SAN FRANCISCO
PERFORMANCES

presents...

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN | Piano

Saturday, February 8, 2025 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

HAYDN	**Piano Sonata in D Major, Hob.XVI:37** *Allegro con brio* *Largo e sostenuto* *Finale: Presto, ma non troppo*
ZAPPA	**Ruth Is Sleeping**
WOLPE	***Passacaglia* from *Four Studies on Basic Rows*, Opus 23**
OSWALD	**Tip**

INTERMISSION

MEDTNER	**Improvisation in B-flat Minor, Opus 31, No. 1**
	Danza festiva, Opus 38, No. 3
RACHMANINOFF	**Étude-tableau in E-flat Minor, Opus 39, No. 5**
	Piano Sonata in B-flat Minor, Opus 36 *Allegro agitato; Non allegro; Allegro molto*

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Marc-André Hamelin appears by arrangement with Colbert Artists Management, Inc.
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Marc-André Hamelin records exclusively for Hyperion Records, Ltd.

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ARTIST PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents Marc-André Hamelin for the fifteenth time. He made his SF Performances recital debut in December 2003.

Marc-André Hamelin's 2024–25 season began with recitals in Asia at the Beijing Concert Hall, Xi'an Concert Hall, Seoul Arts Center, and in duo recitals with Charles Richard-Hamelin in Tokyo, Yokohama and Fukuoka with later solo recitals in Gulangyu, Chengdu and the Shanghai Symphony Hall. European highlights include recitals in Warsaw, Ascona, Copenhagen, Toulouse, Cremona, Florence, Budapest, Detmold, Nijmegen, Herrenhausen, Ruhr, Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie, and London's Wigmore Hall. Orchestral appearances include the RTVE Madrid, Bruckner Orchester Linz, and Prague Radio Symphony. He returned to São Paulo State Symphony Orchestra in the fall for Mozart *Piano Concerto No. 23* and will return later in the season for a recital and Bernstein *Symphony No. 2* and *Rhapsody in Blue* before touring with the orchestra to the Bogotá International Classical Music Festival.

In North America he returns to Carnegie Hall for Beethoven *Piano Concerto No. 5* with the Orchestra of St. Luke's with Bernard Labadie. Further orchestral appearances include the Cleveland Orchestra, Montreal Symphony, Atlanta Symphony, National Arts Center Orchestra in Ottawa and the orchestra of Quebec, Toledo, Amarillo and a complete Beethoven Concerti Cycle with the Edmonton Symphony. Recital highlights include San Francisco Performances, Music Toronto, Boston's Isabel Stewart Gardner Museum, the Music Room at Caramoor, and the University of Georgia Presents. He also tours with the Dover Quartet in a program that features his own *Piano Quintet*.

Summer 2024 included recitals at the Schubertiade, Deutschlandsberg, Banff Center, Vivace Festival, a duo recital with Charles Richard-Hamelin at Ottawa Chamberfest, and Liszt Piano *Concertos 1* and *2* with Yannick Nezet-Seguin and the Orchestre Metropolitain at Festival de Lanaudiere and Domaine Forget.

An exclusive recording artist for Hyperion Records, Hamelin has released 91 albums to date, with notable recordings of a broad range of solo, orchestral, and chamber repertoire. In October 2024, Hamelin released his recording of Beethoven's imposing *Piano Sonata in B flat major, 'Hammerklavier,' Op. 106*, coupled with the earlier *Piano Sonata in C major, Op. 2, No. 3* which received incredible critical acclaim.

Featuring nine original pieces, Hamelin's 2024 album *New Piano Works* is a survey of some of his own recent works, exhibiting his formidable skill as a composer-pianist whose music imaginatively and virtuosically taps into his musical forebears. "His previous offerings of his own music were rich, but his latest self-portrait album is on another level," wrote *The New York Times*, one of many outlets that wrote glowing reviews. It was Hamelin's first album of all original compositions since *Études* (2010). In 2023, Hyperion released Hamelin's recording of Fauré's *Nocturnes & Barcarolles*, with the four-hand *Dolly* suite, played with his wife, Cathy Fuller. A double album of C.P.E. Bach's *Sonatas & Rondos* was released in 2022, and another of *William Bolcom's Complete Rags*. Both received wide critical acclaim and chart success.

