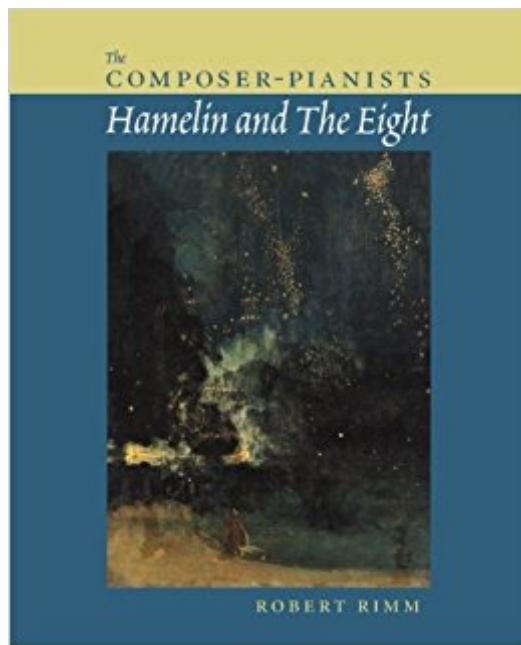


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# The Composer-Pianists: Hamelin And The Eight



## Synopsis

In *The Composer-Pianists: Hamelin and The Eight*, Robert Rimm writes about eight legendary, enigmatic, and interrelated composer-pianists of the instrument's golden age and goes on to consider their present-day advocate and astounding interpreter Marc-Andre Hamelin, whose dynamic playing and engaging personality immediately impressed Rimm upon their first encounter. Rimm portrays The Eight (Alkan, Busoni, Feinberg, Godowsky, Medtner, Rachmaninov, Scriabin, and Sorabji) as the piano's aural sensualists and explores the relationships among their music, their music-making, their ideas, and their lives. HARDCOVER.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A piano teacher and annotator for piano music collections, Rimm here explores the lives and artistic contributions of eight late 19th- to mid-20th-century pianist-composers. He also includes interviews with and commentary on contemporary composer Marc-Andre Hamelin, a gifted interpreter of their works. Rimm deftly weaves together the lives and careers of the composers by discussing them in pairs, while also exploring their influences on each other. The artists range from familiar names (Sergei Rachmaninov) through some known more for writing difficult music than for being performed (Charles Alkan, Kaikhosru Sorabji), to at least one with very little resonance today (Samuel Feinberg). Rimm delves into musical criticism, virtuosity, the erotic muse, the art of transcription, and the future of the piano itself, and the whole work shows evidence of extensive research. Especially welcome are quotes from the artists themselves, contemporary critiques of performances

or recordings, and archival photos. Musical examples would have helped to show the complexity of many of these creators' efforts, and a few patches of purple prose distract if only momentarily. A comprehensive list of works for solo piano (including transcriptions), a discography of recordings by the artists of their own or others' compositions, a wide-ranging bibliography, and index (not seen) round out this excellent addition to all music collections serving an informed clientele. Barry Zaslow, Miami Univ. Libs., Oxford, OH  
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[An] excellent addition to all music collections serving an informed clientele. -- Library Journal, April 15, 2002

Marc-Andre Hamelin is universally acknowledged to be 'primus inter pares' among pianists living today, and Robert Rimm has written a first-rate book which explains why this is so, placing Hamelin into the context and rich legacy of the composer-pianists. The core of Rimm's evaluation consists of four chapters which compare, contrast and illuminate the lives, careers and aesthetics of The Eight: Alkan and Sorabji; Busoni and Godowsky; Feinberg and Scriabin; Medtner and Rachmaninov. The major "find" here is Samuel Feinberg, about whom much less is known by many of us than any of the other Eight. Rimm leaves us wishing to hear much more of this composer's music and of his recorded performances. In these chapters, Rimm manages to deconstruct several myths and misunderstandings about each of these provocative musicians, while calibrating, aligning and amplifying the essence of each. His observation of the correspondences, contrasts, parallels and congruent aesthetics of each of the eight is insightful, and leads to his core thesis: That pianistic virtuosity, as shared and practiced by them (and upon which their public fame largely exists, to the dismay of each), exists to serve the music, through their consummate musicianship, and is not an end to itself. Indeed, their virtuosity must be seen as the necessary precursor to their art; none was satisfied to stop at the "merely virtuosic", but instead recognized that virtuosity was the mandatory platform for the creation and recreation of great music. These four core chapters lead to a fifth: "From Alkan to Hamelin", which examines Marc's career to date and his place in this distinguished lineage of composers and performers. [NB: I feel comfortable using Mr. Hamelin's first name, with respect, in writing about him, for I was fortunate last year to have met and briefly talked with him after a pair of recitals he gave at the Portland (OR) State University Piano Recital Series. These recitals included the music of Bach, Schubert, Brahms, Schumann and, yes, Alkan's Concerto!... plus encores from his then-just released "Kaleidoscope" CD (Hyperion CDA67275), a direct successor to "The Composer-Pianists" CD (CDA67050) which is in turn the companion recording to

