

Performing Arts

Original article

UDC 78.071.1

<https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2025.4.128-144>

EDN SMOTJT



Russian Music in Marc-André Hamelin's Performing Practice (Part 1)

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Abstract. Canadian pianist and composer Marc-André Hamelin (b. 1961) is an expert in Russian music. His repertoire includes all the piano sonatas by Alexander Scriabin, Nikolai Medtner and Samuil Feinberg, the piano concertos of Sergei Rachmaninoff, Dmitry Shostakovich and Rodion Shchedrin. He pertains to the small number of pianists who promote the music of the Russian avant-garde and rarely performed composers (Georgy Catoire, Nikolai Roslavets). In this article, attention is focused on Hamelin's interpretation of works by Russian composers of the turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries — Scriabin, Rachmaninoff and Medtner. A central place in the pianist's repertoire is held by the music of Medtner, whose compositions induce Hamelin to contemplate. The performer is attracted, first of all, to the detailed quality of Medtner's piano texture. In Scriabin's sonatas, Hamelin experiments with sound, disclosing the contrasting boundaries of the composer's musical world — intellectual perfection and the “outbursts” of emotions. In Rachmaninoff's music, he accentuates attention on the diversity of the timbral colors of the piano, the palette of strokes and dynamic shadings, disclosing before the listeners the pianistic qualities of the composer's thought. Special attention in the article is given to the placing of the fingerings in Rachmaninoff's works carried out by Hamelin upon commission of the German publishing house *G. Henle Verlag*. It is noted that the pianist's decisions of fingering are stipulated by various performing goals: the necessity to accentuate attention on the melodic lines, to achieve a conciseness of articulation, to even out a line in a passage in terms of its sound.

Keywords: Marc-André Hamelin, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Alexander Scriabin, Nikolai Medtner, piano performance, style of piano playing, interpretation of Russian music, individuality of performance

For citation: Sukhorukova I.I. Russian Music in Marc-André Hamelin's Performing Practice (Part 1). *Russian Musicology*. 2025, no. 4, pp. 128–144. <https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2025.4.128-144>

Translated by Dr. Anton Rovner.

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Русская музыка в исполнительском творчестве Марка-Андре Амлена (Часть I)

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Аннотация. Канадский пианист и композитор Марк-Андре Амлен (1961) — эксперт в области русской музыки. В его репертуаре — все сонаты Александра Скрябина, Николая Метнера, Самуила Фейнберга, концерты Сергея Рахманинова, Дмитрия Шостаковича и Родиона Щедрина. Он принадлежит к числу немногих исполнителей, кто пропагандирует музыку русского авангарда и редко исполняемых авторов (Георгия Катуара, Николая Рославца). В фокусе внимания статьи — интерпретация Амленом сочинений русских композиторов рубежа XIX–XX веков — Скрябина, Рахманинова и Метнера. Центральное место в репертуаре пианиста занимает музыка Метнера, чьи сочинения заставляют Амлена размышлять. Исполнителя привлекает прежде всего детализированность метнеровской фактуры. В Сонатах Скрябина Амлен экспериментирует со звучанием, выявляя противоположные грани музыкального мира композитора — интеллектуальное совершенство и «взрыв» эмоций. В музыке Рахманинова он акцентирует внимание на разнообразии тембровых красок фортепиано, палитре штрихов и динамических оттенков, раскрывая перед слушателем пианистичность композиторского мышления. Особое внимание в статье уделяется аппликатурной редакции сочинений Рахманинова, выполненной Амленом по заказу немецкого издательства *G. Henle Verlag*. Отмечается, что аппликатурные решения пианиста обусловлены различными исполнительскими задачами: необходимостью акцентировать внимание на мелодических линиях, добиться чёткости артикуляции, выровнять в звуковом отношении линию пассажа.

Ключевые слова: Марк-Андре Амлен, Сергей Рахманинов, Александр Скрябин, Николай Метнер, фортепианное исполнительство, фортепианная стилистика, интерпретация русской музыки, исполнительская индивидуальность

Introduction

Canadian pianist-composer Marc-André Hamelin possesses one of the most massive repertoires at the present time. He has the reputation of a super-virtuoso¹ and performer of rare piano compositions entrenched in him. The repertoire of young Hamelin included Leopold Godowsky's études and transcriptions,

Stefan Wolpe's pieces, William Bolcom's études and ragtime pieces, and Charles Ives' *Concord Sonata*. Many people had previously thought that such a choice of works served as a means for the pianist to attract attention to himself. However, as the horizons of his performing predilections continued to broaden, critics began exerting more attention not only to

¹ In 1999 a documentary film about Hamelin was released with the title of *Supervirtuoso*.
URL: <https://rutube.ru/video/54c48f19ff8d4d2bcce6fbb5dfa0f6a/?ysclid=mic5lo9eis823989989> (fragment)
(accessed: 25.11.2025).

him, but also to the compositions he performed. Hamelin's approach to choosing his programs has overcome many stereotypes of the present condition of classical music,² as figures of the forefront composers have been "constricted" and have given way to such personalities as Charles-Valentin Alkan, Sigismund Thalberg, Ferruccio Busoni, Nikolai Roslavets, Samuil Feinberg, and Nikolai Kapustin.