Hamelin has composed music throughout his career, most of which is published by Edition Peters, including his *Études* and *Toccata on L'homme armé*, the latter commissioned by the Van Cliburn Foundation. Hamelin performed the *Toccata* along with music by C.P.E. Bach and Bolcom in an NPR *Tiny Desk* concert in 2023. His latest compositions include a piano quintet, which he premiered in 2022 with the Dover Quartet, and the solo piano works *Hexensabbat* and *Mazurka*, the latter commissioned by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., where the composer presented the first performance in spring 2024.

Hamelin makes his home in the Boston area with his wife, Cathy Fuller, a producer and host at Classical WCRB. Born in Montreal, he is the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the German Record Critics' Association, and over 20 of its quarterly awards. He has also received seven Juno Awards, 12 Grammy nominations, and the 2018 Jean Gimbel Lane Prize in Piano Performance from Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music. In December 2020, he was awarded the Paul de Hueck and Norman Walford Career Achievement Award for Keyboard Artistry from the Ontario Arts Foundation. Hamelin is an Officer of the Order of Canada, a Chevalier de l'Ordre national du Québec, and a member of the Royal Society of Canada.

PROGRAM NOTES

Piano Sonata in D Major, Hob.XVI:37

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN
(1732—1809)

Haydn's 104 symphonies and his 83 string quartets have become—generally—part of the repertory, but his 62 keyboard sonatas remain much less familiar. These sonatas span his creative career: he wrote the earliest about 1750, the last in 1794 when he was 62. They have made their way

into the repertory very slowly—as late as 1950, the distinguished piano pedagogue Ernest Hutcheson suggested that it did no real harm to the music if performers played individual movements from the sonatas rather than playing them complete.

The *Sonata in D Major* is one of a group of six sonatas published in 1780, at a moment when Haydn was on the verge of new directions. The previous year his employer, Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy, had given the composer permission to publish his work (previously, everything Haydn had written belonged to the prince). Now 48 and the composer of 70 symphonies, Haydn was intent on finding a larger audience, and he turned to the Viennese publisher Artaria for this set of sonatas. Artaria, which would later publish Mozart and Beethoven's music, brought these sonatas out as Haydn's Opus 30.

The six sonatas of Opus 30 are mixed in style and in their technical demands, and there has been debate about the sort of performer Haydn was writing for and even about the instrument he was writing for. Were these sonatas intended for the growing number of amateur pianists at the end of the eighteenth century? Did Haydn write them for his students? Did he write them for himself? (Haydn was an able pianist but by no means a virtuoso, and these sonatas are at times very difficult.) Which instrument did he have in mind when he wrote them? Artaria offered no help with this question: their title page says that these sonatas are "Per il Clavicembalo o Forte Piano." But while Haydn's early keyboard sonatas may have been composed for clavichord, these sonatas have dynamic markings that suggest that he was writing them for the piano.

The opening movement is marked *Allegro con brio*, and Haydn really means the *con brio* stipulation: the opening sizzles along happily, enlivened by its many grace notes and trills, and the second subject, also full of grace notes and trills, arrives quickly. This music is so brilliant—and so much fun—that it is easy to miss the unusual key relationships as its races past. After all this sparkling energy, the movement comes to a quiet, almost breathless, close.

In sharp contrast, the *Largo e sostenuto* seems to take a step back into an earlier era. Haydn moves to D minor here, and his somber central theme is slow and made ornate by its many rolled chords. And then comes another sharp contrast: Haydn goes back to the spirit of the first movement for the rondo-finale. Its main theme has a nice delicacy, and Haydn varies this subtly as the sonata proceeds.

Ruth Is Sleeping

FRANK ZAPPA
(1940–1993)

Ruth Underwood was a percussionist in The Mothers of Invention from 1968 until 1977, and though she left the band at age 31, she has remained an enthusiastic supporter of Frank Zappa throughout her life. Several decades after she left The Mothers of Invention, Underwood and Zappa got in touch once again, and the two had several cordial visits in his Los Angeles home during his final illness (Zappa died of prostate cancer at age 52).

