

15 September 2025



MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

IN RECITAL

Presenting Partner



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WELCOME

Welcome to the *International Pianists in Recital Series* for 2025, and to this very special concert, **Marc-André Hamelin in Recital**.

Marc-André Hamelin stands among the most admired pianists of our age, an artist whose dazzling technical command is matched by an unerring musical intellect and a rare depth of expression. His performances have earned him a devoted international following and a reputation for bringing new life and insight to the great masterworks, as well as championing lesser-known gems of the piano repertoire.

In his first solo recital in Sydney, Hamelin tackles two giants of the piano repertoire: Beethoven's mighty *Hammerklavier* Sonata and Rachmaninov's powerful Second Piano Sonata. The *Hammerklavier*, with its grand opening chords and vast emotional range, is a true landmark for any pianist. In contrast, Rachmaninov's sonata is darker and more turbulent, a thrilling journey through shifting moods. Music by Medtner, including his *Improvisation* and *Danza Festiva*, alongside one of Rachmaninov's *Études-tableaux*, completes this unforgettable program.

As Presenting Partner of the *International Pianists in Recital Series* we are honoured to support the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in its mission to bring world-class artists to our stages. For more than twenty years, Theme & Variations has remained dedicated to nurturing a love of the piano and to presenting artists whose passion and artistry inspire audiences, students and fellow musicians alike.

We believe recitals like tonight's are not only performances but shared experiences that celebrate the enduring power of music to connect us. Marc-André Hamelin's profound musicianship reminds us of the piano's infinite possibilities, and we are delighted you can join us for what is sure to be an unforgettable evening.



Nyree Vartoukian
Co-Founder and Director,
Theme & Variations Piano Services

2025 CONCERT SEASON

INTERNATIONAL PIANISTS IN RECITAL

Monday 15 September, 7pm

City Recital Hall,
Angel Place

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN IN RECITAL

HEAVYWEIGHTS OF THE PIANO

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Piano Sonata in B flat major, Op.106, *Hammerklavier* (1818)

i. Allegro

ii. Scherzo: assai vivace – presto

iii. Adagio sostenuto: Appassionato e con molto sentiment

iv. Introduzione: Largo – Fuga: Allegro risoluto

INTERVAL

NIKOLAI MEDTNER (1880–1951)

Three Pieces, Op.31 (1914)

i. Improvisation

Forgotten Melodies, Op.38 (1919–22)

No.3. Danza festiva

SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)

Études-Tableaux, Op.39 (1916–17)

No.5. Appassionato

Piano Sonata No.2 in B flat minor, Op.36 (1931 version)

i. Allegro agitato –

ii. Lento –

iii. Allegro molto

Preconcert talk

By Philip Sametz in the
Function Room Level 1
at 6.15pm

Estimated durations

Beethoven – 43 minutes

Interval – 20 minutes

Medtner – 8 minutes,
5 minutes

Rachmaninov – 5 minutes,
21 minutes

The concert will run for
approximately 1 hour
45 minutes

Cover image

Photo by Sim Canetty-Clarke

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ABOUT THE ARTISTS

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN piano

Pianist Marc-André Hamelin, a ‘performer of near-superhuman technical prowess’ (*The New York Times*), is acclaimed worldwide for his rare combination of profound musicianship and dazzling technique. He is celebrated both for his interpretations of the core repertoire and for his fearless exploration of lesser-known works from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. He regularly performs around the globe with the leading orchestras and conductors of our time and gives recitals at major concert venues and festivals worldwide.

Hamelin’s 2025–26 season spans North America, Europe, Asia and Australia, with a dynamic mix of orchestral, recital and chamber music engagements. He opens the season with a tour of Australia and Asia, featuring concerto and recital appearances with the Sydney Symphony under Sir Donald Runnicles, concerto engagements with the Wuxi, Ningbo and Shenzhen symphonies and solo recitals in Adelaide, Xiamen, and Shenzhen.

In North America, Hamelin appears with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Yannick Nézet-Séguin, San Diego Symphony with Thomas Guggeis, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra on tour. Recital highlights include Chicago Symphony Presents, San Francisco Symphony, Chamber Music Pittsburgh, Keyboard Concerts in Fresno and Soka Performing Arts Center. In duo with Maria João Pires, he is presented by The Cleveland Orchestra, the Gilmore Piano Festival and the Fortas Chamber Music Series at the Kennedy Center.

An exclusive recording artist for Hyperion Records, Hamelin has released more than 90 albums to date with a broad range of solo, orchestral and chamber repertoire. In October 2025, Hyperion release *Found Objects / Sound Objects*, a recording of contemporary works. Recent acclaimed recordings include Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* Sonata, Op.106 and Sonata in C major, Op.2 No.3, as well as the Dvořák and Florence Price quintets with the Takács Quartet.