Presently, each of the pianist's concert programs reflects the diversity of his interests: here it has always been possible to find something very well-known, such as, for instance, Maurice Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* or Franz Schubert's *Fantasy*, as well as something new in performance practice, such as, for instance, a Sonata by Feinberg or a short piece by Alexis Weissenberg. An ardent promoter of American music and, in this sense, a patriot of his country, Hamelin has also exerted a fair share of attention, effort, and time to Russian music. His musical repertoire includes all the sonatas of Alexander Scriabin, Nikolai Medtner and Samuil Feinberg, several sonatas by Nikolai Roslavets, Sergei Rachmaninoff's sonatas and concertos, the concertos of Anton Rubinstein, Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitry Shostakovich and Rodion Shchedrin, and the small pieces of Georgy Catoire.³ No other native pianist could be found on the American continent

(and, in all possibility, in the whole world) who possesses such an extensive "Russian program."

To return to the repertoire "rarities," we may note that many of the Russian compositions are rare items in American concert venues. Whereas Tchaikovsky's and Rachmaninoff's concertos are, undoubtedly, known throughout the whole world, it is not so easy to find Scriabin's and Medtner's music in the repertoires of philharmonic societies in other countries, besides Russia.

Considering the pianist's "territorial detachment" from the Russian realities and the Russian traditions of musical education,⁴ it seems to us that Hamelin's interpretation of Russian music contains an individual approach, one that is worthy of attention. In most cases, the musician discloses this musical literature (for others) for the first time, he has no need of being distinct among other people, he attempts to show what is present in the composition in as accessible and comprehensible a manner as possible.

The *Trio of the Moscow-based Lyricists*⁵ in Marc André Hamelin's Programs

The most intriguing time period for Hamelin the performer is the early 20th century. Having turned to a lengthy "list" of Russian composers, the pianist obtained a rather broad

² See: Marc-André Hamelin: reinventing the repertoire. Interview with Harriet Smith. *The Gramophone Newsletter*. September 21, 2017. URL: <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/features/article/marc-andre-hamelin-reinventing-the-repertoire> (accessed: 25.11.2025).

³ Marc-André Hamelin's repertoire in chronological order is presented on the website *Classical Pianist*. URL: <https://classical-pianists.net/generation-xi/marc-andre-hamelin/chronology/> (accessed: 25.11.2025).

⁴ Hamelin's pianistic genealogy stems to Alfred Cortot through his pupil and Marc-André's first teacher Yvonne Hubert. Most of her pupils, such as André Laplante, completed their education in Europe, most often in France. Hamelin remained in America, where he continued to perfect his skills under the tutelage of Harvey Wedeen and Russell Sherman at Temple University in Philadelphia. Prior to winning the competition of American music at Carnegie Hall, Hamelin participated only at a competition in Pretoria, South Africa and several Canadian competitions. For more detail about the performer's artistic biography, see: [1].

⁵ This is how Tamara Levaya calls Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, and Medtner in her research devoted to Scriabin. [2, p. 64]

perspective of the stylistic trends of that time, which he characterized overall as “the period of destruction of tonality.” [3, p. 18] The composers-pianists of the Moscow school are presented in his performance repertoire to the fullest extent. Most likely, this is connected with his interest towards them, including towards the aspect of them being pianists.⁶

Three of them are distinguished in the frequency of the performances of their music — the same-age peers, Scriabin and Rachmaninoff, and their younger contemporary, Medtner. Hamelin does not perform the music of Scriabin and Rachmaninoff together in one program (which would be quite natural for a Russian pianist and listener), but combines together Scriabin and Medtner, and even more frequently — Medtner and Rachmaninoff. Among them, Medtner, undoubtedly, holds the predominating position: in addition to his sonatas, the pianist’s discography also includes both opuses of the *Forgotten Melodies*.

It is widely known that Hamelin has made a considerable contribution to the popularization of Medtner’s music. In his utterances about the composer, he noted that “Medtner does not create an impression immediately, he has to be listened to and listened to, and then his music shall become part of you forever.”⁷ [3, p. 19] According to the musician’s acknowledgement, he is not as much interested in a composer’s thematic material as in how the latter works with it. [4, p. 168] Indeed, the texture of Medtner’s compositions, thickset with its events (melodic, harmonic, in the use of various

means of performance, as well as the means of polyphony) cannot leave such a musician as Hamelin indifferent, since for him unwinding the complex musical material saturated with events presents the most attractive side of his performing activities (one has to recall his recordings of the compositions of Kaikhosru Sorabji and Leopold Godowsky). By playing a large quantity of Medtner’s music, Hamelin, in addition to promoting his works, has shown that this composer is very close and comprehensible for him.

In 2017, Marc-André Hamelin’s compact disc was released (in collaboration with the London Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Vladimir Jurowski) with Medtner’s Second Piano Concerto (which was dedicated to Rachmaninoff) and Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto.⁸ This recording may be perceived as a certain idea of the parity of these two composers (it is generally known that they were friends) — in a performance venue, in artistic aspirations, the parity of their music in its conception and manifestation. And this had not always been so in the listeners’ perceptions.

