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Tuesday Musical opens season with epic works from pianist Marc-André Hamelin (Oct. 21)

by Kevin McLaughlin

On Tuesday evening, October 21, pianist Marc-André Hamelin opened Tuesday Musical's 2025–26 season in Akron's E.J. Thomas Hall with a program of unusual range and scale. He mapped the human mind and heart across an often-epic landscape — Beethoven's granite *Hammerklavier*, Robert Schumann's not merely scenic *Waldszenen*, and Ravel's hallucinatory *Gaspard de la nuit*.

Composed between 1817 and 1818, the *Hammerklavier* marks Beethoven's turn toward the monumental and visionary. Deaf by this time, he wrote for some idealized instrument and listener — music indifferent to ordinary technical or emotional limits. Deemed nearly unplayable at its premiere, it later found champions, Liszt foremost among them, who revealed its vast scope.

Hamelin approached the sonata unintimidated, as if dispatched to calm a nuclear reactor. The opening *Allegro* was large but never heavy, its great leaps and dives shaped by architecture rather than heroics. His rhythms had swing and his tempi were slower than expected, giving the fleeting lyricism within the storm a little breathing room.

The *Scherzo* entered slyly, like a private joke between composer and performer, with cunning accents and a half-mocking trio in the parallel minor — a grin between symphonic pronouncements. The *Adagio sostenuto* was the poignant heart of the matter — long-breathed and grave, each phrase speaking as if from some divine space. Hamelin's tone here was silvery and still, his tempo just slow enough for the listener to think.

Then came the final fugue — Beethoven's great act of defiance. Hamelin gave it muscle and line, not bulk. You could hear the workings of two minds — the pianist's and Beethoven's — as much as the heart: augmentation here, inversion there, and finally, tranquility after turmoil.

After the mountainous Beethoven, Schumann's *Waldszenen* brought the scale down to miniature. Written in 1848–49, these nine piano pieces move through the woods at a human pace — mostly without heroics or thunder, but touched by the strangeness of blood-soaked flowers and a prophetic bird.

Hamelin played them as if he trusted the titles — and the notes — to mean what they said. *Eintritt* (Arrival) was simple and open, like stepping through a gate. *Jäger auf der Lauer* ("The Hunter on the Lookout") had a clean edge; *Einsame Blumen* (Lonely Flowers) a touch of warmth without perfume. *Verrufene Stelle* (Haunted Place) darkened the mood with the image of a flower thirsty for human blood. *Freundliche Landschaft* (Pleasant Landscape) smiled in passing.

Herberge (Shelter) offered rest. *Vogel als Prophet* (The Prophet Bird), the best known of the set, hovered in the air — half song, half question mark. *Jagdlied* (Hunting Song) brought motion back, its energy taut but never forced. By the final *Abschied* (Farewell), the music had made its way home.

Hamelin found what's sometimes elusive in Schumann: clarity without coldness, intimacy without indulgence. The forest was palpable, even though we never left the hall.

Hamelin managed to keep on with what he had to do, in spite of E.J. Thomas' propensity for lighting hijinks — a garish green "X" on the back wall at the start of the Schumann, signified what, exactly? — but he seemed unfazed.

Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908) is built on mirage and menace. Inspired by Aloysius Bertrand's prose poems, its three movements — *Ondine*, *Le Gibet*, and *Scarbo* — conjure water, death, and nightmare through orchestral color and devilish technique. Ravel meant it as a challenge, saying he wanted to write something more difficult than Balakirev's notoriously thorny *Islamey*. And so he did.

Ravel's pages glitter with tremolos, arabesques, and cascades — sirens that lure even great pianists into treating the work like a jewel box rather than the tightly controlled drama it is. What Hamelin offered instead was order, beauty, and narrative — all realized with staggering control.

In *Ondine*, his fingers articulated yet bathed the melody as it coursed up and down the keyboard. Where another pianist might have over-polished the surface, Hamelin kept the mermaid's mind on her song, not on her pretty scales.
Le Gibet was all suspense: the tolling B-flat sounded through a haze, its horror implicit rather than displayed. Hamelin caught the eerie stillness — that background bell beneath notes tracing a slow, suspended sway.

Famous for its difficulty, *Scarbo* brought no struggle. Hamelin sailed through with astonishing ease, every run cleanly etched, every accent resonant but never forced. Yet his virtuosity stayed inside the music — its employee, not its employer.
As the program moved from monument to miniature to mirage, Hamelin illuminated each on its own terms, with clarity, restraint, and unwavering command.

The audience knew a good thing when they heard it. Rising quickly at the finish, they shared their uninhibited enthusiasm and received one last shimmer of water in return — Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau* as an encore.

As the opening act, Saya Uejima, a junior in high school, gave a poised and lovely performance of *La Leggierezza*, the second of Liszt's *Three Concert Études*, S.144. She withstood every pressure — including a bit of *From the Top*-style questioning from a well-meaning representative of Tuesday Musical's Brahms Allegro Junior Music Club.

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