotesque climax in m. 267. This *fff* eruption is the peak of the entire variation set in terms of volume and intensity. This ultra-virtuosic writing provides a suitably monstrous conclusion to a wildly diabolical theme and variations. Its obsessive repetition, its disturbing sonic proportions, and its hyperbolic virtuosity all connect to the grotesque in a uniquely Alkanesque way.

**Example 65. “Le Festin d’Ésope,” Coda: mm. 252-269.**

The musical score for the Coda of "Le Festin d'Ésope" (mm. 252-269) is presented in two systems. The first system (mm. 252-257) features a piano introduction with the instruction "poco a poco cresc." in the left hand. The second system (mm. 258-269) continues the piece with the instruction "cresc. sempre" in the right hand. The music is characterized by dense, arpeggiated chords and a dramatic increase in volume and intensity towards the end.

Example 65 continued. Mm. 258-269

Dissonant texture

*cresc.*

*ff, e cresci sempre*

*Ped.*

*Dim.*

*Dim. molto*

*ff*

*Ped.*

Climax

Following this powerful climax, Alkan shrinks the sonority to a conventional chordal figuration recalling the texture of the theme. Obsessive repetition continues, and Alkan delivers one last bitterly dissonant harmony in m. 274 through the obstinate E in the upper voice (circled in Ex. 66). The *diminuendo* in m. 276 foreshadows a quiet ending, and Alkan imitates the

melodic motion used in the final bars of Mendelssohn's *Variations Sérieuses* with the melodic descent from B to G to E in mm. 277-278. But Alkan's homage to Mendelssohn proves to be yet another grotesque insincerity, as one final thunderous chordal outburst sabotages the reserved conclusion.

**Example 66. "Le Festin d'Ésope," Coda: mm. 270-279.**

The musical score for the Coda of "Le Festin d'Ésope" (mm. 270-279) is presented in three systems. The first system (mm. 270-272) begins with a piano (p) and sostenuto (sostenuto) marking. The second system (mm. 273-275) features a poco crescendo (poco cresc:) marking and a piano (p) marking. The third system (mm. 276-279) includes a decrescendo (Dim:) marking, a piano (p) marking, a decrescendo (Dim:) marking, and a fortissimo (fff) marking. The score is annotated with red circles and lines highlighting specific melodic and harmonic features, including a melodic line in the right hand of the second system and a chordal outburst in the right hand of the third system.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Charles Valentin Alkan's legacy has come to occupy an awkward middle ground between reverence and obscurity. The virtuoso composer, who did in fact enjoy moderate professional success during his life, remained largely unknown in the early twentieth century until a resurgence of interest was instigated by Raymond Lewenthal and Ronald Smith. Contemporary pianists such as Jack Gibbons and Marc-André Hamelin have continued this revival and have made Alkan's music an important part of their artistic identities. Despite this, Alkan's music has struggled to secure a permanent place in the standard Western canon. The eccentric pianist-composer seems to maintain a reputation as one of the nineteenth century's unjustly neglected geniuses.

The grotesque aesthetic offers a perspective that can illuminate Alkan's occasionally alienating eccentricities. Alkan's musical style, often characterized by extreme pianistic textures, potent harmonies, driving rhythmic energy, and a manic sense of humor, can be bewildering to an unfamiliar listener. A better understanding of these elements can increase the likelihood that Alkan will be understood, accepted, and appreciated. Notably, the grotesque often inhabits his most daring music, indicating that the composer drew upon the grotesque when in search of innovation.

What academic attention Alkan has received has often limited its focus to his virtuosic powers and the intensely difficult music that those powers fueled. This study seeks to reimagine Alkan's virtuosity not as a demonstration of skill meant to dazzle its audience, but rather as a sophisticated tool of artistic expression. Specifically, his technical innovations support the grotesque aesthetic by expanding the sonic boundaries of the instrument in many of his études, especially "Scherzo Diabolico" and "Le Festin d'Ésope." Intensely dense, rapid, and widely-



spaced textures challenge the bodily dimension of piano playing and create powerful, occasionally violent sonic events. As a vehicle for expanding the piano's range of textures and sonorities, Alkan's virtuosity rarely aligned with the crowd-pleasing aims of conventional Parisian virtuosity.

An overly narrow fixation on Alkan's virtuosity has inhibited the full exploration of his rich and varied body of works. Numerous character pieces, including many individual pieces among the *Vingt-Cinq Préludes*, Op. 31 (1847), and *Esquisses*, Op. 63 (1861), are not primarily defined through technical display. Rather, they offer imaginative explorations of a wide variety of styles and referents, and they showcase some of Alkan's most creative and descriptive piano writing. In certain smaller pieces, the grotesque facilitates daring innovations in the form of percussive cluster chords, idiosyncratic chromatic procedures, and unconventional sonorities.

Biographers and tertiary sources have frequently identified the presence of the grotesque in Alkan's style, but this quality has yet to be investigated deeply.<sup>130</sup> The present analysis of "Le Festin d'Ésope" aims to demonstrate the unique, sophisticated connection between Alkan's virtuosity, the grotesque, and his search for new developments in musical language that could influence the future of music. "Le Festin d'Ésope" surveys many of the most popular musical topics of the mid-nineteenth century, through distorting treatments that are rich in humor, innovation, and imagination.

This document has intentionally avoided offering detailed performance instructions regarding the works covered. The grotesque is a rich aesthetic with a vast potential for personal

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<sup>130</sup> Smith, *Alkan: The Enigma*, 105.

interpretive approaches. To offer a singular, strict guideline for performance to the exclusion of other approaches would be unduly prescriptive.

Further investigations into the intersection of the grotesque, virtuosity, and stylistic innovations would deepen insight into the values and purposes animating not only Alkan but also a number of other virtuoso pianist-composers of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. For example, Scriabin and Rachmaninoff, both visionary innovators in the area of keyboard sonority, composed works related to dark, fantastical subjects, such as *Poème Satanique*, Op. 36 (1903) and Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29 (1908). Prokofiev's well-established interest in the grotesque suggests that he too may have been familiar with and influenced by Alkan's style. These examples suggest that Alkan likely occupies a more substantial position in the complex web of musical influences and inspirations than we currently recognize.



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