Scriabin: “A Sorcerer of Sounds”⁹

The destiny of Scriabin’s music outside of Russia is described in Boris Borodin’s article: “In the West, there was another situation, which Anatoly Leikin asserts¹⁰: ‘During the course of approximately 15 years, from 1910 to 1925, Scriabin as a composer, pianist and person aroused abundant adoration and, oftentimes, frantic idolatry. Subsequently, somehow or

⁶ Hamelin works a considerable amount with recordings, studies different performances and collects them. When mentioning any composition performed by him, he easily enumerates, what performances existed before his.

⁷ Ethan Iverson. Interview with Marc-André Hamelin. URL: <https://ethaniverson.com/interviews/interview-with-marc-andre-hamelin/> (accessed: 25.11.2025).

⁸ The composer dedicated his Fourth Piano Concerto to Medtner.

⁹ This is how Igor Glebov spoke of Alexander Scriabin. [2, p. 160]

¹⁰ Anatoly Samoilovich Leikin is a musicologist, born in 1946, graduated from the Gnesin State Musical-Pedagogical Institute, Dr.Sci. (Arts), presently a professor at the University of California in Santa Cruz.

other, Scriabin's all-absorbing music expired.” [5, p. 90]

The “mutual relations” between the composer and Hamelin are braced by a special history: the Russian composer's Canadian pupil and close friend of his, pianist Alfred La Liberté was a promoter of his teacher's music in Montreal during the first half of the 20th century. Hamelin made the acquaintance of and befriended La Liberté's widow. She presented to him the greater part of her husband's library. Because of this, Hamelin came to be in possession of certain rare editions of Scriabin's compositions, including a translation of the poetic basis of the *Poem of Ecstasy*, Catoire's short pieces, and even the manuscript of Medtner's *Sonata Reminiscenza*. [3, p. 17] This is how Hamelin's connection with these composers came to be, which, most likely, provided the additional impulse for the study of their works.

In 1985, the pianist won a competition of American music at Carnegie Hall, which was in many ways significant for his career. The program consisted 90% of music by 20th century American composers, which was stipulated by the regulations of the competition itself. As part of the program, the works of Stefan Wolpe, Mario Davidovsky, John Cage, Ned Rorem, and Charles Ives were performed. An exception was formed by Schumann's *Carnival* op. 9, which appeared as an absolutely exotic item, in this context, and Scriabin's Piano

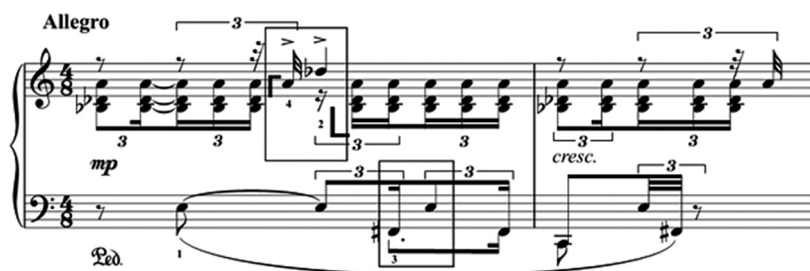
Sonata No. 7. The latter would hereinafter appear repeatedly in Hamelin's concert programs: in 1996 at a festival of rare piano music at the Schloss vor Husum in Germany, in 2000 at Lincoln Center in New York, in 2002 at Miller Theater on Broadway; it is particularly the Piano Sonata No. 7 that the pianist would bring in 2022 to the festival commemorating the composer's 150th anniversary in Moscow (along with Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 29, Prokofiev's *Sarcasms* and a sonata by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach).

Hamelin's interpretation of Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 7 is discernibly different from the renditions of such Russian Scriabinists as Vladimir Sofronitsky, Igor Zhukov and Heinrich Neuhaus. Let us examine some of its moments in greater detail.

The contrasting quality of the themes and their elements, the juxtaposition of the primary and the subsidiary theme groups are obvious for the pianist (as it is for many performers): “the action is carried out as if at that concealed verge <...> where extreme austerity adjoins with gentle caress.” [6, p. 48] Hamelin demarcates precisely the sound of the characters in this composition by means of his touch. Everything connected with dotted rhythms (Example No. 1) possesses a more “real hue — this is conveyed in a thickset dense sound and a somewhat lengthened short sixteenth note in dotted rhythm” [7, p. 18] (which is very close to Sviatoslav Richter's performance;

Example No. 1

Alexander Scriabin. Piano Sonata No. 7.
Primary Theme Group, mm. 1–2



it is possible that Hamelin derived this idea from him).

The strict triplet rhythms of the transition theme group create a seminal irreversible character, bringing in references to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The concluding trill of the transition theme group sounds in a terrifying manner (Example No. 2).

The more notes are present in one meter, the lighter and more “unreal” sound is created by the pianist — the accompanying quintuplets of the subsidiary theme group are devoid of accentuation, as they envelope the main theme. The theme of the subsidiary theme group in this regard appears as the semantic center of the composition, as the longest intoned line; everything concentrates itself towards it; its appearance elucidates the sound canvas by the completeness of its phrase.

