Gershwin, Alkan and Gibbons

Having established himself as an outstanding interpreter of Gershwin and Alkan's piano music, Jack Gibbons has now turned his hand to composing, as Martin Anderson discovers

The reissue from Sanctuary Classics of a four-CD set of *The Authentic George Gershwin* (CD RSB 401) in editions and arrangements by Jack Gibbons once more puts him before the public as a Gershwin specialist. But much has happened to Gibbons since the first appearance of those recordings in the 1990s – chiefly a near-fatal car accident in March 2001 that seemed certain to cost him the use of his left arm.

What was it, I asked Gibbons, that brought him into contact with Gershwin in the first place? 'It was purely by chance. I was very ignorant about Gershwin about fifteen years ago. But an orchestra asked me to play the Concerto in F, and it was only when I began preparing it that I realised what an amazing composer he was, and I just fell in love with his music. After that, I wanted to hear him playing it himself – I'm always interested in hearing composers perform their own music – and thought there must be recordings. But instead of him playing the Concerto in F I came across recordings of Gershwin improvising. I fell in love with his piano playing and wanted to try and play this music. But it wasn't published, so I had no choice but to reconstruct it by ear. Even then I wasn't thinking of my career; it was something I did for fun. This must have been around 1988; I was already established as a classical pianist by then – I didn't imagine for one minute I would become a Gershwin specialist!'

Gibbons's endeavours on Gershwin's behalf have been part of a larger movement that has gone a good way to overcoming the snobbery that the 'classical' music world showed the composer until only a decade or two ago; he's finally beginning to be shown the respect he deserves. 'I think it is growing all the time, as well. Chopin was in a similar position round about 1900, when he'd only been dead about 50 years. Gershwin was popular, so the critics tended not to take him too seriously. Similarly, Chopin was also very popular, so the critics were dismissive of him. If you've been dead long enough…It's rather depressing but that's the way it seems to work. I predict that in another 50 years' time Gershwin will be seen as a really great composer of the 20th century.'

Might there be another explanation for the parallel reaction of the critics? Both composers were doing something entirely new in 'classical' music: Chopin in his approach to form, Gershwin in his importation of popular idioms. 'With Gershwin it was almost like waving a red rag in front of a bull, because even by his youth in the 1920s the classical music world was quite separate from the popular world. And so, of course, he antagonised people on both sides – but he knew exactly what he was doing. The funny thing was that Gershwin had such a wide range of friends: one of his closest friends at the end of his life was Schoenberg, who admired him – thought he was a genius. Similarly, Gershwin sponsored some of Schoenberg's early recordings. He wasn't as narrow-minded as some of his critics, in fact.'

That Gibbons's arrangements, transcriptions and editions add up to a substantial enlargement of the Gershwin solo piano repertoire is even clearer when they are presented all together, as almost five hours of music. 'The first CD was actually recorded quite a long time ago, in 1991, and over the next five or so years I recorded the rest. But this is the first time all four have been in one volume. I'm pleased: they were designed as a set – it's a chronological survey of Gershwin's work, so I like the idea of listening through all four CDs.'

Can he listen to his fourteen-year-old interpretations with equanimity? 'I certainly do some things differently, but on the whole I'm pleased with them. I'm a very fastidious person when it comes to recording – I do my own producing as well – so I was fully aware they would have to last a lifetime, and I think they still stand up pretty well.'

Gibbons's other emblematic composer has been Alkan, whose works he has recorded for ASV as a two-CD set of the *Douze Études dans tous les ton mineurs*, Op.39, and a number of smaller pieces on CD DCS 227. Does he think the two composers have anything in common, other than both being Jewish – and is that relevant? 'They have enough things in common. They were both great pianists. It's not as strange as it sounds, to play both Gershwin and Alkan. I was aware of Alkan long before I came across Gershwin. In my teens I was a great fan of his music, I had heard Ronald Smith playing it back in 1975 or something. I feel very strongly about Alkan: I'm not trying to claim that he's Frédéric Chopin or that he's the Bach of the nineteenth century. My attitude is that it's wonderful music and it doesn't deserve to be neglected. When I perform it, audiences love it; for whatever reason he's been very hard done by.'