About a decade earlier, in 1982-83, Zappa had remembered Underwood when he composed his first piece for Synclavier, one of the earliest digital synthesizers. Zappa explained that the title "derives from the fact that sometimes during rehearsal of the '72–73 band, while I was giving instructions to other members of the group, Ruth Underwood would curl up underneath the marimba and go to sleep." The Synclavier gave Zappa a new range of compositional freedom, and in its published form for two pianos, *Ruth Is Sleeping* is music of extraordinary complexity. Though it is set originally in 3/4, the music so obscures any sense of a downbeat that it feels almost without meter. *Ruth Is Sleeping* is completely atonal, and it spans the range of the two pianos—across its six-minute span of this music, the effect is of unrelenting motion, of polyphony spilling atop more polyphony, glittering and spinning off energy as it goes.

In its version for two pianos, *Ruth Is Sleeping* poses formidable challenges for the performers, and those hurtles are magnified exponentially in the version for solo piano. Zappa himself described the solo-piano version as "very, very, very difficult."

Passacaglia from *Four Studies on Basic Rows,* Opus 23

STEFAN WOLPE
(1902–1972)

Stefan Wolpe came to maturity in post-World War I Germany in an atmosphere of artistic ferment and social discontent. As a young man, he was drawn to painting as well as music and was associated at different times with the Berlin dadaists, the Melos circle, the Novembergruppe, and the Bauhaus in Weimar; his teachers included Busoni, Scherchen, and Webern. The rise to power of the Nazis in 1933 sent Wolpe into exile: first to Vienna for a year, then on to Palestine, and finally to the United States in 1938. He taught at a number of American institutions and was music director at Black Mountain College from 1952 to 1956 and chairman of the music department at C.W. Post from 1957 until his retirement in 1968.

Wolpe composed his *Four Studies on Basic Rows* during the 1930s and published them in 1938, the year he arrived in the United States. Wolpe was interested in serial composition, but he had become dissatisfied with twelve-tone music, feeling that its possibilities were too limited. The *Four Studies* were a way of experimenting with and enlarging the possibilities of serial music. The fundamental tone-row in the *Passacaglia*, which is the last of the *Four Studies*, consists of 22 notes, arranged to provide the maximum number of intervals. The composer noted: "The theme of the *Passacaglia* is built progressively on all the intervals from the minor second to the major seventh." He then constructed sequences of twelve notes built on each of these intervals and used them in this music as well.

The *Passacaglia* opens with a statement of the 22-note sequence, played with both hands in the bass clef. From this moderately-paced beginning (the marking is *Sostenuto*), the fundamental theme repeats at different speeds, and above these sequences Wolpe spins out a series of variations. Some of these are delicate and playful, others are powerful. Gradually the tempo increases, and the *Passacaglia* builds to a huge climax on ringing chords marked *Pesante*, then falls away to the subdued, almost enigmatic, ending.

This is music of stupefying difficult for the performer. Over the 13-minute span of the *Passacaglia*, the pianist must play across the entire range of the keyboard (many passages are written on three staves) and solve complex problems of pedaling, voicing, and chording (there are many tone-clusters here). Simply playing the notes in this music is challenge enough, but the pianist must then push beyond mere technique to project the individual variations clearly and master the entire range of expression in this exceptionally complex score. Perhaps it is not surprising that Wolpe also made a version of the *Passacaglia* for orchestra. He revised the piano version in 1971, the year before

his death, and it is in this revised version that the music is usually heard today.

Tip

JOHN OSWALD
(B. 1953)

John Oswald is a Canadian composer whose best known project is *Plunderphonics*, the practice of making new music out of previously existing recordings. *Tip* was commissioned by Marc-André Hamelin and had its premiere at Koerner Hall, Toronto Canada in October 2022. At that time, Oswald wrote:

Why *Tip*? A short title for a brief piece. But that little word packs a myriad of associations. Some tip-ical phrases are: Tip of the iceberg…In the ocean of music this iceberg is composed of my condensation of the most familiar music in the pianistic repertoire. What you hear in *Tip* is the 10 percent that rises above the surface of that ocean. The 90 percent below the surface contains the many other possible quotations not chosen from the nearly 400 scores and performance transcriptions investigated. Perhaps while listening to *Tip* you will sense some aspects of what lies below the surface—the unheard but easily recalled continuations of phrases unfinished; the layers of possibility in polyphonies of superimposition; a great submerged consciousness of musical memory.