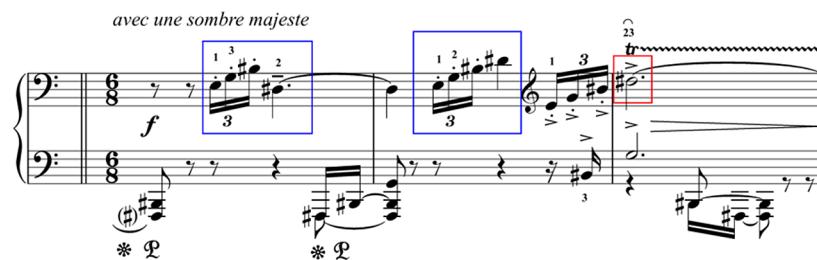
The pianist aspires to preserve the minutest particulars of the musical text, all of its details. The graphics of the musical score as a separate artistic component is important for Hamelin;

he wants to make it more “visible,” and for this reason, he uses the pedal very accurately, at times almost in a classical style, frequently not mixing the harmonies and turning the trills into melodies. The performer's fingers lay out ultra-precisely short passages and accompanying arpeggios into separate notes, adding acuteness in the upsurge of small rhythmic figures with the help of a clearer accentuation or thicker trills in proportion to the motion to the culmination (Example No. 3).

The culmination is determined in an unusual and effective manner: the descending chords are not intonated as divided by two (as they are by the majority of performers) and are not connected in a *legato* manner, neither are there bell-like effects of voluminous pedal present: Hamelin depicts the implacable motion of clockwork, extremely mechanistically and harshly, and the listener perceives the approaching end. The final chord is played quickly, evenly, with each note sounded out without a pedal — this gives the sensation

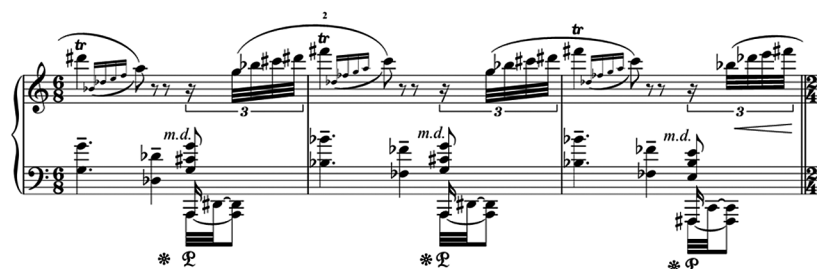
Example No. 2

Alexander Scriabin. Piano Sonata No. 7.
Transition Theme Group, mm. 17–19



Example No. 3

Alexander Scriabin. Piano Sonata No. 7.
Culmination, mm. 270–272



of dissolution in space, as if everything is “wrapped up.”

It must be noted that in the pianist's performance practice, the Piano Sonata No. 7 is of rather short duration, compared with the massive scores of Paul Dukas or Charles Ives. In our view, in this composition Hamelin turns to one of his favorite performing dramaturgical ideas — the supersession of the stages of life: the generation of themes, their formation, maturity and termination. There is an absence of such an uttermost dramatic effect and sweep that is so important for Russian pianists, as well as those in other countries (Vladimir Ashkenazy, Mikhail Voskresensky, Sviatoslav Richter, or Arcadi Volodos). In Hamelin's interpretation, the sonata turns out to be luminous because of the subsidiary theme group, the sounds of which are unified into a concise phrase (and not “scattered” in a meditative fashion, as it may be frequently heard in other renditions), and intimate, due to an absence of sound conglomerations. The performer does not attempt to surpass the framework of corporeality by means of contrast, since, after all, it is particularly this miracle of dematerialization we always wait for in the final section of Scriabin's composition in Hamelin's interpretation of the music, as divine providence, “brings out” the main protagonist to another dimension of life.

By the clarity of its sound, the sonata may be conditionally called “classical,” in the context of the most part of performances. Hamelin is fascinated by the beauty of Scriabin's “process of construction” of the sound space, the combination of trills, short arpeggiato passages, the repeated and decomposed chords, the leitmotif intonations. The contrast present in the work transforms itself into a rivalry of elements between themselves for a place in this space: the closer the music proceeds to the final section, the more lucid the sound of the texture becomes.

In 1995 Hamelin recorded all of Scriabin's sonatas on the *Hyperion* CD label. This was one of his first projects in collaboration with this sound recording company. During the years of its formation, *Hyperion* specialized in rarely performed music, which confirms the reputation of Scriabin's music as being rather non-traditional for the listener in countries outside of Russia. The work, accomplished in London's Catholic All Saints Church, was highly evaluated by Canadian music critics, the album having received the Juno Awards.

In his subsequent concert practice, Hamelin maintained in his repertoire, in addition to the Piano Sonata No. 7, also the Piano Sonatas Nos. 3, 5 and 6, as well as the Sonata-Fantasy (1886) composed by Scriabin in the student period of his creativity. In the 2000s, he played these works more seldom, giving his preference to Scriabin's short pieces. Frequently, in the large-scale concert programs, the *Étude in C-sharp minor* op. 2 has been played — essentially, a short and simple piece. What has been the reason for this? The feeling of fascination with the simplicity of the tonal language of young Scriabin, or the pianist's intellectual irony in regard to the image of the composer created by himself or by others?