Here I have to take issue with Gibbons, for the best of reasons. I think he is selling Alkan short – to my mind, it is some of the most original piano music ever written. 'Well, some of it is. The danger is that if you promote something no one has ever heard of as unique, there tends to be a backlash:

above (left) **Jack Gibbons (l) and the conductor Levon Parikian rehearsing at the pianist's UK home in 2000**
Photo courtesy of Newsquest (Oxfordshire) Ltd
(top) **Gershwin's use of popular idioms in classical music condemned his work to a half-century of scorn**
(bottom) **Gibbons is championing Alkan's neglected piano works**
Photos Tully Potter Collection

the critics have come down on Alkan very severely, with criteria they wouldn't apply to other composers. That's why I try to ease him in gently, to say: "Well, give it a chance, have a listen to it".'

I'm still inclined to sell Alkan rather harder; as an essay in psychological penetration there's little that can compare with, for example, *La chanson de la folle au bord de la plage*; there's nothing like it between late Beethoven and Freud. 'Absolutely. It's an incredible piece. And Alkan had a profound influence on Debussy, who was a great admirer of Alkan. Debussy studied his music when he was at the Paris Conservatoire, and I'm pretty sure that had a major influence not only on his compositions but on the whole business of Impressionism.'

That's an important point: Alkan is part of a French keyboard tradition we no longer perceive – Forqueray, Jadin, Reicha, Boëly ... Gibbons breaks in to disagree: 'Alkan was very passionate about French music, he played Couperin at a time when no one was interested in Couperin. On the other hand, he's very much like Chopin – out on his own. I don't quite see him as part of a tradition. I think he influences people like Debussy and Ravel afterwards. And there are some aspects of his music which are very French. But a lot of it isn't, a lot of it is quite Germanic. It's hard to put him into a particular school.

'There's one other thing about Alkan. There's a strange thing about people who play his music and support him, and that's that they almost always get attacked as slightly obsessive. No one complains if you are crazy about Beethoven.' But he can hardly deny there's an obsessive quality in Alkan's music. 'If you heard Beethoven for the first time, if you had never heard his music and it had suddenly been discovered in the 1970s, you would hear Beethoven in a very different way now, too – and he's very obsessive in lots of his qualities. People have got used to Beethoven and they haven't really had time to get used to Alkan.'

And it's Alkan's demonic qualities that have made the running so far, obscuring the heart-melting lyricism which really ought to draw audiences to him. 'That was the side I first got into. When I first came across Alkan I was looking for virtuoso piano music – I was a teenager mad on Liszt and interested in virtuosity. But when I heard Alkan – I think the first piece was his Sonata, *The Four Ages* – what really impressed me was the quality of the music and the beautiful melodies; the virtuosity wasn't the most important thing at all.'

Time we talked about Gibbons's new-found enthusiasm for composing. Was his car crash some kind of psychological turning-point? 'I was unable to play the piano for quite a long time.' This is something of an understatement, typical of the resilience Gibbons displayed after the accident. He was trapped in the wreckage for an hour, emerging with his left arm little more than a mosaic, his cheek and jawbone smashed, ribs and sternum broken, a punctured lung, and a spleen so badly damaged it had to be removed. Less than three months after the accident, and a second round of major surgery, he played in concert a suite of Bach, Rachmaninoff, Gershwin *et al*, that he had of necessity arranged for right hand – and which he performed from a wheelchair.

'I had always composed a little bit, ever since I was in my teens, but I had never had a chance to take it seriously; I wanted to, but then my piano playing became more important. Now I had the golden opportunity: there was nothing I could do. I found I got very absorbed. I began by writing songs, and I found I really got into the setting of poems. Now, of course, I'm writing all kinds of stuff, piano music and whatever.'

