

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANIST

[The Guardian](#)

Classical CD

Alkan: Concerto for Solo Piano; etc, Marc-André Hamelin

★★★★★ (Hyperion)

Andrew Clements

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The days when any new recording of a piano work by Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888) was a journey into unexplored musical territory may have passed, but discs of his music still emerge relatively rarely. That's partly because of the sheer technical difficulty of getting around the torrents of notes, and making the result seem like music rather than empty pyrotechnics. Alkan's style may be grounded in Chopin, with Mendelssohn and Schumann as secondary sources, but getting his melodic lines to sing like Chopin's, or his harmony to move as purposefully, is a challenge that few pianists have met successfully. Unquestionably one of those who can, though, is Marc-André Hamelin, and his astounding new performance of the Concerto for Solo Piano makes the best case I've heard for finding a place for Alkan within the canon of 19th-century piano music.

The sheer keyboard brilliance of Hamelin's playing is exceptional. The breathtaking clarity with which he articulates even the most ferocious passages, while unerringly projecting melodic shapes that are often obscured under welters of notes, never fails to dazzle, and the way in which he sustains the huge first movement of the Concerto so that each discursive paragraph seems a natural consequence of what precedes it is a triumph of pure musical will. The Adagio, like a monstrous, cloudy Chopin mazurka, is beautifully shaded, and the finale, with its dizzying changes of tack, careers along as if balanced on the most precarious knife-edge. The whole thing is compelling; even when you suspect the music is fundamentally bombastic and second-rate, Hamelin's sleight of hand is so convincing that you believe in every single overloaded bar of it.

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