

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANIST

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GEORGIA ROWE: CLASSICAL NOTES

Pianists take center stage

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WE DON'T KNOW much about astrology here at Classical Notes. But the stars must be favorably aligned for pianists right now. With the arrival of Angela Hewitt, who joins the San Francisco Symphony in concerts this afternoon through Saturday evening, audiences will hear the third of three great pianists to appear in the city in a matter of days.

I confess I'm often appalled by the acclaim heaped on some of the pianists I've heard in recent years (no, I'm not naming names). To these ears, they're all about flash, not substance. Which is why I was thrilled when two of my favorites -- Marc-Andre Hamelin and Leif Ove Andsnes -- came to town last weekend.

Hamelin, who is Canadian, has been astonishing Bay Area music lovers since his San Francisco Performances debut in 2003. Saturday evening, he returned to Herbst Theatre and held an enraptured audience spellbound. This is one pianist who manages to avoid mannerism at every turn, no matter the repertoire; playing Liszt, Schubert, Pantcho Vladigerov and (during his four encores) Debussy, Hamelin let the music speak for itself. Or sing for itself, in the case of three Liszt transcriptions of music from the operas "Tristan und Isolde," "Ernani" and "Norma." These were performances that demonstrated the ways a little restraint can reveal a world of emotion.

Sunday night at Davies, Andsnes devoted his recital's second half to Ravel's always-illuminating transcription of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," lavishing his customary attention to detail and perspective on every colorful episode. But the evening's greatest enjoyments were in the smaller works: Schumann's "Four Piano Pieces," Schubert's "Three Fragments/Unfinished Pieces," and Beethoven's Op. 110 Sonata No. 31 in A-flat major. Here, the Norwegian pianist played with tremendous focus and nuance, passion and tenderness. Andsnes seems to take delight in outlining the music's contrasts, and the audience did, too.

Hewitt, who has made exemplary recordings of music from Bach to Chopin to Messiaen to Ravel, will play Mozart's beguiling Piano Concerto No. 15 in this week's San Francisco Symphony concerts. Led by her countryman, Canadian conductor Bernard Labadie, the all-Mozart program -- which also includes the Chaconne from the composer's "Idomeneo," and the Serenade No. 7, "Haffner" -- begins at 2 p.m. today at Davies Hall, with repeats at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Tickets are \$20-\$107. Call 415-864-6000 or visit www.sfsymphony.org.

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