Whereas the Piano Sonata No. 7 for Hamelin is an example of Scriabin's intellectual perfection, the Piano Sonata No. 5 presents an “atomic” explosion of emotions. The recording made in December 1997 in Tokyo is exemplary in this regard. The music, possessing the highest emotional degree, caliber and impetuosity, is a real discovery for a pianist. For Hamelin, it is pure energy: positive, rampant, young, bright. The joy that he experiences while playing the sonata cannot be concealed: his behavior on stage, from an intertextual point of view, is swashbuckling in the vein of poet Sergei Yesenin — the pianist is not afraid of speed, maximal contrast, sudden throttles, or an overall loss of motion. He uses the pedal

very boldly, while, at the same time, his pedal applications, for the most part, are connected with phrasing, i.e., particularly by its means he demarcates the musical phrases, highlights the most important element.¹¹ In our view, the musician juxtaposes in this music organized nature and chaos, static qualities and duality, similar to the energetic, whirlwind, carnival-like change of emotional states in the music of Schumann's piano cycles (even the dotted rhythms "make dancing steps" joyfully and resiliently). The interpretation closely resembles an improvisation, wherein a fair share of space is devoted to sound-phonetic experiments: the uncontrolled maelstrom of the introduction, the light of "pouring" repeated chords in the culminations. The ending is quite logical — a jump into another world from an overabundance of energy.

It is possible to characterize Hamelin's performance with the words of Leonid Gakkel, who wrote about the concordance of Scriabin's aesthetics with symbolism: "We presume that it is possible to speak in parallel of the aesthetic energy of sound aspired by Scriabin, about the musician, the public figure, and about the music, the instrument of apperception of the world. The 'energy of the word,' spellbinding luminosity of the artistic matter becomes a manifestation of freedom, a freedom of spirit in its actions..." (the author's spacing. — *I.S.*). [8, p. 50]

Boris Borodin, disclosing the "complex of the Scriabinist," noted: "Scriabin the pianist becomes a prototype of a unique role specialization — that of a musician with the most sophisticated spiritual level, possessing the most saturating sound palette, and a peculiar, aristocratic, yet frequently

vulnerable pianistic talent. This is not simply an intermediary, a diligent performer, enlivening the musical text and fulfilling the will of the composer, but rather a medium connected to some kind of mysterious streams of energy effused by the 'supreme forces.'" [5, p. 83] Hamelin's pianistic *métier* corresponds quite adequately to this image.

Hamelin's "Research" Approach to Rachmaninoff's Music

A most important position in the pianist's performance repertoire is taken up by Sergei Rachmaninoff's music. However, this is hardly perceptible at first, since in Hamelin's discography, only two of Rachmaninoff's works are present — the Piano Sonata No. 2 (its second version) and the Third Piano Concerto. It is not difficult to answer the question of why does the performer turn so rarely to Rachmaninoff's compositions at the beginning of his career: the open emotionality of the Russian composer's music, the melodic expressivity, and the depth of the piano sound are not close to Hamelin's aesthetic creed. It is not quite easy to convince the public of one's own rendition of this highly popular composer, considering the established traditions and the number of available interpretations of any of his compositions. In one of his interviews, Hamelin observes that certain particularities in the Third Piano Concerto are not only hard for a pianist to convey, but also difficult for the public itself to hear, since for this one needs to know how to listen.¹² In this particular case, it is meant that "popular" music can also be difficult, at times inaccessible to the common ear. But the world performance tradition has been formed in such a way

¹¹ The pedal for Hamelin even becomes a means of contrast, which may comprise the subject of a separate study.

¹² See: Ethan Iverson. *Op. cit.*

that Rachmaninoff's piano concertos are indispensable for performance, if one aspires to ascend the Olympus of pianists.

In 2016, at the threshold of Rachmaninoff's 150th anniversary, the German publishing house *G. Henle Verlag* proceeded to publish the urtext scores of his piano compositions. Hamelin was invited to carry out the redaction of the fingerings. The choice was not accidental: the publisher was seeking a pianist equal to the composer in his level of art of performance, a virtuoso capable of matching "this Olympian as he reveals the utmost beauties of the pianoforte" [9, p. 56] and proposing his ideas that would not contradict the composer's perspective. Hamelin became the editor of the Second and Third Piano Concertos, the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, all the *Preludes*, the *Études-Tableaux*, the *Moments Musicaux* and the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*.

The composer had already possessed the experience as an editor. For example, he had fully notated on music paper by ear Alexis Weissenberg's pieces based on Charles Trenet's songs, edited Rudolph Ganz's exercises and Kaikhosru Sorabji's Piano Sonata, participated in the redaction of Godowsky's Piano Sonata, which helped him, according to his own admission, to perceive in new light its form and the certain polyphonic finesse on the part of the composer.¹³ These cases had to do with lesser-known compositions, whereas here, the situation was absolutely different — virtually every pianist plays Rachmaninoff's music, and most of the composer's short pieces are true "bestsellers." Analysis of Hamelin's

solutions forms the object of a separate study, so let us turn our attention merely to certain important moments.¹⁴

In his work, Hamelin stemmed from the possibilities of pianists with large hands. It must be reminded that the fingerings placed by Rachmaninoff were meant for pianists with rather large palms of hands and long fingers, so in this case we can trace a natural continuity on the part of Hamelin with the composer's ideas. In those spots in particular compositions where Rachmaninoff suggested his variant, Hamelin did not add anything, since he understood that a certain conception of fingerings had been conceived of there: "I did not suggest any alternates when he provided his own because I figured that he had specific results."¹⁵ As an example, he brought in the fingerings of a descending scale of *B minor* from the *Étude-Tableau* op. 39 No. 4, where Rachmaninoff made use of only the first and second fingers for the sake of creating a certain evenness of intoning. At the same time, the thumb finds its place on the black key concluding the passage, which is logical, considering its physical force (Example No. 4).

