

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANIST

MUSIC

REVIEW: Marc-André Hamelin

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Zachary Lewis
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When Isaac Albeniz published his "Iberia" for solo piano in the early 1900s, pianists at the time considered the 12-part, evening-length portrait of musical Spain so difficult as to be unplayable.

Numerous pianists have since disproved that notion, but few can have done so with the seeming effortlessness and keen poetic sensibility of Canadian keyboard virtuoso Marc-André Hamelin.

Performing the complete "Iberia" on the Cleveland Museum of Art's Viva! and Gala Around Town series Saturday night at Pilgrim Congregational Church in Cleveland, Hamelin sounded as if dances like the fandango, seguidilla and malagueña had been in his blood since birth, or at least since the 2005 release of his "Iberia" recording.

Even more impressive, the score's immense technical obstacles practically faded into nonexistence. Playing entirely from memory, Hamelin devoted himself to capturing the individual character of each scene, from the ruminative, lilting "Evocation" that opens Book I through to "Lavapiés," the animated, dissonant finale to Book III, which Hamelin played last, after Books II and IV.

Perhaps most distinguished was Hamelin's knack for underlining melodies, the heart of this incredibly evocative music. No matter how thick or ornate the web of sound Albeniz spun, Hamelin was able to draw forth the shapely lyrical phrase underlying it. This aspect was particularly notable in "El Corpus en Sevilla," a florid depiction of a Corpus Christi procession.

Part of what made "Iberia" seem unplayable a century ago is its rhythmic complexity. Albeniz spiked his signature score with a myriad of pointed, offbeat dance patterns, often employing more than one in the same piece.

In this regard, too, Hamelin was a consummate artist. A lesser pianist might have permitted the strong rhythmic dimension to dominate, but Hamelin tamed it beautifully. Under his fingers, the castanet-like meters of the "Rondeña" and

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the driving flamenco steps of "Málaga" flowed through the musical fabric organically, without overtaking the ear or losing any of their edge.

Warm, enveloping acoustics made Pilgrim Church an ideal setting for "Iberia." What's more, Hamelin responded to his environment by maintaining superbly clear textures and allowing the space to do much of his blending for him.

But even that wasn't the last of Hamelin's brilliant accomplishments Saturday night. Choosing the Debussy Prelude " La Puerta del Vino" as an encore was a masterstroke.

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