

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Pianist Hamelin thunders through Alkan rarity

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The brilliant Canadian pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin is best known for blazing an individual path through little-known and unusual repertory that's made to order for a virtuoso of his digital prowess. But his musical appetite extends to more standard works as well. The recital he gave Sunday at Orchestra Hall as a replacement for Murray Perahia contained examples of both mainstream and unfamiliar fare, and it was the latter that emerged more successfully.

Case in point was his stunning performance of a rarity by the neglected French composer Charles-Valentin Alkan – the Symphony for Solo Piano, a monstrously difficult work few pianists have taken up and fewer audience members can say they've ever heard.

Nearly everything about Alkan was strange. He was born in Paris in 1813, the same year as Richard Wagner, whom he outlived by five years. His death is supposed to have been the result of having been crushed by a bookcase that fell on him while he was reaching for the Talmud, a legend scholars now dispute. A prodigious pianist who seldom played in public, he hobnobbed with the Parisian artistic elite and sired an illegitimate son, dying a recluse.

His piano works are known as much for their originality as the monstrous demands they make on performers. Although Busoni and Rudolph Ganz, among other pianists, championed them, it wasn't until the Romantic revival of the 1960s that Alkan's music emerged from long neglect. Hamelin is the latest virtuoso to take up the cause, having recorded at least seven Alkan CDs for the Hyperion label.

The Symphony is impressive and well-made without being memorable. Its four movements are hyper-Lisztian, full of big bravura writing and odd harmonies that were ahead of their time. Alkan's major failing was his weakness as a melodist. Undaunted, Hamelin articulated the thunderous volleys of notes with a command that took one's breath away. He brought out especially well the sheer wildness of the minuet, which prefigures Mussorgsky and Rachmaninov.

After Alkan, the three Liszt pieces Hamelin presented on the first half of his program – drawn from the "Venice and Naples" supplement to Book 2 of "Annees de Pelerinage" – seemed almost as child's play.

Here, too, the pianist wore his firebrand and poet hats with equal distinction. His unruffled control was remarkable, although over-pedaled *fortes* sometimes yielded a clangorous sound. Yet there was much ravishing detail, not least the finely weighted chords of "Canzone," set atop a rumbling bass line and building to a dazzling finish.

Further departures from the repertory norm were Faure's tender yet passionate Nocturne No. 6 in B flat and Leopold Godowsky's "The Gardens of Buitenzorg," a lovely little bit of Debussyan exoticism inspired by a visit to Java, which Hamelin played as an encore.

I found his renditions of both the Haydn Variations in F minor and Mozart's Sonata in A major (K.310) too idiosyncratic to be fully convincing, for all the lucidity and rippling ease of his pianism. Both works sounded as if Beethoven had composed them: While all the notes were perfectly in place, the explosive manner in which Hamelin approached loud passages seemed out of place stylistically.