

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

A substitute, but not one bit second-rate

By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic
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As good as Sarah Chang was last week with the Philadelphia Orchestra, you couldn't feel bad for audience members who arrived on Tuesday assuming she'd be there but instead got Marc-Andre Hamelin.

The Montreal-born pianist, who happens to live less than 10 blocks from the Kimmel Center (and just played a recital at Lincoln Center), stepped in to remedy Chang's scheduling conflict with Chopin's *Piano Concerto No. 1* - a treat, since he's usually presented here in recital by Philadelphia Chamber [Music Society](#).

So it was only one night. So the repertoire was lightweight. I'll take it. With his taste for forgotten virtuoso music of the 19th century, I've compared his programming to digging for dinosaur bones - this is the music of huge personalities who composed their own star vehicles - and then reconstructing their gargantuan, sometimes monstrous manner. Tuesday evening, Hamelin could be heard without requiring listeners to parse something unfamiliar. This was music from the dawn of the virtuoso age that he usually champions.

We know tempos could be outrageously freewheeling in the 19th century, and Hamelin conveyed that without outrageousness, giving each idea its own subtle pulse. The frame created by his left hand was wide enough for right-hand activities to shape themselves decisively, almost taking on a three-dimensional quality.

Also important was what the performance wasn't: no delicately perfumed pedaling, no swooning rubatos. Hamelin didn't pretend to be a 19th-century reincarnation. Clean but not tidy, the performance viewed the music from a distant but richer-than-usual sense of what it all led to.

Elsewhere, Martinu's infrequently heard *Toccata e due canzoni*, played tentatively on Thursday under guest conductor Jiri Belohlavek, had poise and confidence on Tuesday, plus Philadelphia Orchestra warmth gracing the piece's chic sonorities and individualistic counterpoint. A genuinely great piece of music emerged. Time and again, you marveled, even more than on Thursday, how this composer - with a voice so unmistakably his - radically changed the complexion of a phrase with an altered inner-chord voice or two.

For the Brahms *Symphony No. 2*, I sat in the conductor's circle, facing Belohlavek in an effort to determine why Thursday's performance seemed to maintain a respectful, less-than-interesting distance from the music, and if there was some compensation I missed. Any suspicions that Belohlavek was on autopilot were dispelled by his extremely attentive (if restrained) manner. He was getting the performance he wanted, though it wasn't the one I wanted.

He wasn't interpreting so much as releasing the music, more or less saying, "This is what it is. BYO journey." As admirable as that approach sounds, the Brahms franchise - particularly in this standard repertoire-steeped community - can better use an attempted revelation, even at the risk of disturbing those who only want their view of the music confirmed rather than challenged.

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111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019
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