

## Canadian University Music Review Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

***Scriabin: The Complete Piano Sonatas.*** Marc-André Hamelin, piano. Hyperion CDA 67131/2 [DDD], produced by Andrew Keener

***Beethoven: Diabelli Variations.*** William Kinderman, piano. Hyperion CDA 66763 [DDD], produced by Marc Seiffge.

Glen Carruthers

Volume 17, numéro 2, 1997

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014798ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014798ar>

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### Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

### ISSN

0710-0353 (imprimé)

2291-2436 (numérique)

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### Citer ce compte rendu

Carruthers, G. (1997). Compte rendu de [*Scriabin: The Complete Piano Sonatas*. Marc-André Hamelin, piano. Hyperion CDA 67131/2 [DDD], produced by Andrew Keener / *Beethoven: Diabelli Variations*. William Kinderman, piano. Hyperion CDA 66763 [DDD], produced by Marc Seiffge.] *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 17(2), 129–133. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014798ar>

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## RECORD REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE DISQUES

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Hyperion has released two recordings, one by a Canadian pianist living in the United States, the other by an American pianist living in Canada. Both artists are well-known internationally, albeit for different reasons. Marc-André Hamelin is widely recognized as one of the finest pianists of his generation and William Kinderman, who teaches at the University of Victoria, has earned an enviable reputation as a musicologist; his Beethoven scholarship in particular has brought him much recognition.

Hamelin has, of course, concentrated largely on the music of some lesser-known pianist-composers, including Adolf von Henselt, Charles-Valentin Alkan, Leopold Godowsky, Kaikhosru Sorabji, S.C. Eckhardt-Gramatté, and Frederic Rzewski. His next couple of releases for Hyperion will continue this tradition by featuring music by Grainger and Medtner. The recent release of the complete Scriabin Piano Sonatas marks one of Hamelin's comparatively rare excursions into more frequently-recorded repertoire (along with his forays into Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff, and Ives). Typically, however, the composer is one who has a special affinity for the piano, whose sometimes idiosyncratic understanding of the instrument is nonetheless profound.

In the first three Scriabin sonatas, Hamelin's performances can be recommended without reservation. Vladimir Horowitz's acclaimed 1956 reading of the Third Sonata (RCA GD86215) may never be superseded, but Hamelin offers a different view, well worth hearing.

The Fourth Sonata is remarkably concise, ranging from the elegiac tenderness of its opening theme to its grandiose peroration less than eight minutes later. In between, the principal theme is transformed several times, appearing by turns light and playful, swaggering, and heroic. There are several fine recordings of this sonata currently available, but Hamelin, I believe, sets a new standard. He takes the first movement a little slower than Vladimir Ashkenazy (London 425 579-2) and a lot slower than Vladimir Sofronitsky (Melodiya/BMG 74321 25177 2) and in the process is able to suffuse its meandering strains with a calmness and delicacy that are utterly disarming. Note especially the elegantly turned trills, reminiscent of a Chopin waltz, and the feather-light repeated chords. Hamelin sounds as if he has all the time in

the world in this sonata and, although his rubato is admirably restrained, each phrase is sculpted with the utmost care.

The second movement has enough pianistic pitfalls to discourage all but the most accomplished players. Particularly treacherous is the matter of balance; the luxurious accompaniment to the return of the theme at m. 66, spanning more than four octaves, can so easily swamp the melody. Where Andrei Gavrilov (EMI CDC 7 47346 2) punches out the theme in a way that is harsh and ineffective, Hamelin is able to shape and mould the theme despite all odds. The same is true in the work's closing pages, beginning at m. 144, where Scriabin pits the melody against massive reiterated chords. This is the sort of texture that Rachmaninoff so often exploits and which pianists so often fail to project clearly. Although Gavrilov is able to project the melody clearly, again it is at the expense of tone and contour. Hamelin fares much better here, although, if truth be told, one wonders if this ending can ever truly succeed. The technical challenge may well be insurmountable; the chords simply too big, the dynamic too exaggerated, and the melody pitched too high to allow for a reasonable balance between melody and accompaniment. Suffice it to say that Hamelin brings off these pages as expertly as anyone and more convincingly than most.

