

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANIST

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VSO Review: Please don't let me be misunderstood

The Emperor! - Marc-Andre Hamelin plays Beethoven May 18 at the Orpheum.

By Lloyd Dykk Published: Saturday, May 19, 2007

Two pieces of music, both mistitled, were the gist of the Vancouver Symphony's weekend concerts: Beethoven's "Emperor" concerto and Schubert's "Tragic" symphony.

Beethoven, being no friend to royalty, would never have described his own work as imperial - as if the key of E-flat weren't imperial enough.

And it must have been adolescent angst that made Schubert call his own work tragic, because it isn't particularly.

The soloist in the Beethoven was Marc-Andre Hamelin, the Canadian virtuoso who's made a career of playing great individualists of the piano - Busoni, Henselt, Catoire, Grainger, Rzewski, Medtner and Alkan, among others - whom we tend to lump together as weirdos because their technically fearsome music is so uniquely eccentric.

Beethoven's Fifth Concerto was unique, too, in its own time though it's become one of the pinnacles of the classic repertory. The Schubert is about sturm und drang. The Beethoven, written when he was already too deaf to hear let alone play it, shows a man who'd moved far beyond sturm und drang into a profoundly knowing awareness of the fundamentals of life.

This sense is there as early as the dozen or so bars of the beginning, the piano rolling up from a low E-flat and down again to the start, as if through a canyon. Here it is, he seems to say, the simplest thing in music, but how unforgettable he makes that gesture.

The performance featuring Hamelin and Tania Miller guest conducting the Vancouver Symphony was a dream conception of a concerto that represents the integration of things - not a piano concerto with, or against, orchestra, but a concerto for piano and orchestra. Miller is an amazingly good conductor (the youngest in the country at 35) who was on top of every detail, and effortlessly, it seemed.

And Hamelin didn't strike a false gesture. Everything was superbly even with virtuosity just rolling off his fingers, but unshowily. He even made light of the treacherously difficult-to-articulate left hand part.

His gradations of tone were a complete spectrum of all the pianistic colours Beethoven knew. The performance got a standing ovation and for once, deserved it. It was a truly aristocratic performance and like a true aristocrat, it created the impression of comfort wearing ordinary clothes.

The VSO, playing beautifully, made it seem strange that we never hear Schubert's Fourth Symphony, only the Unfinished and the Ninth. This is a wonderful, if formative, piece of music. It suggests Haydn and Rossini but essentially it's all Schubert in the making, especially the rhapsodic Andante movement. It became a charmer under Miller's hands, sprung with athletic, tensile rhythms - a delicious light soufflé.

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