

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

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Who for Whom? Marc-André Hamelin Pinch-Hits

by Charles T. Downey | Friday, April 10, 2009

No one was very happy about the cancellation that affected the recital on Wednesday night at Strathmore -- not Krystian Zimerman whose sinus infection caused him to cancel, or Washington Performing Arts Society who had to scramble to find a replacement, or the audience, many of whom apparently received the news in advance and decided to stay home. **Perhaps it was only your reviewer, who regretted another chance to hear Zimerman, to be sure, but who equally relished the chance to hear Canadian pianist Marc-André Hamelin.** After all, Hamelin has not played in Washington since a 2004 recital at the National Gallery of Art, although Jens reviewed him in 2005 in New York. Fortunately, for listeners around the world Hamelin has created an extensive series of recordings, focusing especially on modern composers, some more known (Ives, Godowsky) and others less so (Alkan). As far as substitutions go, it was as near a luxury replacement as one could reasonably hope.

Hamelin's calling card is music of fiendish technical challenges, which was not really a part of this program, presumably because of the lack of preparation time. Instead, this was a game of subtlety and restraint, beginning with a Haydn sonata (no. 32, B minor, Hob. XVI:32) most noteworthy for its delicate, understated touch, contoured lines, and clear fingerwork. Those who have accused Hamelin's Haydn set of being intemperate would have approved of the gentleness of this performance, with the Steinway in the first movement scaled down to pianoforte sound, just with booming fortés. The second movement was lightly pedaled, with a clean, active minor section, and the contrapuntal last movement, with its obsessive, repeated-note subject was brisk, but not manic. The same feeling of careful temperance came through in the Fauré pairing that opened the second half, especially in the fleeting, transparent sound of the Nocturne No. 6 (op. 63). The Barcarolle No. 3 (op. 42) was vivified by wild roulades, often rolling like waves around a skilfully voiced inner melody.

Schumann's *Fantasia in C Major* (op. 17) is fresh in my ears from Maurizio Pollini's recital in October, and it was originally on Yaron Kohlberg's program last weekend, replaced by the *Dauidsbündlertänze*. Hamelin, like Pollini, emphasized the Eusebius parts of the work, showing the introverted, moony side of the composer's personality (the end of the first movement was so lost in musing that it almost seemed to be whispered inside the listener's head), with a free, plastic sense of rubato and, once again, crystal-clear voicings, with evanescent non-melodic lines meaning that the melody could be quite clear without being hammered. Where Pollini's second movement showed the martial insistence on dotted rhythms as a sort of empty-headed rigor, Hamelin's performance had a wide-open sense of bombast without being so relentless, with even the loudest sections voiced with care.

The closing set of Debussy preludes, all from the second book, showcased Hamelin's gifts as a colorist, with shimmering pastel trills, so soft, in «*Les Fées sont d'exquises danseuses*»; a suave, wind-blown *Bruyères*; and a lampooned *Général Lavine - eccentric*, quixotic but not vulgar. After an eerie *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune*, full of hushed magic, Hamelin made child's play of the crossed-hand *moto perpetuo* toccata of *Les tierces alternées* and highlighted a booming section in the middle of a lacy but bright *Feux d'artifices*. Hamelin indulged his interest in jazz in two encores, Alexis Weissenberg's arrangement of the Charles Trenet song *En Avril à Paris* (recorded on Hamelin's recent disc of jazz arrangements) and Hamelin's own jazzy, Debussy-inflected nocturne from 2007. If nothing else, this excellent recital allows Marc-André Hamelin to sneak into the WPAS series by the back door, since in his apologetic introduction WPAS president Neale Perl acknowledged that they are possibly the last concert organizer in the United States to feature a recital by Hamelin. Because some of the senior pianists regularly featured by WPAS, like Murray Perahia, Richard Goode, or Maurizio Pollini, will not be performing forever, we can hope that Hamelin will come back to Washington more frequently in the future.

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