I recall hearing Gavrilov play this work in Ottawa in 1985 and the climax was gripping and almost frightening in its intensity. But the visceral excitement generated by a live performance can sound raw and untamed on record. Gavrilov's recording, as splendid as it is (it won the *Grand Prix international du disque de l'Académie Charles Cros*), simply does not stand up to the ultimate test of repeated hearings. The same goes for the legendary Sofronitsky performance, recorded live in Moscow in 1960. Despite this illustrious competition, Hamelin's interpretation wins hands down.

The Fifth Sonata presents problems of a different sort. Although the Fourth Sonata, nominally in two movements, comes across a single movement with a slow introduction, the Fifth is the first of Scriabin's sonatas formally cast in a single movement. It begins as the Fourth did, with a slow introduction, but thereafter the tempo alternates between slow and fast throughout the work. The problem here is to maintain coherence in a structure that is so determinedly sectionalized. Much more so than in the previous sonatas, Scriabin is punctilious with respect to tempo and dynamic markings; presumably, if his instructions are scrupulously followed, the work will ebb and flow as the composer intended. Hamelin takes more liberties in this regard than might be expected. The opening right-hand trills and left-hand ostinato are not played sotto voce, so that the sudden crescendos and fortissimos are not what they could be. Peter Jablonski (Decca 440 281-2) manages this opening better, utilizing a much wider dynamic range than Hamelin. At the *Languido*, we are cast back into the ethereal realm of the Fourth Sonata and Hamelin is again in his element. In an attempt to make the wayward structure gel, both Jablonski and Hamelin add little crescendos here and there; listen, for example, to Jablonski at m. 145 or Hamelin at mm. 188-89. The effect is to smooth over some of the transitions in a way that is anathema to Horowitz (RCA GD86215), who is surprisingly

precise in his rendering of Scriabin's copious markings. While no recording compares with Horowitz's for sheer excitement and for the crystalline delineation of primary and subsidiary themes, and while his machine-gun chords (e.g., mm. 304 ff.) and fanfare-like trumpeting in the treble (e.g., mm. 190 ff. and mm. 354 ff.) must be heard to be believed, the fact remains that both Jablonski and Hamelin manage to tie the work together in a way that is ultimately more satisfying. As in previous instances, the magnificent delicacy of Hamelin's quiet playing and the breadth and solidity of the more aggressive sections place his recording in a class of its own, easily surpassing Jablonski's in almost all respects except recorded sound; Decca's recording is much sharper and brighter than Hyperion's. No matter the occasional liberty; Hamelin's conception works in a way that, arguably, makes the sonata sound more cohesive than it actually is. Compare Hamelin's with Mikhail Sheyne's old recording on Allegro Records to hear clearly what I mean (Allegro Set AL 37).

Hamelin's readings of the Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Sonatas are certainly among the best available. It is in the last two sonatas that he is up against formidable competition in the form of live recordings by Horowitz. Sonata no. 9 has also been recorded recently by several pianists of Hamelin's generation, most notably by Nikolai Demidenko, so direct comparisons are apt.

For all of Demidenko's obvious gifts, his approach to the Ninth Sonata leaves me cold. Hamelin's handling of the opening gesture is opposite to Demidenko's. Where the former achieves an atmospheric, slightly murky texture, appropriate to Scriabin's lugubrious chromaticisms, Demidenko opts for a much slower tempo and a dry, very sparse texture. Demidenko's approach might have worked, had he not summarily abandoned it after the opening measures. One senses that Demidenko has not quite made up his mind about a number of matters. To take another example: his opening tempo is quarter-note = 60, but at the *Tempo primo* he speeds things up to quarter-note = 88. Nor does Demidenko's approach to dynamics serve Scriabin well; the passages at mm. 92, 125 ff. can in no way be construed as *pianissimo*. Hamelin, on the other hand, gauges his tempos and dynamics with great care and is able to delineate clearly an admittedly complex structure. Beginning at m. 23, Hamelin contrasts brilliantly the fantastic swooping figures — a manic reincarnation of Schumann's "Prophet Bird" — with the passage beginning at m. 42, which sounds as if played from the nether side of a thick and undoubtedly jet-black veil. The effect of these passages in juxtaposition is striking and absolutely apropos the material at hand.

