

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

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Pianist Marc-André Hamelin Aply Fills In at Strathmore, Plays Haydn and Debussy

By *Philip Kennicott*

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There was a lone, husky boo when Neale Perl, head of the Washington Performing Arts Society, announced what many in Wednesday's Strathmore audience already knew: The scheduled pianist, Krystian Zimerman, was ill, and would be replaced by Marc-André Hamelin.

It was a cranky, grumpy boo, and undeserved. **Hamelin is no second-rate consolation prize, but a major pianist, with a devoted following who prize him for his voracious musical appetite, intellectual control and fine technique. It was a stroke of good luck that the WPAS was able to secure him so quickly. And his performance was fascinating, nourishing and provocative.**

Hamelin is known for his huge catalogue of recordings, and his seemingly boundless capacity for finding, absorbing and mastering important but neglected composers. Connoisseurs adore him because very often he's the only pianist who has made a decent recording of some legendarily obscure figure.

Very often, this spongelike quality of the musical mind makes one suspect of being a mile wide and an inch deep. But Hamelin is no dissipated dabbler in musical exotica. **Just as vast experience makes doctors better diagnosticians, Hamelin's breadth makes him better at finding solutions to musical problems.**

Take Haydn, for instance. Haydn's piano writing, with its mix of spiky and elastic phrases, its thumbtacks and rubber bands, is technically simple but interpretively difficult. Hamelin opened with Sonata No. 32 in B Minor, and he played it rather the way Horowitz used to play Scarlatti -- a small but luxurious sound, with fragmented episodes colored and polished into a unity without losing their separate and distinct character. If you didn't know this was Haydn writing in the 1770s, you might guess it was music of the late 17th or early 19th centuries: That is to say, you'd guess it was Haydn because he is the slipperiest of composers, seemingly both behind and ahead of his own time.

Schumann's Fantasy in C Major, Op. 17, begins with a roiling river of notes over which a grand and impetuous theme seems to presage a long, symphonic spectacle. But Hamelin (unlike many pianists) followed Schumann's dynamic markings and very quickly dropped the big, rhetorical sound for something much smaller and improvisatory, as if to say the joy in this bipolar music is really just so much mania. The three-movement Fantasy is filled with detailed indications to slow down and speed up, and with transitional passages where time seems to stop and the composer drops his public face to mutter scraps of old poetry under his breath. Hamelin followed this tortuous map faithfully, drawing out the most inward passages, occasionally faltering in the more virtuosic pages, but always leading to the same conclusion: This is music of horrifying seams and ruptures, egomania and self-laceration, wildness and despair.

He ended with two character pieces by Fauré and a magnificent reading of six Preludes (from the Second Book) by Debussy. But it wasn't until he started giving encores that his reading of Fauré and Debussy came into focus. In thanks for a partial standing ovation, Hamelin played an Alexis Weissenberg transcription of a little melody by Charles Trenet, the warbly, chirpy, campy embodiment of everything charming and criminally superficial about mid-century France.

Weissenberg's arrangement is a perfect example of art born out of the decorative impulse gone mad. It is all filigree and tinsel, but filigree and tinsel that has taken on a life of its own, like Islamic calligraphy.

If you could charm all of Weissenberg's deliciously superfluous notes to fall out of the air, you'd need a push broom to sweep them off the stage. And that was how Hamelin played Fauré, too, more trees than forest, which was frustrating and interesting at the same time. Debussy fared far better -- the Preludes were the highlight of the evening -- perhaps because Hamelin found the closeted salon composer in Debussy, an appealing balance to the more severe, difficult face of the composer.

No instrument (besides the orchestra) is so well adapted to explore the tension between substance and decoration as the piano. Hamelin's career has been a continual research project in this area, and Wednesday's recital proves his research has paid off. It helped him stitch Haydn into something whole, and cleave apart the terrifying poles of Schumann. It cast Fauré in a new if odd light, and revealed a simpler, more communicative Debussy. Not a bad night's work for a substitute artist greeted with a boo.

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