

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

Pianist's recital bolstered by his bag of musical tricks

By Richard Scheinin

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Pianist Marc-André Hamelin's playing is so full of quiet revelations that it's hard to know where to begin describing his Tuesday night recital in San Francisco. But for the heck of it, let's start with Debussy's "Ondine," named for a water nymph in German mythology, in which Hamelin traced pools of slippery notes (representing the nymph) and flicked them out into a vast empty space (the ocean) that seemed as separate and real as Ondine herself.

It's only one of his tricks: letting listeners hear and feel the space or silence around a group of notes as much as the notes themselves. His recital at the Herbst Theatre, presented by San Francisco Performances, was loaded with such moments. But Hamelin's best trick of all was threading them together to form a series of cogent and intriguing performances.

The Canadian virtuoso has a reputation for playing surprising repertory: Alkan, Ives, Busoni and Medtner are among his favorites. Tuesday, he stuck with a mainstream program - Haydn, Chopin and Debussy - but didn't dispense with the surprises.

Finely crafted sonata

Haydn's Sonata in B minor, published in 1776, was sturdy as a house, one in which the cabinetry is inlaid with a variety of fine woods. The opening *Allegro moderato* was at first darkly etched, with clipped bass figures in which each note seemed to be given a quick haircut.

Then, with the change of a theme or an unexpected modulation, Hamelin would introduce new colors and shadings, but tastefully, without banging you over the head. Carefully, he would change his weighting of notes, adjusting his attack. In the *Minuet*, there was a succession of subtle contrasts, as if light were passing through different panes of stained glass onto the music. In the closing *Presto*, Hamelin's notes were staccato pushpins, which here and there would coalesce into a gleaming blur that seemed to step off the page, cleanly abstracted.

That's another trick: Hamelin unites opposing phenomena, so that a blur is at once a blur and a constellation of fine detail; it can be heard either way. It's a little like staring at a pointillist painting: The viewer can focus on the minutiae or the big picture, the sum of the parts.

Most pianists don't do this as effectively; it's one reason Hamelin is so admired by piano connoisseurs. Beginning Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Opus 58, which dates to 1844, he released a bank of fog, which came rolling up from the bass: But was that a single wash of fog or a thousand separate particles, hanging in the air?

As the Chopin progressed, there were moments when Hamelin's approach became too carefully considered. In the long *Largo*, he kept playing with tempo, slowing it down - so much introspection and so many coaxed phrases; it was too much. But then there was the lyricism, the starlit melody - and the mad dash through the closing *Presto*, *non tanto*.

Best was Debussy's "Preludes, Book II," a set of a dozen miniatures, including "Ondine." Published in 1913, Debussy's pieces immortalize fleeting sensations and physical events, as well as storybook imaginings and people, both fictional and real.

Hamelin's renderings were subtle and dead-on: "Brouillards (Fog)" was barely audible, a visitation from a weightless world; "Feuilles Mortes (Dead Leaves)" conjured, around and through its static chords, hints of a storm, to blow the leaves about; "La puerta del Vino," a portrait of one of the gates to the city of Granada, transported me across the Mediterranean to Morocco. With its distant drones and small embellishments, it was a desert breeze - and reminiscent of jazz pianist Randy Weston, who has spent lots of time in Marrakesh and I bet enjoys Debussy.

A pair of encores

There was lots more: the fine-spun flaxen textures of "Bruyères (Heather)"; the swaggering cakewalk and razzle-dazzle jazziness of "General Lavigne-eccentric," Debussy's tribute to an American clown and juggler who made a name for himself in Paris before World War I; and Hamelin's streaming play of light and shadow in "Feux d'artifice (Fireworks)."

This very fine recital closed with two encores, songs transcribed by Hamelin from a recording dating to the 1950s, titled "Mr. Nobody Plays Trenet." Intrigued, Hamelin did some research and discovered that Mr. Nobody was actually the legendary pianist Alexis Weissenberg, performing six tunes by the French singer and songwriter Charles Trenet.

Tuesday, Hamelin played "Vous Oubliez Votre Cheval (You Forgot Your Horse)" and "En Avril à Paris (April in Paris)," the latter sounding as if it had arrived full-blown from some fabulous French film of the '50s, pure romance served up by this ultra-refined pianist.

Colbert Artists Management

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019

www.colbertartists.com ~ 212-757-0782