A noted composer, Hamelin has written more than 30 works. Many, including his *Études* and *Toccata on “L’homme armé”* – commissioned by the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition – are published by Edition Peters. He performed the *Toccata* in 2023 on NPR’s *Tiny Desk* alongside works by CPE Bach and William Bolcom. His most recent composition, *Mazurka*, was commissioned by the Library of Congress to celebrate 100 years of concerts and premiered in April 2024. 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*. It was Hamelin’s first album of all original compositions since *Études* (2010).

Hamelin is the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the German Record Critics’ Association and over 20 of its quarterly awards. Other honours include eight Juno Awards, twelve Grammy nominations, the 2018 Jean Gimbel Lane Prize from Northwestern University and the Paul de Hueck and Norman Walford Career Achievement Award 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. Born in Montreal, Hamelin lives in the Boston area with his wife, Cathy Fuller, a producer and host at Classical WCRB.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

In the late eighteenth century Germany was a loose grouping of small principalities. The city of Bonn was the seat of the Archbishop Elector of Cologne and Beethoven was born here in 1770. His grandfather was a chief musician in the Elector's household; his father Johann was also a musician employed there. Johann was a violent alcoholic, and family life was far from happy, but young Ludwig nonetheless showed early promise as a musician and soon joined the Archbishop's retinue.

Beethoven almost certainly met Mozart briefly in Vienna in 1787, but in 1792 returned to that city to study with Joseph Haydn. They didn't get on. Late in life, Haydn was suddenly enjoying superstar status throughout Europe. Beethoven could be extremely rude and arrogant and felt that Haydn wasn't paying him enough attention.

Beethoven's status in Vienna was helped by the relative ease with which he was accepted into aristocratic circles. This is partly because he allowed people to think that the 'van' in his name meant he himself was noble (in German, 'von' indicates nobility), and he allowed a rumour to circulate that he was the illegitimate son of the King of Prussia! But it was mostly about the music, and a group of Viennese nobles supported him for the rest of his life (despite appallingly bad behaviour on occasions).

From the later 1790s he had been aware of the deterioration of his hearing, and by the early years of the new century his deafness caused him gradually to retreat from society. His was also chronically unlucky in love. This, along with his deafness, led him to the point of suicide and the heroic resolution to carry on which is documented in a kind of will he wrote at Heiligenstadt, his favourite holiday village, in the summer of 1802. The crisis launched his middle or 'heroic' period.



Beethoven in 1818–19, by Ferdinand Schimon (1797–1852).
Source: United States Library of Congress/Wikimedia.

In May 1809 Napoleon's armies attacked Vienna and bombarded it with considerable violence. Beethoven took shelter with his brother Caspar Carl and his wife Johanna and to protect what was left of his hearing hid with pillows over his ears in the cellar. He wrote to his publisher: 'What a destructive, disorderly life I see and hear around me: nothing but drums, cannons and human misery in every form'. Despite his misery, Beethoven managed to work.

Beethoven's deafness was only part of the chronic ill-health which dogged him for most of his life, but it certainly made things worse. He retreated from society, became grumpy and paranoid (occasionally to the point of violence) and despite relative financial security often lived in squalor. His music, though, tells a completely different story.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT THE *HAMMERKLAVIER* SONATA

The *Hammerklavier* itself was composed in 1817 and 1818. It is dedicated to Beethoven's beloved Archduke Rudolf (whose installation as Archbishop of Olmütz – the present day Czech city of Olomouc – would be the occasion for the *Missa solemnis* which Beethoven began in 1819). It further demonstrates Beethoven's interest in piano building – the story goes that the London builder John Broadwood wrote to him describing his new six octave piano and this was enough to spur the composer into action in a work that tests the limits of the piano's sound. Beethoven later took delivery of one of Broadwood's instruments. The nickname 'Hammerklavier' – while it seems to indicate the massive effects of resonance that the piece exploits – merely describes the action of a fortepiano and was in fact used for several works, including the Sonata in A major, Op.101, which, Beethoven admitted, was 'hard to play'.

Op.106 is Beethoven's longest single sonata, and according to such scholars as Charles Rosen is his most thematically unified, deriving much of its material from the interval of a descending third. (Unified or not, the piece was very nearly published in Britain – at Beethoven's suggestion – in varying states of dismemberment; fortunately this never happened.) And like much of Beethoven's mature music, the piece is telescoped, its dramatic weight deferred and focussed on its final movement. Beethoven knew that he had written a challenging piece for player and audience, and prophesied that people 'would be playing it in 50 years' time'. He was right – it took some time, and the support of virtuosos like Liszt, for the piece to enter the repertoire.