Example No. 4

Sergei Rachmaninoff. *Étude-Tableau*
op. 39 No. 4, m. 27



¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hamelin told of his work as a redactor in his interview to the editor of the publishing house *G. Henle Verlag* Dominik Rahmer. URL: https://vk.com/wall-22220838_1437 (accessed: 25.11.2025).

¹⁵ Ibid.

Hamelin presumes that there are even more convenient solutions available, but does not dare to “argue” with Rachmaninoff: “My role in there was to supplement these suggestions not with anything terribly personal although you know I was thinking.”¹⁶ Such an immersion into Rachmaninoff’s musical text, the realization of his artistic ideas related to performance gives the pianist a special kind of professional delight and in a certain sense, a means of communication with Rachmaninoff.

Hamelin notes that in most cases he aspired towards a universality. Similar to Rachmaninoff, in certain spots he “divides” the passages with the help of repeated fingerings, for example, in

the *Étude-Tableau* op. 39 No. 9 in mm. 24 and 44 (Example No. 5).

A number of Hamelin's solutions deal with the allocation of the fast passages between the hands, which in some cases focuses our attention on the melodic lines (Example No. 6), and in other cases — helps achieve a more precise articulation of notes played in a fast tempo (Example No. 7).

The most peculiar decisions in regard to the fingerings have to do with the use of the same fingers in both hands. The synchronicity of the fingerings helps even out in terms of the sound the line of a passage or melody, especially in the fast tempos (Example No. 8).

Example No. 5
a) m. 24

Sergei Rachmaninoff. *Étude-Tableau* op. 39 No. 9



b) mm. 43-44



Example No. 6

Sergei Rachmaninoff. Third Piano Concerto.
First Movement, m. 32, the soloist's part



¹⁶ Ibid.

Example No. 7

Sergei Rachmaninoff. Third Piano Concerto.
Second Movement, mm. 132–134



Example No. 8

Sergei Rachmaninoff. Third Piano Concerto.
Third Movement

a) mm. 152–154

Scherzando (♩ = ♩) **48** *molto leggero*
pp *dim.* *ppp* *Archi*

b) m. 160

mf *dim.*

“I saw my task,” Hamelin explained, “in suggesting the best fingering solution for a concert performance of these compositions, so I had to not merely choose the ‘logical fingers,’ but to sense keenly the potential comfort of performance on stage.” [2, p. 22]

Since the end of the 20th century, the pianist’s repertoire is complemented with

the appearance in it of Rachmaninoff’s concertos — the Second, the Third and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. He added these works to his repertoire at the age of 38, which coincided with the composer’s age at the period of his writing the Third Piano Concerto. We perceive this fact to be by no means coincidental. The scale of the indicated works in regard

to the contrast of images, the breadth of the performer's breath, the abundance of piano colors and disbursement of emotional force cannot be achieved by musicians immediately, from the start. Hamelin's mastery of the instrument and of the element of time in the Third Piano Concerto places his performing art at an unprecedented height: Rachmaninoff's thickset musical texture permeated with semantic elements begins literally to breathe, speak and move in an organic way in the pianist's hands. Let us note a few elements that are substantive, in our view.

The tempo of the primary theme group of the first movement in Hamelin's interpretation is slow, in comparison with many of the performances by Russian composers, including Rachmaninoff himself. This does not provide any advantages, since it is harder to create a long line, it expands for objective reasons; however, subsequently, such a decision makes it possible to align the tempo plan of the first movement from slow to fast, leading to the culmination, and not lose the intonational lines, motives and voices. Immense significance in Hamelin's performance is acquired by the rhythmic intonation of the introduction to the first movement in the orchestra (Example No. 9a): dotted quarter note — eighth note. One way or another, attention to this element is perceived in various sections of the first movement (Example No. 9b); at the culmination point

of the cadenza, this intonation comes out to the forefront, thereby traversing the path from a barely perceptible element in the accompaniment to the chief intonational material in the culmination (Example No. 9c). This form-unifying technique demands great intellectual intensity from the musician during the process of performance.

The subsidiary theme group, in its reference to the slow movement of the Second Piano Concerto in the recapitulation acquires in Hamelin's performance the character of a dream, a reminiscence, which seems comprehensible after a culminating upsurge, unprecedented in its force. The pianist "hovers above" with the aid of a most refined *legato*. The transition to the iridescent passage appears as a natural phenomenon, whereas the subsidiary theme group seems to "dissolve" at the end.

Most intriguing is the pianist's figurative "discovery" in the first movement (in the development section, the passage prior to the cadenza, reh. 15): three times there appear two simultaneously "crawling" one-voice passages which Hamelin places very far from each other in the sound space by means of bringing out the lower voice and the absence of dynamic development, during which, all of a sudden, the music completely ceases all motion (Example No. 10).