Hamelin's principal competition in this work, at least to my ears, comes in the form of two live Carnegie Hall recordings by Horowitz: one from 1953 and the other from 1965. The Ninth Sonata must have had special meaning for Horowitz, since the two performances come from watershed concerts. The first occasion, a concert in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Horowitz's American debut, paved the way for the pianist's retirement from the concert stage. Upon his return to the stage twelve years later, he again programmed the Ninth Sonata and this is the source of the second recording.

In both recordings, Horowitz's unique ability to give each of several voices its own articulation, to create layer upon layer of variegated sounds, is without compare. The "mysterious murmuring" of the right hand at m. 7, for example, is as different as could be from the legato left hand and the stuttering figures at mm. 75 and 83 ff. are aptly arid and menacing. Add to this the thundering climaxes of both Horowitz recordings (the earlier one is rawer and more kaleidoscopic than the later one), and we are left with compelling interpretations that, to date, are matchless. In the same class, and for many of the same reasons, I would place Horowitz's live recording of the Tenth Sonata from 1966. To say that Hamelin's only real competition comes from these Horowitz recordings is high praise indeed.

In short, among recordings of the complete Scriabin sonatas, Hamelin's stands easily at the head of the list. The Hamelin set, incidentally, is made even more attractive by the inclusion of the rarely heard *Sonate-Fantaisie* of 1886 and the *Fantaisie* in B minor, op. 28 of 1900. In individual works, however, particularly in the last two sonatas, some classic recordings still hold their own.

A quote from Percy Grainger came to mind as I was pondering William Kinderman's recording of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*: "When the mechanical part [of playing] has become automatic, we can give the mind fully to the emotion to be expressed. For I do not believe you can feel the structure of a piece and its emotional message at the same time. For my own part I am not much concerned with (or about) how the piece is put together; I think of it as music, as the expression of natural impulses, desires, or aspirations."

I wonder if Kinderman is simply so aware of the structure of the *Diabelli Variations* that its "emotional message" is obscured. Right from the outset, I found Kinderman's playing alternately too straightforward and too contrived; note, for example, in the first variation, the manner in which the eighth note at the end of m. 14 is detached from the downbeat of m. 15. Why Kinderman does this is obvious; it both facilitates and highlights the subito piano. But as listeners, we should not be aware of such pragmatic details. Nor can I agree with Kinderman's anticipation of the *fp* markings in variation 14, so that accents appear on the anacrusis of mm. 5–7. Time and again I found myself more aware of interpretive and pianistic matters such as these and less emotionally involved in the music than I would have liked.

If your tastes tend towards Alfred Brendel or Wilhelm Kempff in Beethoven playing, you may find much to admire in Kinderman's playing. If you favour the Russians and Americans, Kinderman's recording is not for you.

I then went shopping for alternatives. Brendel's 1988 recording (Philips 426 232-2) is, as noted, similar to Kinderman's in many ways. And yet, although Brendel is quite literal in his observance of Beethoven's text, there appear many moments of pure magic; the beginning of the second half of variation 5, where Brendel's pianissimo occasions an unexpected change of colour, is a case in point. Felicities of this sort define Brendel's Beethoven playing and make his *Diabelli Variations*, if sometimes rather dry and stolid, nonetheless memorable.

I wish that I could recommend Sviatoslav Richter's live recording from 1986 (Philips 422 416-2). It is a superior performance to both Brendel's and Kinderman's and would, except for one flaw, be a recording to be treasured. Unfortunately, especially from variation 6 onwards, the instrument is so out of tune in the much-used octave two octaves above middle C that it sounds like a bar-room piano. A honky-tonk *Diabelli* is not what most people have in mind.

My long-standing deep appreciation for John Browning's recording from the mid-1960s remains unassailed (RCA Victor Red Seal LSC [LM] 2877). After countless hearings it sounds as fresh and unburdened as ever. Browning's reading may be far removed from the sombre world of several recent recordings, but Beethoven's exquisite variations emerge lovingly and often humorously revealed under Browning's hands. What more could be asked for? A CD reissue of this youthful yet masterful performance is long overdue.

Glen Carruthers