The first two movements are relatively short. The first begins with a ceremonious gesture, a full-voiced fanfare of B-flat major chords answered by much more chromatic music. It is a sonata-form movement though quickly establishes Beethoven's current fascination with counterpoint, and with harmonic excursions further and further from the tonic, or home key. The scherzo that follows is short, its relative lightness in mood a way of preparing what is to come. Beethoven makes much, as will many a sci-fi composer, of the

dramatic effect of juxtaposing the distantly related keys of B flat major and B minor, before straying into G flat for a trio section in a fast 2/4 time.

The light-hearted hammering of the scherzo is light-years away from the Adagio, Beethoven's longest single slow movement, which commentators invariably discuss in terms of grief and pain. This movement, too, is built on sonata-design principles, and is especially notable for Beethoven's precise directions for the coloristic use of soft and sustaining pedals. It is in the key of F sharp minor, which 'sounds' a third away from B flat, and passes through several keys in the dramatically audacious way of late Beethoven.

The composer follows this exhausting emotional narrative with a massive fugal finale that is introduced by a fragmentary 'warm up' that dissolves in trills. The fugue itself is naturally rooted in the practice of J S Bach, whom Beethoven held in the highest regard, but with a range of sound and expression of which Bach could hardly have dreamed. The massive movement consists of seven linked sections, each a complex contrapuntal variation on the material.



Detail from a picture by Johann Nepomuk Hoechle (1790–1835) depicting Beethoven's workroom in Schwarzschanerhaus, 1827.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT NIKOLAI MEDTNER

Like his compatriot and friend Rachmaninov, Nikolai Medtner was, at the outset, a pianist who composed. He was born in Moscow to a family of Danish extraction on his father's side and German on his mother's, and while they were Russian first and foremost the Medtner's maintained a strong sense of their Western European, and especially German, heritage. Medtner's great-grandfather had known Goethe, and German literature was of immense importance to Medtner's work as a prolific composer of songs. He studied piano at the Moscow Conservatory from 1892, inevitably somewhat in the shadow of Rachmaninov and Scriabin; at the turn of the century, he resolved to concentrate on composition, reserving his considerable gifts as a pianist for performances of his own work.

The 1890s saw a wave of artistic activity in Russia in which artists and entrepreneurs such as Léon Bakst, Alexandre Benois and Sergei Diaghilev first made their mark. In the new century this promising atmosphere supported Medtner's first published works, and he enjoyed considerable support in his native Moscow. Sadly, audiences and critics were less enthusiastic when he travelled to Germany to perform in 1904. This was part of the tragedy of Medtner's life: he left Soviet Russia in 1921 but failed to make much headway in either Germany or France, and he spent his later life in Britain, where there was greater enthusiasm for his work, but ended up largely subsisting on the charity of well-wishing friends. The irony is that Medtner's innately conservative style, insistence on formal clarity and love of Russian folklore would have been more than acceptable in the Soviet Union (to whose political ideal he was not committed), whereas he attempted to establish himself in cities like Berlin and Paris where modernist experiment or ironic neo-classicism dominated. And the position of Romantic pianist-composer was well and truly taken by Rachmaninov, whose generosity to Medtner included financial support for the latter's book *The Muse and Fashion*, published in 1935.

ABOUT IMPROVISATION OP.31 NO.1

Medtner composed his *Three Pieces*, Op.31, in 1914. The set consists of the opening Improvisation, a Funeral March and a Conte, (fairy tale). The Improvisation uses art to conceal its art: despite its title and impromptu feeling it is effectively a carefully worked out set of variations on the elegant little theme heard at the outset. A recurring mannerism of the piece is the way in which Medtner withdraws into softer dynamics to signal the end of each section. It is marked *Andante gracile* but its dance-like character is gradually destabilised by increasingly insistent grace notes on strong beats in the bass. This leads to an allegretto section of brilliant semiquaver writing that picks out the theme in the top line, followed by a gradually accelerating section where the theme is given in rapid repeated notes over dotted long-short rhythms in the bass. A quite waltz has the theme in the tenor line (top of the left hand) and moves gradually into 6/8 time which in turn gives a jaunty stride-like section. The final variation is a breakneck allegro assai, and the work concludes with a development of the sound and mood of the opening.

ABOUT DANZA FESTIVA

The eight pieces in Medtner's *Forgotten Melodies*, Op.38, were composed between 1916 and 1922. The work is framed by 'reminiscences' and alternates dances and *canzone*, or songs.

The *Danza festiva* is a work of great brilliance, beginning with chords flung at each other to obscure any sense of pulse, but soon stating an eight-bar waltz-like theme. This sets off much bravura playing with highly chromatic harmony. The 'flung' chords reappear to introduce a section where the rhythmic ambiguity takes the form of simultaneous lines in 3/4 and 2/4. The waltz theme returns to dominate the final section of the piece.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT SERGEI RACHMANINOV

Rachmaninov never cut a cheery figure – Stravinsky famously (or maybe Craftily) described his countryman as ‘a six foot three inch scowl’. That Rachmaninov felt his exile keenly is clear, and he only took out US citizenship in the final months of his life despite having lived there from 1918. Even before his departure from Russia, however, his was a temperament given to intense, and often depressive, emotion.