On the Tip of the tongue…

The reader will notice that we are not citing sources here; therein lies the fun. At times the quotes come so fast and furious your ears might tingle on the verge of recognition. Other times up to four quotations occur simultaneously (a momentary quodlibet). A familiar pop tune weaves into the key and melody of an equally familiar classical fragment. Diverse quotes can pivot on a common note or chord. A medley on steroids?

Are there any tips for listening to *Tip*?

Marc-André writes: "I have always been fascinated by how completely unrelated but familiar snippets of music can influence each other when juxtaposed—and here John Oswald put pedal to metal, going as far as superimposing material, so that the final result is a delightful challenge for the listener in untangling this multitude of strands of musical thought. And it is no less of a challenge for the pianist!" When my long-suffering copyist John Abram warned me, and Marc-André subsequently confirmed, that two measures of the score were possibly impossible to play, I was only too happy to give Marc-André a free hand to adjust, rearrange, or recompose that passage. You, the listener, may recognize it, especially if the names Linus and Ludwig ring any bells.

Tip-ping over (and not over-tipping!)

I have a predilection for phrases and quotations left incomplete. The listener can imagine what comes next as several familiar phrases tip over into each other, much like this facetious mixed metaphor: "If we hit that bullseye, the rest of the dominoes will fall like a house of cards." Here the string of clichés has an illogical synergy, tumbling through familiar territory in a novel navigation.

A tip of the hat …

To Eve Egoyan for test-running *Tip* as a composition-in-progress, and for her encouraging thoughts; and to Holly Small for her sharp ears, eyes, and pencil.

Tip on!

No grants or government funds were procured to make *Tip*, but complimentary tipping is allowed! *Tip* is dedicated to Marc-André Hamelin.

—John Oswald

Improvisation in B-flat Minor, Opus 31, No. 1

Danza festiva, Opus 38, No. 3

NIKOLAI MEDTNER
(1880– 1951)

The name—and music—of Nikolai Medtner have almost vanished from contemporary concert life, but in the first decades of the twentieth century he was one of the most respected pianists before the public. He trained at the Moscow Conservatory, where he studied piano with Safonov and composition with Taneyev, and then embarked on a career as both pianist and composer. He taught briefly at the Conservatory, but—like so many other Russian artists—chose to leave his homeland in the years after the revolution. He settled first in Paris but found himself more comfortable in England, where he spent the final two decades of his life. Medtner's music has sometimes been compared to the music of his good friend Rachmaninoff (who dedicated his *Fourth Piano Concerto* to Medtner), yet Medtner went his own way as a composer. He wrote three piano concertos and 14 piano sonatas, but his most popular works are probably the many short pieces he wrote for keyboard, a number of them published under the titles *Fairy Tales* and *Sketches*.

Improvisation is the first of Medtner's *Three Pieces*, published in 1914. It opens with a wistful melody marked *Andantino, gracile*, but this melody, engaging as it is, is simply the starting point for a sequence of incredible variations (or "improvisations") on that gentle tune. The music races ahead at the *Allegretto capriccioso danzando*, and from then on this piece becomes almost a study in fiery virtuosity, whipping across the keyboard in great torrents of sound, then stopping and starting in entirely new directions. A section marked *Quasi Valse* leads to a return of the quiet opening, and the *Improvisation* concludes quietly, deep in the piano's lowest register.

In the years 1918–20, just as he was leaving Russia, Medtner composed three collections of short pieces for piano that he called *Forgotten Melodies*. That title refers to the fact that he based these pieces on themes (or motifs) that he had written much earlier, then rediscovered as he consulted his old notebooks. The first set begins with the one-movement *Sonata Reminiscenza*, which is then followed by seven pieces that take the form of either songs or dances. These are for the most part very quickly paced and beautifully written for the piano, and all have evocative titles. *Danza festiva* depicts (very generally) a village celebration. It begins with the sound of ringing bells and then takes wing on music of incredible rhythmic vitality that sends the pianist to the extremes of the keyboard. A return of the ringing bells from the opening helps propel *Danza festiva* through a final section marked *giubiloso*.

