

# MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

## PIANIST

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### THE KANSAS CITY STAR

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#### PROFILE | Marc-André Hamelin

**Recognition at last Marc-André Hamelin played in obscurity but he is receiving deserved acclaim for repertoire**

**Piano virtuoso played in obscurity, but he finally receives acclaim in his 40s.**

By PAUL HORSLEY

"People are finally finding out that I do perform standard repertoire, and so more avenues are opening up," Marc-André Hamelin says.

It's not that Marc-André Hamelin tore up the playbook on how to succeed as a classical pianist. It's that he never seems to have read it.

After years of low-profile management and critics who pigeonholed him as a "mere" technical wizard, in 2000 Hamelin hired new managers and at age 45 is greeted with astonished cries of "Where has this guy been?"

Hamelin, who solos with the Kansas City Symphony this Friday through Sunday, is one of the great pianists of our time. How he got here with so little notice is a mystery.

But he's here now, with six Grammy nominations and dozens of recordings of music ranging from Brahms to Shchedrin. And he wants the world to know that he plays just as much central repertoire as out-of-the-way classics.

In Kansas City he'll play Brahms' durable Second Concerto, a piece he recorded recently with the Dallas Symphony to acclaim.

"People are finally finding out that I do perform standard repertoire, and so more avenues are opening up," said Hamelin recently from Vancouver, British Columbia, where he was performing Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto with the Vancouver Symphony.

Hamelin was a victim of his own success in recordings of the superhumanly difficult works of Alkan, Godowsky and others — he played them better than anyone had.

His blistering technique is unequalled among pianists today. And gradually critics and fans came around.

"Artists and organizations hoping to revitalize classical music should look to Mr. Hamelin," wrote the *New York Times* of the pianist's "Russian Avant Garde" program in 2002.

Still Hamelin said he was pigeonholed as a virtuoso for so long that it began to sound like a veiled reproach.

"A lot of people think of a virtuoso as a tightwire act," he said. "If they thought of it in its true meaning, then I would be truly flattered."

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It's not that Hamelin ("HAM-uh-lin") has received no acclaim.

In fact he records on one of the world's finest labels, British-based Hyperion, and in 2001 performed on the Grammy Awards. He was also one of the artists whose recordings were cribbed by William Barrington-Coupe in this year's Joyce Hatto fake-CD scandal.

Still his recordings have won more of a cult following by connoisseurs than big sales, despite having won major awards like the Preis der Deutsche Schallplattenkritik.

Moreover, only recently (2005) has Hamelin had a New York Philharmonic debut. The *Times* called it "intense, rhapsodic and ferociously brilliant."

He's grateful for the newfound recognition.

"We musicians work in isolation," he said, "so we need feedback, we need validation."

Acceptance helps him to feel more complete as an artist, he said. It's one thing to be praised for music hardly anybody plays, quite another to win accolades — as he did recently with Haydn sonatas — in familiar music that other great artists have played through the ages.

"My perception of interpretive problems seems to be widening." He is also a composer and the subject of Robert Rimm's 2003 book *The Composer-Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight*.

The son of a Quebec pharmacist, Hamelin began playing the piano at age 5, and made fantastic progress. But instead of Juilliard or Curtis, he studied with Harvey Wedeen at Temple University in decrepit north Philadelphia. Wedeen is a teacher whose claim to fame is, well, Hamelin.

He remained in Philadelphia because "there's never been any compelling reason to move," and continues to pursue the unconventional. His musical passion is obscure avant-garde electronic music of the '60s, '70s and '80s.

His taste in fellow pianists is equally unorthodox: He adores Brazilian pianist Nelson Freire, scorns the praised Sviatoslav Richter.

"Early in his career there were some remarkable recordings, but I have never heard one single spark of humanity or joy," he said of Richter. "It's all dark, gray, sunless. To me that's not what music is about."

Hamelin's playing is, indeed, the opposite — filled with sunlight and color, seething with fascinating humor and interest.

But he emphasized that he doesn't play Alkan and other supervirtuoso composers just because he can. He plays the music because it deserves a hearing alongside other great piano music.

"If Alkan's music was not completely worthy, I would not bother with it for one minute."

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