The infernal, otherworldly, absolutely unexpected character of the sound of these

Example No. 9

Sergei Rachmaninoff. Third Piano Concerto.
First Movement, the soloist's part

a) Introduction, m. 1



b) Development section, m. 191



c) Culmination, m. 342



Example No. 10

Sergei Rachmaninoff. Third Piano Concerto.
First Movement, reh. 15

The musical score for Example No. 10 is a piano arrangement of Sergei Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto, First Movement, rehearsal mark 15. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system shows a complex polyphonic texture with multiple voices in both hands, marked with 'dim.' and 'p'. The second system features a box highlighting the rehearsal mark '15' and continues the polyphonic texture. The third system shows the music continuing with 'dim.' and 'mf' markings, and includes a triplet of eighth notes marked '3' and a sequence of notes marked '1 4 3 1'.

three small-scale two-voice structures provides a powerful impulsion at the beginning of the cadenza, the figurative structure of which changes cardinally, following the vector “from darkness to light.”

In the second movement, the music acquires an improvisational character, Hamelin (similar to many other performers) avoids the windings and curves at the conclusions of the phrases (this is inspired by the music itself), thereby creating a type of motion along a spiral, wherein each variation structure presents a new loop. In this movement, a significant role is acquired by the polyphony in the accompaniment, to which Hamelin gives more attention than to the melody. A form-generating role is played by the cadenza episodes, frequently marked *Meno mosso*, wherein the entire material — both the melody and the accompaniment — is transferred from a low to a high register: similar to the flight of a bird, the sound becomes lightened and becomes more aerial in the high register, and all the small notes within it subtilize and soar above (Example No. 11).

Each variation presents an attempt to “depart from the ground.” In terms of performance, Hamelin succeeds in doing this at the moment of the appearance of the “scherzo-like” episode in a dance-like character (reh. 33), constructed by means of repeated passages. It overcomes the legato and the resultant gravitation, each note sounding lightly, concisely, transparently and brilliantly. This lightness resembles a “breath of fresh air,” the joy of overcoming; however, just as in life, this does not last long. The model of development of the image found by the performer — from an earthly, *legato*, lyrical character (in duple meter) through a lengthy transition (from a low to a high register), towards light, and then towards scherzo-like fantastic sounds (trills) — becomes very important for the finale. But there it would acquire a different, larger scale.

The chief difficulty of the finale is to adhere to the goal of not losing the momentum, playing it in one breath, reaching the light, the happiness, easily, without strain, in a natural manner, without losing speed. Along this path

Example No. 11

Sergei Rachmaninoff. Third Piano Concerto.
Second Movement, reh. 26

appear all sorts of techniques, all the possible tints, and as many sounds as each performer would create for himself; there is practically no respite. Most characteristic for the formal structures are either wavelike motion with even ascents and descents or direct ascending motion. Hamelin plays simply, without any kinds of artifices or tricks, following the musical text precisely: in his performances, all the short notes are very audible, especially, the repeated notes, which adds resilience and energizes the music. The force of the sonorousness is proportional to the duration and the filling of the vertical; here the pianist does not back down.¹⁷ In the increases and decreases of the dynamics, there are no harsh differentials present, which is heard especially well, when the pianist “reaches” a *f*, at which

point two or three chords sound precisely at the same dynamic; instead of accents, more frequently there is another type of touch applied, either a sharp one or a deep one. For Hamelin, such music is close to him in spirit: it is life-asserting in the diversity of its colors, feelings, emotions, and inner states. The themes of the first movement do not transfer any dramatic elements into the finale; the pianist plays them warmly and gently. This composition for him is a hymn to life, its relentless drive, nature, the happiness of being. In his interpretation of the concerto, Hamelin places his attention not as much towards Rachmaninoff the composer as Rachmaninoff the pianist, entralling the listener by the diversity of the timbral colors of the piano, the palette of hues, and dynamic nuances.

¹⁷ This seems to be a very simple rule, but within the massive “spaces” of Rachmaninoff’s music, it becomes very difficult to follow.

Hamelin is also well-known as a composer. Among his musical works are compositions in various genres (nocturnes, toccatas, a *Suite in Old Style*, etc.). The most popular of all his works is the cycle — *12 Études in All the Minor Keys*, half of which are taken up by transcriptions, carried out with a fair share of freedom and fantasy. For example, the Étude No. 1, the so-called “triple étude” presents a contrapuntal symbiosis of three of Chopin’s études — op. 10 No. 2, op. 25 No. 8 and op. 25 No. 11.

In 2013 one of the most large-scale of all of Hamelin’s musical compositions was published by the Peters Edition — the *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*. The tradition to take this theme as a basis for variations has been transformed in a certain sense into a competition between the composers. Hamelin joins in a very peculiar manner: he writes large-scale polystylistic variations, which brings him quite close to Rachmaninoff. However, in Hamelin’s composition there are not only hints at different styles present, but in separate cases he resorts to quotations in the manner of intellectual jesting intrinsic to him. Thus, Variation No. 13 presents a quotation of Rachmaninoff’s slow 18th Variation in *D-flat major* from his *Variations on a Theme of Paganini* (even in the musical score, the crossed-out number 18 is corrected into number 13). In order for the quotation to appear covertly, Hamelin changes the key signatures in each measure, so that the number of keys would correspond to the number of measures. But the irony lies in that one cannot avoid recognizing the music (is it possible that thereby Hamelin hints at the impossibility of hiding, concealing (and, definitely, destroying) true beauty?).

