

# MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

## PIANO

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### The Case for the Underestimated Pianist

By Paul Moor *MusicalAmerica.com*

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BERLIN - Probably all of us who write professionally about musical events have a private little list of personal favorites we feel have for whatever reason not received the acclaim those artists so richly deserve. Why, comparatively speaking, do they remain in the shadow of colleagues no more than their peers - and not infrequently their inferiors? High up on my own little list has long stood the name of the Montréal-born, Philadelphia-based pianist Marc-André Hamelin.

At 45 he does indeed enjoy an international career that definitely demands the adjective "going"; he also has a long and exceptionally congenial relationship with one of the world's musically most distinguished record labels, England's Hyperion. He has made more CDs, many of them esoteric in the extreme, than you could shake several sticks at. Berlin as a matter of course provides the fortunate audience here with the cream of the world's artists, usually at annual intervals. When Hamelin appeared here on Dec. 3 -- at 11 a.m., for the second time only and not even in a conventional concert hall -- I had to ask myself for the umpteenth time: Why not more, much more?

Hamelin made his Berlin debut several years ago as one of several younger pianists in a concert series sponsored by the Berlin Philharmonic and presented in the smaller auditorium of the Philharmonie. The visitor I took with me had studied with Nadia Boulanger for seven years, headed the music faculty of a distinguished east-coast college, and definitely, to quote a favorite phrase of Van Cliburn's, knew where middle C was. Details of what Hamelin overwhelmingly laid on us have faded into memory, but I do recall the unfailing musicality that pervaded everything on that entire program. At the end I remarked to my neighbor with something approaching awe: "Well, I'd never expected to hear another pianist who for sheer technical virtuosity outclassed even Horowitz, but I really think I just have" - and my friend agreed.

This more recent but still only second Berlin recital by Hamelin came about as a result of his having received one of Germany's highest annual musical accolades, the *Schallplattenpreis* (Recording Prize) awarded by a jury of some of the country's most knowledgeable and responsible critics. When one of them -- the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's* Dr. Eleonore Büning -- greeted me there, I looked forward to reading her review, for she most definitely also knows where to find middle C. This recital, with conversational interspersings, took place in the main hall of Berlin's *Instrumentenmuseum*, which houses a splendid collection of instruments of every description from all periods of history.

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Hamelin's characteristic program began with one of Haydn's numerous - and almost totally neglected - sonatas, the one in B flat minor, catalogued as Hob. XVI:32. The first minutes of the opening Allegro moderato immediately made me sit up and take notice of his digital finesse with ornamentations sharp and precise, articulated to perfection - a merely peripheral by-product of that superhuman technique. After a conversational interlude conducted with the Museum's Martin Elste came the last of Chopin's three sonatas, Op. 58, in B minor. Once again Hamelin's sheer musicality made the same deep impression on me that it had on the occasion of our only previous encounter.

After another breather of chitchat (in which Hamelin, who says he otherwise really loves Liszt, dismissed that flashy composer's "Orage" ["Storm"] as nothing more than "a big bag of wind"), the musical part of the morning turned 100% Hamelin when he laced into the almost totally forgotten "Rudepoêma" Heitor Villa-Lobos composed as his kind of portrait of his friend and champion Arthur Rubinstein - who found it technically so taxing (Hamelin had even referred to its "violence") that he himself played it only a very few times. In a life of concert-going that began shortly after the world premiere of Jacopo Peri's "Dafne," I had never before had even the opportunity to hear this staggering curio; if Rubinstein found it taxing, you can imagine how warily almost all other pianists regard it. I will not necessarily die less than happy if I never hear it again, but I wouldn't have missed this overwhelming display of pyrotechnics for anything.

Naturally I looked forward to what my German colleagues would write about this unforgettably impressive recital, especially Dr. Büning, who I knew had heard it. When I subsequently asked her about her own review, she said that her membership on the jury that had awarded Hamelin the Schallplattenpreis precluded her reviewing that recital. As far as I can ascertain, not one word about it appeared in Berlin's daily newspapers - and of course all performers *need* reviews as leverage to advance their careers.

Especially for anyone reading this who has thus far remained ignorant of this thrilling musician, I urge you to click on the URL below and revel in 43 free audio samples from his vast catalog of Hyperion CDs, which in addition to more familiar repertoire also go to bat for such esoterica as Alkan, Barber, Bernstein, Dukas, Ives, Medtner, Ornstein, Roslavets, Rzewski (those astounding variations on the Chilean anti-fascist song "*El pueblo unido jamás será vencido*"), Skryabin, and Szymanowski, not even to mention virtually forgotten concertos by Alkan, Busoni, Henselt, Korngold, Marx, Rubinstein, and Scharwenka. Especially for piano freaks, I confidently promise you a major revelation, which may well move you to reconsider your list of the most authentically outstanding pianists in the world today.

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