

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

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MUSIC REVIEW

Pacific Symphony revels in Ravel

The season debut program opens well with Strauss and Mozart, but it's the second half devoted to the French composer that dazzles.

By Michael Rydzynski
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Marc-André Hamelin simply dazzled the audience in Costa Mesa's Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall on Thursday night by coupling amazing virtuosity with exquisite pianism in Ravel's Piano Concerto in D for the Left Hand. His hard-to-follow act was matched, however, by the Pacific Symphony's outstanding interpretation of the composer's "Daphnis and Chloé" Suite No. 2.

Helping the orchestra open its second season in the new hall and its 29th season overall, the French Canadian pianist from Montreal displayed tremendous poise and grace, his technical prowess used never for its own sake but to imbue the music with expression.

Hamelin brilliantly executed the full-bodied harmonies that accompanied the melodies played by his free fingers. He was always mindful of the work's inherent musicianship, which accounted for a wonderful lack of extraneous or excessive movements. He showed such ease and proficiency that he made the work truly his own.

Beginning with its well-crafted introduction, which music director Carl St.Clair guided intensely from the low rumblings of a contrabassoon (the deservedly acknowledged Allen Savedoff) and basses to an astounding crescendo leading into Hamelin's powerful entrance, this 18-minute account of Ravel's 1929-30 concerto became the centerpiece of the concert.

It wound up sharing that honor, though, with the 16-minute 1913 suite from the ballet "Daphnis and Chloé" (1909-12), which followed it in the program's all-Ravel second half. St.Clair worked feverishly, shaping each phrase into a performance of great drama. Flutist Heather Clark, particularly, turned in impressive solos that were by turns lively, haunting and flowing. The frenzied flurry of wave-like forward motion in the final movement drove the work and concert to a pyrotechnic conclusion.

The first half, as fine as it was, afterward seemed almost pale by comparison. But Hamelin, allowed to use both hands, did Mozart justice in the 32-minute Piano Concerto No. 17 in G, K. 453, especially in the slow middle movement, which he invested with pensive lyricism.

The concert opened with an exciting 17-minute rendition of Richard Strauss' first (1888) tone poem, "Don Juan," which concertmaster Raymond Kobler enlivened with several splendid solos and St.Clair conducted with tremendous verve.

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