The composer was born on a large estate near Novgorod, but his childhood was marred by his father’s alcoholism. Rachmaninov senior drank away the family fortune, and left his family when Sergei was nine years old. Sergei’s mother had to sell the property and move to St Petersburg. His studies were undistinguished there, but in 1885 he moved to Moscow to attend the Conservatory where he studied composition with Tanayev and Arensky. His graduation piece, the opera *Aleko* (performed at the Bolshoi in 1893) earned high praise from Tchaikovsky, but the first of many artistic crises hit with the abject failure of his First Symphony, conducted by Glazunov, in 1897. For three years Rachmaninov was unable to compose, and underwent treatment by the hypnotist Nikolai Dahl. This was supremely successful: the next year saw the production of two masterpieces of his early maturity, the Piano Concerto No.2 (dedicated to Dahl) and the second Suite for two pianos.

Rachmaninov had left Russia two months after the 1917 revolution. Effectively exiled from his homeland and what remained of his fortune, Rachmaninov focused his energies on being a piano virtuoso.

Rachmaninov once said that ‘what I try to do, when writing down my music, is to make it say, simply and directly, what is in my heart at the moment of writing.’ His idiom is steeped in that of Beethoven, Liszt and Chopin. But as recent scholarship has argued, there are ways in which Rachmaninov remains fundamentally Russian: his most characteristic melodies move by step in the manner of Orthodox chant (and this piece was composed at the same time as his magnificent Vespers), and often, his piano figurations ring out like the bells of churches. Russian churches.



Rachmaninov in 1921

ABOUT THE *ÉTUDE-TABLEAUX*

In calling his Opp.33 and 39 *Études-tableaux*, Rachmaninov seemed to suggest a visual or programmatic element to the music. He did give Ottorino Respighi subtitles for five of the pieces when the latter orchestrated them, but most of the time insisted that listeners should ‘paint for themselves what it most suggests.’

Pianist Nikolai Lugansky believes that the works create ‘epic symbolic images which add up to make a grandiose Tableau de Russe... imbued with the very essence of Russia – her people and nature, griefs and festivities, her mysterious spirit’.

The Op.39 set was composed in 1916 and 1917, making them some of the last works Rachmaninov composed in Russia before emigrating. The fifth piece, marked *appassionato* opens with one of the composer’s characteristically broad melodies pushed along by insistently repeated chords in triplets. The work gains its considerable drama by setting this material off against roiling semiquaver-dominated sections, sections of the melody restated in different voices, and harmonic excursions in which at least one writer hears the influence of Scriabin. All passion is, finally, spent, issuing in a mood of calm sweetness.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT THE SONATA IN B FLAT MINOR

Rachmaninov's career as a virtuoso was, of course, established in Russia, where, in 1913 he composed his breathtaking Second Piano Sonata, premiering it, as Dominik Rahmer has established, on a 24-town tour that began in Kursk and ended in Moscow. It is a work of Romantic excess *par excellence*, and in its final version takes place in a relatively modest 20-minute span: Rachmaninov had his doubts about the bravura aspects of the original work and in 1931 made the second, shorter version that he premiered in the United States at Portland, Maine. Some pianists, Vladimir Horowitz in particular, felt that Rachmaninov had gone too far and reinstated some of the excised material.

The opening makes a vertiginous plunge, answered by music that passes through turbulent passion, sparkling high passagework, glittering cascades and fleeting moments of introspection as in a passage in siciliana rhythm that appears quietly toward the end. Rachmaninov's gift for melody is never far below the surface: three bars in we hear a beautiful fragment in the left hand, under the rapid ripples of the right. Generally, though the movement gains force from the use of short motifs, sometimes containing as few as three notes, used in sequence or repeated for rhetorical effect. For instance, the three-note upbeat of that very first thematic fragment suffuses motifs throughout the piece.

The emotive chromaticism of the first movement is briefly dispelled by the slow movement that follows immediately, where, after a scene-setting 'non allegro', Rachmaninov spins out a kind of lullaby that gives way to the composer's characteristic full-hearted lyricism and powerfully-voiced chords. A central section admits a certain chromatic instability before a return of the lyrical mode. A simple seven-bar joins the slow movement to the finale, which begins in earnest with another vertical plunge and two terse chords. Like the first movement, the finale leavens its restless and powerful surging with moments of simple tunefulness before an emphatic, ringing conclusion.



Rachmaninov's hands

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