this very book. Marc is a most cordial and approachable individual, totally without pretense, and unfazed by those who insist on referring to him as "a super-virtuoso". Our conversations were brief, following his generous performances and after he tolerated lines of autograph-seeking well-wishers -- I'm sure he'd not recognize me in a crowd, yet I left feeling like I'd met a new friend.]Rimm's chapter on Hamelin (who is indeed his friend and collaborator in this book) examines Marc's own views of The Eight (and others), his championship of their art and music, and his own recognition of virtuosity as an element of musicianship itself. This chapter is perhaps the gem of the book: it is constructively analytical, not hyperventilating with hero-worship (difficult to do when faced with Marc's executant talents), and comfortably conversational. Marc offers his own insights, including a clear-eyed personal view of his own performance skills and technique, on concertizing and composing, and the push-pull demands of a varied and creative career. The chapters on the pitfalls of criticism, the liabilities of virtuosity and the art of transcription are also strong, interweaving a fine counterpoint of notions and ideas again at the foundations of The Eight's (plus one's) aesthetics and lives. The weakest chapter is "The Erotic Muse" -- I suppose that, especially in light of Scriabin's world view of mysticism and sexuality, this is somewhat of an obligatory chapter. I'm no prude (nor is there anything the least bit titillating herein), but I found that this chapter could be ripped without loss from the book. Fortunately, after examining certain views of how (some) music(s) and sex are (somehow) linked or of "the same" human impulse, Rimm ultimately comes to the obvious conclusion that sex and music are really two different things altogether. I'll need to re-read this chapter in a few months to see what, if anything, I missed. Along the way, we encounter other musicians, composers and pianists of note, including Liszt (of course), Prokofiev, Ives, Horowitz, Kapustin, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Earl Wild, Alistair Hinton, Radu Lupu, Zoltan Kocsis and Stephen Hough, who provides an enticing foreword plus complementary remarks in various chapters. Hough is, of course, a peer, compatriot and colleague of Hamelin's -- boy, a duo-recital &/or recording by these two would be almost too much of a good thing! Hyperion, are you paying attention? Bonus points for the appendices: Complete Solo Piano Works for each of The Eight and for Hamelin (an emerging composer of note), plus a Discography for each who has left a recorded legacy (Alkan's the exception; he died just before Edison put cactus-needle to wax) ...and of course, Hamelin's own discography is fortunately a catalog-in-progress. This is mandatory reading for all pianists and other musicians, professional and serious amateurs (like me!), and anyone else who wants to understand the fascinating hold that virtuoso musicians have over us all. Bravo, and thank you, Mr. Rimm!

Great book about the most important composers-pianists besides Liszt and Chopin.

At first, I wondered why Chopin and Liszt weren't included in a book called "The Composer-Pianists," but these eight form a closely interrelated league all their own. By extensively quoting their letters, diaries and writings as they relate both to themselves and to each other (including intriguing material from Russia apparently never before translated), Rimm illuminates their thoughts, motivations, desires and methods. Although Hamelin is not widely known as a composer, he is recognized around the world as among their foremost interpreters. Who else has in his/her repertoire all the Medtner and Scriabin sonatas, the Chopin-Godowsky etudes, the Godowsky Passacaglia, the Alkan Concerto and solo-piano Symphony, the Busoni Concerto, et al., and at such an Olympian level of technical achievement and musical eloquence? I've heard several of Hamelin's compositions both in recital and on recordings, and he demonstrates polyphonic and pianistic sorcery (with transcriptions as well) that clearly echo The Eight. As Rimm posits, though, it remains to be seen whether Hamelin will occupy a lasting place compositionally. He also offers a perspective toward the future with names like Kocsis, Pletnev, Hough and others. (Incidentally, Stephen Hough has written a fine foreword to this book.) Rimm's chapter on transcriptions, a large part of The Eight's performances and compositions, should be required reading for anyone interested in the transcriber's art, and the chapter on musical criticism is both sharply observed and funny. Whether one hears music in terms of eroticism is fairly subjective (and I don't), Rimm cites numerous examples from most of these composers, especially Scriabin, that indicate direct expression of eroticism and sensuality through their music. Well written and comprehensively researched, including photographs and letters not otherwise accessible, this book may well contribute to the renaissance of Medtner, Alkan, Busoni and Godowsky. Hamelin surely has!

This exceptional book provides a crucial reference, not only to individual biographies of eight composer-pianists the likes of Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Medtner, Busoni, Godowsky and others, but in how Rimm groups them in pairs. One reads comparisons and contrasts between and among them in a way that provides historical context to the vital composer-pianist tradition. As a pianist who has played many works by these composers, I found stylistic and emotional insights page after page. The chapter on musical criticism is another highlight, with its wry look at the sometimes ephemeral perspectives of music critics, with some very funny and also unfortunate examples. The inclusion of Marc-André Hamelin was a brilliant stroke. Rimm doesn't begin to suggest that he is in the same compositional league as the others, but Hamelin, one of the world's foremost pianists,

provides invaluable au courant perspective and context. The companion CD from Hyperion is also a gem.

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