

The New York Times
November 1, 2008
Music Review | Marc-André Hamelin

Pianistic Feats, From Takeoff to Landing

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

Listening to Marc-André Hamelin perform Charles-Valentin Alkan's Concerto for Solo Piano (Op. 39) on Thursday night, I felt the same disbelief as when I watched gymnasts at the Beijing Olympics, wondering how such acrobatics were humanly possible.

During Mr. Hamelin's recital, part of the Pianoforte series at the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium in the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), his upper body barely moved, while his hands — seemingly possessed of some demonic force — hurtled across the keys with jaw-dropping speed, always scoring a perfect landing.

Mr. Hamelin often performs lesser-known (and often technically daunting) works from the 19th and early 20th centuries, and has recorded many for Hyperion. Alkan was a 19th-century French Jewish virtuoso pianist and a close friend of Chopin's. Like that colleague, he wrote almost exclusively for piano. The slower interludes of Alkan's Concerto reflect Chopin's influence but lack his lyrical genius.

Alkan, admired by Liszt and Schumann, was at times a recluse who disappeared from the concert stage for long periods; at one point he was possibly embittered by being passed over for a prominent position at the Paris Conservatoire. He seldom performed his own music in public and never played the complete Concerto, which formed part of his set of 12 Études (Op. 39) in all the minor keys. The Études comprise works including an overture, a four-movement symphony, a set of variations and this three-movement concerto (Nos. 8-10).

In the monumental 30-minute first movement, which alternates between tumultuous frenzy and lyrical interludes, Alkan requires the brave pianist to be both soloist and orchestra. Mr. Hamelin, certainly far more than just a showman, poetically illuminated the brooding moods of the Chopinesque Adagio. The final movement ends with an avalanche of runs, chords and a swooping glissando.

After finishing the work, which concluded the program, Mr. Hamelin looked understandably tired but smiled as he said, "You might be relieved to know that Alkan was also capable of brevity." As an encore, he offered "The First Love Letter," a gentle snippet of a piece from Alkan's "Sketches" (Op. 63).

Berg's one-movement Sonata (Op. 1) and even Chopin's technically challenging Sonata No. 2, which came before intermission, seemed child's play compared with the Alkan. Berg develops a few thematic motives in a rigorously defined structure, composed while

studying with Schoenberg. Like much of his later music, this sonata demonstrates Berg's lyrical and avant-garde affinities — blending atonality with tonal triads in a richly expressive tapestry, which Mr. Hamelin played with ruminative poise.

Mr. Hamelin brought the clarity of touch and nuanced dynamics he used in the Alkan and Berg to his unsentimental rendition of Chopin's popular Second Sonata. He played with propulsive sweep in the tumultuous opening movement (though without the breakneck speeds some pianists favor in the fast sections) and dignified solemnity in the famous "March Funebre." The concluding Presto was a colorful whirl — another feat of effortless virtuosity.

The Pianoforte series continues with Valentina Lisitsa on Nov. 17 at the Metropolitan Museum; (212) 570-3949, metmuseum.org.