

# MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

## PIANIST

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### THE KANSAS CITY INDEPENDENT

By Paul Horsley, Feb. 22, 2010

Pianist **Marc-André Hamelin** has an uncanny ability to convince you, through the sheer force of his musical personality and will, that whatever he's playing at the moment is the greatest music on earth — even music whose genius you might later, upon reflection, decide you're not as sure about as he is. But at the moment he's playing it, you believe in it. Thus the Montreal-born artist has managed to persuade untold numbers of listeners of the greatness of Charles-Valentin Alkan, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century French composer whose reputation among the musical public worldwide can be said to have measurably benefitted from Hamelin's championing of it over a quarter-century.

Alkan's extraordinary *Symphonie* for solo piano was the culmination of Hamelin's Folly Theater recital Friday on the Harriman-Jewell Series, and it was an experience that convinced me more than ever of the validity of music that as a younger man I sometimes found equal parts fancy and bombast. That's a powerful endorsement for any artist: that he can reconnect us, as Bernstein did for Mahler, with music that we perhaps should have held in high regard all along. Hamelin, long esteemed for his bevy of recordings of everything from the Classics to the most demanding Romantic and modern scores, now stands firm as one of the leading keyboard artists of our time.

A Hamelin recital is a unique experience. Friday's moved from the intimacies of one of Haydn's most enigmatic scores (the F-minor Variations) to the theatrics of Mozart's A-minor Sonata (K. 310) and the extravagances of Liszt's *Venezia e Napoli* — then after the pause "reigned in" for Fauré's perfumed *Nocturne* before diving headlong into Alkan's knuckle-crushing monument. The evening had a wholeness to it, a dramatic line that felt satisfying on multiple levels, like a meal in which each course has been gauged precisely to play off the previous. There was even a dessert: a tart, lightly-whipped *Nocturne* of the pianist's own invention, played as an encore.

Haydn's curious F-minor Variations began from nothingness, with each detail of the theme exquisitely crafted. Hamelin walked a fine line between "preciousness" and simply making Haydn's filigree continually interesting, and he did not stint on the use of pedal. But he never obscured the inexorable musical line, and one was almost lulled into a feeling of understatement until the final operatic outburst, milked for all its startling force. Operatic, too, was the Mozart Sonata, approached with unabashed Romantic sensibility. The program's first half concluded with deftly colored Liszt, unshowy despite this music's formidable difficulties. *Gondoliera* evoked, with a gorgeous blur, the mists rising off Venetian waters; the *Canzone* was milked for its almost clichéd melodrama; and the *Tarantella* showed off Hamelin's otherworldly technique.

Fauré's *Nocturne* No. 6 is a discursive and ethereal piece that seems to be moving toward Impressionism; in Hamelin's hands it had a wildness to it, which lent it a more modernist feel than usual. The pianist acknowledged applause afterward but immediately took his seat again, with the interesting result that Fauré's strange nocturnal mood felt like a prologue to the Alkan.

Hamelin's conviction about Alkan's *Symphonie* was apparent from the emphatic first theme, delivered with straightforward verve: This *Allegro moderato* is like Liszt on speed, with dashes of Schumann and Berlioz, yet it felt logical and whole, even Classical. The *Marche Funèbre* had an oddly obsessive drive to it, more martial than funereal. The madcap *Minuetto* pays homage to Berlioz but perhaps also Saint-Saëns; it is like a "Minuet Macabre," and is offset with a dreamy central trio section. Alkan skirts at the edge of excess in the *Finale*, with ferocious left-hand octaves that storm and rave. Hamelin was, however, able to make it sound like music throughout.

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