

# MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

## PIANO

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### **Marc-André Hamelin, Herbst Theatre, San Francisco**

By Allan Ulrich

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Pianists who have earned their reputation by dwelling in the byways of the keyboard literature may harbour a desire to travel the main roads once in a while, if only to demonstrate a kinship with music lovers at large. Through his many recordings, the Canadian artist Marc-André Hamelin has proved a pianophile's delight, a dauntless explorer of the repertoire. For many listeners, he is this age's principal conduit to Charles-Valentin Alkan, the enigmatic 19th-century French keyboard master whose stock rises about once a generation, assuming he attracts a musician capable of hurling himself into his fearsome technical demands.

Alkan's *Symphonie for Solo Piano* occupies pride of place on Hamelin's current recital tour, and it is dispatched with the gusto and brilliance one expects from this performer. But Hamelin has cannily surrounded that juggernaut with earlier fare that, taken all together, suggests a gripping narrative about the birth and flowering of Romanticism. One hears it in Haydn's *Andante and Variations in F Minor*, a late work that, in the yearning of its opening section, its set of double variations and wistful truncated ending, looks forward to the 19th century.

Mozart's *K.330 Sonata* finds Hamelin in complete empathy with the opening movement's grim resolve and the gentle cantilena of the *Andante*, though he sometimes articulates favoured passages to the extent of hindering the flow. Liszt's *Venezia e Napoli* unleashed a torrent of bravura, although Hamelin remains susceptible to the charms of the pop tunes and dance rhythms embedded in the piece. Magisterial chords and piercing staccati vied with moments of plangent lyricism.

Fauré seemed an odd choice here; the performer sounded a bit impatient with the pastel palette of the *D-flat Nocturne*. The Alkan yields four movements of challenges that test a pianist's speed, dexterity and gift for conjuring a massive texture that might strain any instrument's resources. Hamelin impresses as an exponent beyond compare. The work is symphonic in its ambition, structure and variety of moods (from funeral march to lullaby to scalp-tingling finale). Perhaps Alkan extended the Romantic piano literature as far as it could go. No one takes us to that point of no return as adroitly as Hamelin.

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