

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

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MUSIC REVIEW

Hamelin takes his piano off-roading

By Jeremy Eichler
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At one point in his recital on Saturday night in Jordan Hall, Marc-André Hamelin glanced down at the Steinway grand piano with what appeared to be a look of sympathy. It was as if to say he didn't really enjoy giving the instrument such a bruising. Well, OK, maybe just a little.

Then he plunged into Villa-Lobos's "Rudepoema," a work of savage virtuoso extremes that ends with a brutal avalanche of notes in which Hamelin's hands crossed frenetically until he reached the bottom of the keyboard. Once there, he took his right fist and pummeled the instrument four times to bring the piece to a close.

It's all in a typical day's workout for Hamelin. This fearless musician, equipped with an astonishing technique, is known for approaching piano playing as a kind of extreme sport. If some recitals are like scenic drives along a country lane, Hamelin's resemble a form of pianistic off-roading. With his love of obscure repertoire, the destinations are often places you have never heard of but are happy to visit - at least once - especially if you accept the itinerary on its own terms. Those without a weak spot for the purely sensual pleasures of virtuosity need not apply.

Hamelin has long been an open secret among pianophiles, but at 46 he is now making a bid for more mainstream recognition. Saturday's recital, presented by the Celebrity Series, was designed with a deftness worthy of a campaigning politician; it played to the Hamelin base but also reached out to the center. In the spirit of the latter, he opened with a remarkably clear and graceful reading of Haydn's F Major Sonata (Hob. XVI: 23), dispatching the presto movement with a delightfully crisp champagne-like effervescence. The Sonata in B-flat Major (Hob. XVI: 41) followed in an account that was witty, fast, and scintillating.

Hamelin then tacked toward the obscure, presenting the pianist Alexis Weissenberg's "Sonate en État de Jazz" - a four-movement work that refracts the essence of the tango, the Charleston, blues, and samba, through a dazzling Scriabinesque prism.

The second half began with some beautifully supple Chopin (Barcarolle, Op. 60 and Ballade No. 3) and proceeded with Liszt arrangements of more Chopin and two Schubert songs ("Ständchen" and "Ave Maria"). A certain dryness can occasionally mar Hamelin's playing but the Schubert songs in particular were rendered with a touching tenderness and delicately inflected lyricism. Those qualities also helped offset the astonishing keyboard acrobatics called for by the closing Villa-Lobos piece, written as a portrait of Artur Rubinstein, evidently catching him in a rather barbaric mood.

The crowd's cheering coaxed from Hamelin two more encores, including a lovely and evocative Weissenberg arrangement of Charles Trenet's "En Avril, à Paris."

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