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FANFARE

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ALKAN *Concerto for Solo Piano. Troisième Recueil de chants* • Marc-André Hamelin (pn) • HYPERRION 67569 (67:39)

In 1992, when Hamelin's first recorded tilt at the Alkan *Concerto* hit the street, he had just entered his 30s, having already done great and astounding things for which he was winning piecemeal recognition, though the "super-virtuoso" (Harold Schonberg's response for the *New York Times*) reputation had not yet coalesced as it has in the 15 years since. In those years Hamelin has played the *Concerto* in concert a number of times—still a crusading gesture though not the startling novelty it was—and interest shifts from the work to what else the artist may have found in it. But the spanking pace and rhythmic inflexibility required for Alkan's peculiarly manic expressiveness to take persuasive wing allow little leeway—Hamelin II is essentially the same enactment as Hamelin I—though there is some dimpling of nuance in the later performance, mainly in transitions, while the feral grasp of Hamelin I has, relatively speaking, become more relaxed (or shopworn) in Hamelin II, though still ferocious. The one salient difference is a very discreet *rubato* in phrasing the first movement's second subject, which, not invariably but often, follows it throughout, arguably weakening rather than augmenting the effect of the rhythmically impelled straightforwardness of Hamelin I. The second movement Adagio takes on greater depth and expressive penetration in the later performance, though the *Allegretto alla barbaresca* finale is genial rather than ripping, as was its 1992 precursor. The movement times, early and late, are within a few seconds of each other. It should be needless to add—but probably isn't—that both accounts involve, beyond all praise, playing of a phenomenal order whose only real rival is John Ogdon's 1969 performance (last available as No. 72 of BMG/Philips/EMI's "Great Pianists of the 20th Century" series, nla 456 913), which looms as Jupiterian, or jovial, where Hamelin's, early or late, is primly mercurial. No one else—not Ronald Smith, Jack Gibbons, Mark Latimer, Stephanie McCallum, nor Osamu Nakamura (on a precipitately sliding scale)—belongs in this company.

In 1992 Hamelin played a Yamaha, which is not only brighter but almost tinny beside the later recording's more richly resonant Steinway. The Yamaha—very closely captured by Joseph Patryck recording came from hearing a young and—for most listeners—unfamiliar pianist prove his prowess. Now, he has nothing to prove: no longer the young challenger, he's become the standard bearer.

In part, though, the recording has a different effect because Hamelin has matured as a pianist. I don't want to minimize the sheer bravura on display here: the clarity of the passagework even in the most torrential climaxes (especially the infamous repeated-note passage toward the end of the first movement), the dazzling variety of articulation (especially important in this piece, which interleaves "pianistic" and "orchestral" writing), the control of rhythms and textures, the solidity of tone, and—most striking of all—the ability to provide profusion of detail without aural overload. This is, quite simply, one of the supreme examples of pianistic agility in the catalog: it's even more secure than his earlier performance.

Still, over the years, Hamelin's playing has become less flashy, less exhibitionistic: increasingly, he uses his technique to transcend the music's difficulties rather than to revel in them. As a result, the new recording is noticeably more nuanced in affect—more flexible in its lyricism, more wistful in its reflection, more varied in its colors. The nocturnal slow movement is especially powerful here, its harmonies superbly weighted, its more dramatic moments tinged with a subtle melodramatic chill. Heard on its own, the old recording sounded close to perfect; heard against the new one, it's marginally monochromatic, both in timbre and in mood.

The *Concerto* is one of the biggest works in the solo piano repertoire; the *Chants*—of which Hamelin provides the half-dozen that make up the third book—are miniatures inspired, as Jeremy Nicholas points out in his informative notes, by Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*. Yet in their unostentatious way, they too resist convention. The first piece, for instance, which sounds like an out-take from Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, keeps slipping off course in a way that leaves you vaguely dizzy; the strutting Polonaise of the fourth keeps getting tangled up in rhythmic displacements. Hamelin is just as effective here as he is in the blockbuster, offering sensitive readings that bring out the music's quirks without exaggerating them. Hyperion's sound is excellent too. Highest recommendation. **Peter J. Rabinowitz**