The fact that Rachmaninoff has a special status among Hamelin’s predilections is testified

by a composition that is not directly connected with Rachmaninoff, but, nonetheless, brings us to him. This is Hamelin’s étude on Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s *Lullaby*.¹⁸ The romance, as it is known, had two transcriptions — one made by the composer himself (the only one ever made by Tchaikovsky), and another made by Rachmaninoff (in the latter composer’s output, this is the only transcription of a work by Tchaikovsky). Hamelin’s étude presents the third transcription of this romance. In the introduction to the compilation, the pianist writes that he purposely did not listen to Rachmaninoff’s version, although he knew that it existed. [10, p. 4] This curious fact makes the case that Hamelin possibly tried out his “Rachmaninoff instinct.” And the latter did not fail him: the intonation of the descending second in the main theme becomes the foundation on which the development of the new musical material is built in Hamelin’s transcription, as well. A truly “Hamelin-type” trait in this work is present in that it is written for the left hand alone.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be noted that in Marc-André Hamelin’s perception, Scriabin and Rachmaninoff have remained as different from each other up to the present as they were a hundred years ago in Leonid Sabaneyev’s description: “a constant eternal enigma” and “a repository of old academic traditions.” [11, pp. 390, 395] They are so unlike each other that the pianist has included compositions by both of them in a single program only once — on a compact-disc devoted to the famous pianist-composers.¹⁹ Scriabin is an intellectual, an architect of musical images and structures, by no means impulsive, but rather calculated,

¹⁸ Étude No. 7 from the cycle *12 Études in All the Minor Keys*.

¹⁹ Among them are Charles Alkan, Ferruccio Busoni, Samuil Feinberg, Alexander Scriabin, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Nikolai Medtner, Leopold Godowsky, Kaikhosru Sorabji, and Marc-André Hamelin.

precise in his intentions, with the character of a demon. We hear very well the balance and control in the performance — in relation to the sound, in the touch, in the use of the space, it can be an experiment, but brought to perfection. Rachmaninoff is a buoyant person, happy with life, his compositions require energy, strength, amplitude, mastery in the search for precise motions for each stroke, character or phrase. The naturalness, the continuity of development in the interpretation of his music by the piano — all of these are the result of very tight “communication” on the part of Hamelin with Rachmaninoff’s music: his work of editing, transcriptions, study of his interpretations. Rachmaninoff is for Hamelin predominantly a pianist who demonstrates the piano sound in all its splendor, diversity, and power.

Undoubtedly, the pianist’s interpretations of Medtner’s works merits separate examination. Let us cite Hamelin’s words about Medtner: “No other composer has been able to realize such an amazing marriage between instrumental craft and musical thought. Medtner went to incredible lengths in making his music comfortable to play without sacrificing anything he aimed to address.” [4, p. 168] In Hamelin’s performance of the *Sonata Reminiscenza* this synthesis is perceived very well — that of instrumental mastery and musical thought: the simplicity of melodies is emphasized by the expressivity of the accompaniments, the polytonal layers do not create an obstacle for conveying the intonational expressivity of the voices, the frequent change of meters serves the naturalness of motion. In his interpretation of Medtner’s music, the pianist contemplates, looks within himself, experiences pain, loss, hope, struggle. Emotions and inner

states, thoughts come to life under his hands in the manner intrinsic to him of sounding the entire sound canvas, all the layers of texture, all the supporting voices. This pianistic style, wherein there is no primary or secondary entity, no first-rate or second-rate element, is very typical of both musicians — Medtner as well as Hamelin: the musical thought cannot be molded into strict form or phrase, nor can it limit itself solely to a melody. Being an extraordinary composer, “possessing the remarkable ability of combining and developing musical material,” [12, p. 208] Hamelin is extremely ingenious in the construction of the dramaturgy and form of the performed compositions. This sonata would hardly “forget to exert its influence on me,” he used to say about the *Sonata Reminiscenza*, calling it “a microcosm of life.” [4, p. 168] Some researchers have connected the lyrical-philosophical content of Medtner’s work with the composer’s self-portrait. [13, p. 46] It is possible that Hamelin has also perceived this connection. The pianist aspires to show barely noticeable details, the accompanying voices, the improvisational quality of the constructions, the sporadic changes of character. Medtner is of interesting to him first of all as a personality and a composer.

“There is something special in Russian music that I find that separates it from the rest, but I’m still really trying to identify exactly what it is,” the pianist tells Dominik Rahmer, the editor of the *G. Henle Verlag*.²⁰ In search for this distinction, Hamelin continues to research and promote Russian music and, in a certain sense, he has become a translator and interpreter of Russian music into many languages of the world.

To be continued

²⁰ See: Marc-André Hamelin gives an interview to the editor of *G. Henle Verlag* Dominik Rahmer. URL: https://vk.com/wall-222220838_1437 (accessed: 25.11.2025).

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Received / Поступила в редакцию: 17.11.2025

Revised / Одобрена после рецензирования: 19.12.2025

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 22.12.2025