

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANIST

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Classical music review: Pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin performs with eye-popping virtuosity at Bass Performance Hall

By **SCOTT CANTRELL / Tuesday, February 2, 2010**

FORT WORTH—Marc-André Hamelin will be hard to displace as the area's piano recitalist of the year.

The eye-popping virtuosity displayed Tuesday evening at Bass Performance Hall was no surprise. While plenty of pianists can play very fast and very loudly, rare is the mastery of musical rhetoric and expression shown by Hamelin. His command of touch and texture amazed.

The difference between a great performance and a merely very good one is the illusion of spontaneity. And from Haydn's F minor Variations (Hob. XVII:6) and Mozart's A minor Piano Sonata (K. 310) to four Debussy preludes, Hamelin seemed to be making up the music on the spot, in the very best sense.

From the first notes of the Haydn, Hamelin essentially let the music explore its own implications rather than crimping it into a rhythmic straitjacket. Even his considerable rhythmic freedoms in the Debussy were always structural, never arbitrary, responses to turns of phrase and colors.

In the latter's "Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses," the fairy flutterings were evoked as if by moths' wings barely brushing the keys. The fireworks of "Feux d'artifice" sparkled, sprayed, splashed, boomed and crashed in an astonishing variety of nuance. Hamelin managed to make even Liszt's *Venezia a Napoli* triptych sound like better music than it really is.

Most of the great pianists of the 19th and early 20th centuries were also composers, if only to produce their own flashy encores, and so is Hamelin. Tuesday's program, part of the Cliburn Concerts series, ended with a selection of five of Hamelin's own etudes, and, sure enough, they were all showpieces.

"After Tchaikovsky," based on a lullaby by the Russian composer, wasn't flashy, but the pianist's left hand worked atmospheric wonders. Both it and "Coma Berenices" suggested early Scriabin, while "Erlkönig" was closer to Liszt. A Minuetto suggested Liszt updated as a cocktail pianist, with a delicious "blue" chord at the end. A Prelude ended with a delightfully demonic fugue.

A well-deserved standing ovation was rewarded with a ravishing performance of Chopin's D-flat major Nocturne (Op. 27, No. 2).

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