



REVIEW

# The best classical albums of 2024 so far

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Our critics pick the best new releases, updated weekly



Marc-André Hamelin tackles Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata

Geoff Brown | Neil Fisher

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From grand opera to chamber music, featuring artists including Yunchan Lim, Jonas Kaufmann, Magdalena Kozena and Ivan Fischer, these are the best albums our critics have heard this year, and what they're listening to this week.

*What have been your favourite new recordings? Let us know in the comments.*

## This week's best releases

### Marc-André Hamelin

#### Beethoven

★★★★☆

*Hyperion*

When Beethoven completed his *Hammerklavier* Sonata in 1818, the number of keys on a piano was limited to 78: that's ten short of the Steinway standard of 88, established in the 1880s.

Beethoven, bless him, used every note available in this gigantic and powerful work, which might have been custom-built for Marc-André Hamelin, the Canadian pianist with a particular flair for the grandiose, eccentric, or otherwise out of the ordinary.

Assertive rhythmic chords launch the piece. Hamelin thunders away at them as expected, only to switch to the twinkling and fluid in the music's answering phrase. Similar contrasts tumble out of the remaining 44 minutes, although it's always when Beethoven is at his most virile when Hamelin most excels, especially with sweeping runs up the keyboard or busy fugal complications — anything that needs flying fingers.

To complement this rugged monster, Hamelin chose a more modest Beethoven sonata, Op 2, No 3, written more than a quarter of a century earlier. Hamelin's dexterity here is just as evident, and enhanced by the recording's church acoustic, which bathes the notes in a modestly reverberating halo entirely suited to the music's simple textures. A halo not quite so suited, however, to the hammering of the *Hammerklavier*. Even so, there is nothing in Hamelin's latest Hyperion album (there are 89 others) to break the rule of thumb where this splendid artist is concerned: when Hamelin plays, you stop and listen. **Geoff Brown**

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