If one assumed from Artur Schnabel's repertoire that his own music might emerge from the broad Austro-German tradition, his avant-gardist style would come as something of a shock. Would we be

above (l and r) **Gibbons's year-long recovery period following his car accident provided a 'golden opportunity' to start composing**
Photo (l) W Francis (r) Diana Sainsbury

making the same mistake by taking Gibbons's performing preferences as a yardstick? 'Absolutely, it doesn't sound anything like Gershwin or Alkan! But a composer who has had a profound influence on me is Elgar; he has always been one of my favourite composers. I also adore Bach's music. It's hard to describe what the main influences are – but certainly not Gershwin, which is strange.' He has suggested already that it is tonal and contrapuntal. 'I'd say that, yes. When I was a student I played lots of contemporary music, but I've got very firm views on music now. I think music for a long time took a very wrong turn and lost its audience. I'm not saying you should pamper them, that you have to dumb down; I don't believe in that at all. Music became so obsessed with itself that it lost its direction.' Did he ever study composition formally? 'Yes, I did, at the Guildhall School of Music. But like piano playing, I learn far more from my own mistakes than I ever do from teachers.'

What does his worklist now contain? 'I've written about 30 song-settings, mostly of people like Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, all the nineteenth-century poets. Christina Rossetti in particular lends herself to music; I don't know why. I also like dark poetry, like Emily Brontë – anything that's gloomy! I've also written a lot of piano music and some orchestral pieces now, too. Nothing big at the moment: I'm very unambitious as a composer – I'm not even trying to be a composer, really. It's writing for my own pleasure; if anyone else is interested, that's fine, but the main reason for doing it is just for myself. Taking on a sonata or a symphony would just be an ambitious project; at one point I may well come round to that. Now it's mostly very short pieces. But it's still very early, because I've only been composing for a year or two.'

Obviously, Gibbons's own familiarity with the keyboard will affect his music. 'It does in some ways. It's not particularly virtuosic – I've found it quite difficult to write virtuoso piano music: it's not something I'm particularly interested in, which is strange, since I've played so much virtuoso stuff. The only thing that might make my music difficult to play is that I've frequently used large chords, like tenths, just because I think they sound so good. I might have written a very simple waltz, and then unfortunately, if you're an amateur pianist, you'll suddenly discover half-way through that your hands aren't big enough to play it. I'm certainly not interested in writing complicated studies; maybe that will come later. I would like to write orchestral music, to be honest; I ought to move away from the piano more. On the other hand, I enjoy playing my own music. There's another strange thing: I'm not particularly anxious to pass this music on to other musicians; I'm very selfish about it. I have some sympathy for someone like Chopin, who wrote totally for himself; he wasn't really interested in other people playing his music, and I can understand that.' But he is giving it a hearing? 'Oh, yes: I've been slipping little pieces into my programmes now and then. And I've just recorded a whole CD of piano music coupled with some of my songs with the soprano Anne Mackay.' For which label? 'It's all part of my unambitious approach: I thought I would record it now and decide what to do with it later. I'm hoping it will be released quite soon.'

How long was he out of operation after the accident? 'Six months not being able to play the piano, and six months getting back. It was at least a year afterwards that I felt confident enough to play properly. Before that I was performing but it was difficult, because I had problems with my left hand.' And has staring death in the teeth changed his outlook in general? 'I don't really worry about the future now. I never particularly used to suffer from concert nerves, but I suffer from them even less now; it doesn't seem very important to me. I'm playing just the way I want to play. It has helped my music because I'm not worried about trying to please the crowd when I perform. That may sound funny from someone who plays a lot of Gershwin, but I play it because I'm really passionate about the music: that's my main motivation. Ⓟ

Even by Gershwin's youth in the 1920s, the classical music world was separate from the popular world. And so he antagonised people on both sides – but he knew exactly what he was doing