

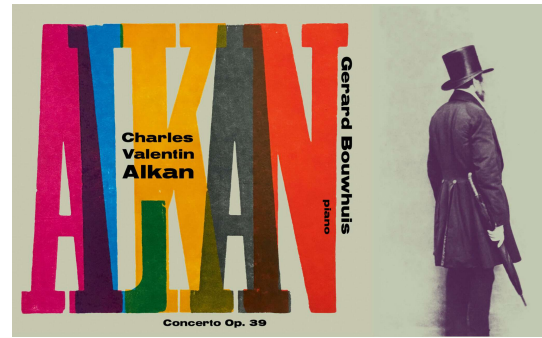
## Alkan: Concerto for solo piano (from Op.39)

Gerard Bouwhuis, piano

Available from performer's website: <https://gerardbouwhuis.nl/alkan-cd/>

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Reviewed by Richard Murphy (London, UK)



How very refreshing, and what a very successful experiment!

Verbal description of timbre is fraught; suffice it to say that this piano seduced my ears. From the first notes, the sound is resonant and clear, and there's a marvellously pellucid timbral quality, with every layer of music exposed. The instrument is played very resourcefully by Gerard Bouwhuis with sometimes eye-opening musical results.

We get an orchestra of reduced forces with period instruments and their colours. Bouwhuis uses little pedal so we don't get the full-throated orchestral sound we might expect and there's nothing aggressive or *martellato*. I welcome this 'human scale' performance. I never realised how much of the last movement asks for quiet playing.

Though influenced by Alkan's preference for Sébastien Érard's instruments, Bouwhuis chose to record the Concerto on a new design of Straight Strung grand piano by *Chris Maene* who is based in Belgium – he had considered using an *Érard* but preferred the mechanical stability of a modern instrument. All previous Concerto recordings were played on Steinway pianos, Bouwhuis maintains, and thinks they become too bombastic in the middle and lower register. The *Maene* grand delivers power with clarity.

It's unusual to be given the utilitarian motive behind the learning and recording of a 19<sup>th</sup> century piano piece. The academic course Bouwhuis attended offered a two-year artistic research programme; so having made his reputation as a player of complex music by Finnissy and Ferneyhough, Bouwhuis thought he'd learn some Alkan who has also had a fearsome reputation as a composer of 'the impossible', and to whose music he had been introduced by Geoffrey Douglas Madge (another Everestian via the Chopin/Godowsky Etudes). 'Many notes, few notes, it doesn't matter to me. I just see music.' says Bouwhuis.

I very highly recommend this disc. Instead of both hands pounding *ff* chords simultaneously, Bouwhuis applies a very musical restraint in letting either hand take the lead, so we don't get that full-throated roar we're so used to, and musical lines get their place in the sun. Many passages which have previously not caught my ear suddenly appear in different timbres (e.g., in the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement at 5:00). The opening couple of pages of the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement highlight the control of colour between melody and accompaniment. The *bel canto* touch doesn't seem forced. In the early virtuoso passages in the 1<sup>st</sup> movement, the high register has a fabulously penetrating ring – real brilliance. Those quintessentially Alkanian eight bars towards the end of the piece, from bar 227(7:26), forces me to think that I've never heard it before with Alkan's dynamic markings. The performance is full of surprises.

Bouwhuis has all the technique to cope with the demands, and more, because he knows how to control them. A couple of little caveats – a slight tendency to apply some personal *rubato* might sound out of place, such as in the opening of the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement, and the drum beats in the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement veer towards incorrect rhythms although the sound is pretty bewitching.

There is so much to learn and enjoy in this performance that it will repay repeated listening because **so much is newly coloured**. It's worth every cent, if you're not expecting or wanting a Steinway. It's not so much the piano vibrating, as the air around it, like a massive Aeolian harp. Fabulous effect. Could this be closer to Alkan's sonic ideal? It wouldn't surprise me. Thank you GB, and Chris Maene, for the revelation.