Note: Medtner made many recordings over a great span of years (1894 to 1950) and recording techniques, from early acoustic recordings through piano rolls and then on to mono recordings. He recorded both the *Improvisation* and *Danza festiva* multiple times, and those performances reveal how incredible a pianist Medtner was.

Étude-tableau in E-flat Minor, Opus 39, No. 5

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF
(1873–1943)

Rachmaninoff composed two sets of *Études-tableaux*: the first—consisting of

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eight brief pieces—as his Opus 33 in August 1911, and the second—of nine pieces—as his Opus 39 during the 1916–17 season, just as he turned 44. The latter set was completed during the dark days of World War I, when Rachmaninoff was performing benefit concerts for wounded Russian soldiers. The communist revolution came later that year, and in December 1917 Rachmaninoff would leave Russia, never to return. The title of this collection of brief piano pieces needs some explanation: *Études-tableaux* means "picture-studies," piano etudes that are meant to be expressive but not pictorial—Rachmaninoff does not set out in this music to paint exact musical portraits. In response to a question about what this music depicted, he replied: "I do not believe in the artist disclosing too much of his images. Let them paint for themselves what it most suggests."

The one thing clear about this music is how difficult it is, and that may also be a clue to its character. The *Études-tableaux* are evocations of mood and atmosphere that depend more on pianistic brilliance, complex textures, and rhythmic subtlety than on the memorable tune—listeners will come away from this music not humming their favorite parts but instead struck by the atmosphere Rachmaninoff is able to create in these pieces (and it is worth noting that eight of the nine are in minor keys). The composer did not regard these nine pieces as a unified set and would sometimes perform individual pieces on his recitals. *No. 5 in E-flat Minor*, marked *Appassionato*, combines powerful triplet rhythms with a wistful, haunting quality.

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Opus 36

Though he was famed for performances of music by other composers, Rachmaninoff made a point early in the twentieth century of playing recitals only of his own music. By 1913, when he was 40, Rachmaninoff felt that he needed new repertory and decided to compose a new piano sonata. He took his family to Rome that summer, and—working in a room that Tchaikovsky had once occupied—he sketched two works: a choral symphony based on Edgar Allan Poe's *The Bells* and the *Piano Sonata No. 2*. Late that summer he returned to the family estate at Ivanovka, near Moscow, and completed both works.

Rachmaninoff's setting of *The Bells* met with success (the composer called it his own favorite among his compositions), but the sonata—which Rachmaninoff premiered in Moscow on December 3, 1913—had a cooler reception. Audiences and critics alike found it difficult—reserved, detached, intellectual—and the composer himself came to agree with them: after performing it for several seasons, he withdrew it from the stage.

But Rachmaninoff remained interested in this sonata, and in 1931 he decided to revise it, believing that he had located the source of the problem: "I look at my early works and see how much there is that is superfluous. Even in this sonata so many voices are moving simultaneously and it is too long." Rachmaninoff cut the original version severely, removing altogether passages that he believed "superfluous" and clarifying textures. Rachmaninoff had little success with this version, but another Russian pianist did. Vladimir Horowitz, acting with the composer's approval, created his own version by reincorporating some of the passages Rachmaninoff had excised from the original version. The *Second Sonata* is extraordinarily difficult for the pianist, and Horowitz made performances of it a real occasion; he recorded his revised version (as well as a later one that he made in the 1960s).

At the present concert, the *Second Sonata* is performed in Rachmaninoff's 1931 revision. The three movements are played without pause, and the movements depend on musically-related ideas: themes from the opening *Allegro agitato* reappear in later movements. Listeners who come expecting the big Rachmaninoff "tune" may be disappointed, for this dramatic music makes its case through the logic of its musical argument rather than with engaging melodies. The sonata-form first movement opens with a great downward flourish that leads immediately to the main theme; the more lyric second subject, marked *meno mosso*, arrives in a dotted 12/8 meter. The main theme will reappear in both the wonderful, dark slow movement (*Non allegro*) and the dynamic finale (*Allegro molto*).

Throughout, this music demands a pianist of transcendent skill, able to cope easily with complex technical problems yet still generate the vast volume of sound this sonata demands. Many have noted that this music seems full of the plangent sonority of ringing bells, and this is only natural, given Rachmaninoff's fondness for the sound of bells in general and the fact that he was working on the Poe setting at the same time he wrote this sonata.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger