

# MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

## PIANO

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### San Francisco Chronicle

#### Players rise to challenge of daunting piano concerto

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic    Friday, November 17, 2006

There's no such thing as an easy piano concerto, but even among the tough nuts there are gradations. Kevin Volans' splashy, ferocious "Atlantic Crossing," which had its exciting world premiere at Davies Symphony Hall on Wednesday night, takes a proud stand right out there on the frontier of difficulty.

Written on a commission from the San Francisco Symphony, Volans' 25-minute concerto is a breathless orgy of crashing chords, jagged rhythms and tumultuous orchestral textures, punctuated here and there by brief interludes of serenity. The soloist is at work almost without pause, and the demands on the orchestra are no less grueling.

But if "Atlantic Crossing" is a killer for the performers, it's a wonderfully accessible feast for the audience. Melding the emotional transparency of the Romantic concerto tradition with the varied repetitions of post-minimalism, Volans writes with the listener uppermost in mind, and the results are thrilling.

Wednesday's soloist was pianist Marc-André Hamelin, making a welcome Symphony debut in a score worthy of his prodigious talents. Michael Tilson Thomas led the Symphony in an athletic, crisply controlled performance.

And all of it was in the service of a score designed to inspire delight and awe -- awe at the superhuman exertions of the pianist, delight at the clarity and exuberance of the music.

The predominant feature of "Atlantic Crossing" is its rhythmic explosiveness, with an arsenal of bongos, congas and tom-toms keeping up a steady Latin-tinged backbeat. Jack Van Geem and James Lee Wyatt III were the hard-working percussionists, co-soloists in all but name.

The pianist, meanwhile, labored to raise the rhythmic temperature with page after page of huge, bristling chords. They crashed high and low with the feverish intensity of one of Messiaen's ecstatic outbursts, and Hamelin dispatched these passages with utmost precision and an almost otherworldly air of calm.

But Volans reaches further back for his models as well. The opening of Tchaikovsky's First Concerto -- tolling chords rising in counterpart to orchestral melody -- lurks everywhere in "Atlantic Crossing," either explicitly or by implication. In one particularly beautiful central section Volans rebukes Tchaikovsky by writing piano chords with a fascinating rhythmic profile, something the older composer had neglected to do.

Occasionally, Volans varies things with a stretch of rhapsodic writing for strings and brass, allowing the pianist a breather by asking for no more than single notes in succession. Hamelin showed his mettle even here, shaping those simple melodies with limpid grace.

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There's no avoiding the sense that "Atlantic Crossing" is often a little denser than it needs to be to make its full impact ("too many notes," as the Emperor Joseph II may have said to Mozart).

But what's most exciting about this score is how deftly Volans manages repetition to keep the overall rhetoric comprehensible. Musical ideas arrive and stick around until they're firmly in our ears (but no longer); because we understand the baseline, the rhythmic and harmonic variations then register all the more intriguingly.

In the end, I suppose the music's daunting difficulty may make it hard for "Atlantic Crossing" to get the wider exposure it deserves. Are there other pianists out there willing to take on Volans' challenges, let alone go toe-to-toe with Hamelin's fearsome example? We shall see.

The concert opened with a handsome account of "Russia," Balakirev's concert overture on Russian folk tunes, and concluded with a truly splendid performance of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, one that seemed almost inspired by the muscle and theatrical potency of the Volans. Thomas led the first movement with a fierce sense of purpose, tracing the melodies in hard-edged outline and moving things forward at a firm rhythmic tread.

The scherzo was all sharp elbows and sardonic glitter, with concertmaster Alexander Barantschik's solo waltz tune slipping the knife deftly into the Strauss boys, Johann and Richard. The brass sections thundered powerfully in the martial finale.

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