

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

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Hamelin displays new level of skill

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By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Classical Music Critic

For years, Marc-Andre Hamelin has been leading audiences down obscure, gothic avenues of the piano repertoire in such a commanding fashion, who wouldn't wonder how the big gun standard pieces would come off with him? Was he waiting for a time when he could withstand comparisons to the great masters of past?

Well, that time is now. Hamelin's Philadelphia Chamber Music Society recital Wednesday at the Kimmel Center, the latest of many, was on a different level than before. In a program featuring such cornerstones as Liszt's *Sonata in B minor* and Debussy preludes, he was nearly in the Horowitz Zone.

Technically, this Canadian-born, Temple-trained, Boston-based pianist has long been on par with late wizard Vladimir Horowitz, not just in terms of manipulating the piano, but in the cut-glass precision of sound that could be a mixed blessing with both musicians. In his later years, Horowitz's brilliance often arrived in an eccentric, all-too-treble sound; Hamelin's performances can be all-too-clinical musical X-rays in atmospheric works such as Albeniz's *Iberia*.

His occasional forays into standard repertoire - a Chopin concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra or Brahms and Schumann recordings, and even the Liszt sonata some years ago - were always promising breaks from the strange musings of Charles-Valentin Alkan and hyper-density of Leo Ornstein. But on Wednesday, the Hamelin sonority had more body, easily shouldering Liszt's grand rhetoric. His coloristic range in Debussy was hugely original in concept and execution. There was more a sense of him prioritizing the notes - and with greater depth of feeling and more profound comprehension. It's true that Hamelin's spellbinding revelation of musical structure tends to temper the demonic elements of any given piece, but I'll take that quality over Horowitz's neurotic tension any day.

No performance I've heard of Alban Berg's *Piano Sonata Op. 1* (the program opener) so clearly elucidated the music's germinating construction as well as how this composer who came to define the 20th century used gestures from the 19th - in a beguilingly disembodied fashion. Thus, one's ears were more attuned to Liszt's modernity (often discussed but seldom heard) - amid Hamelin's thoroughly distinctive way of giving the music higher peaks and lower valleys than many pianists would dare to.

The Hamelin technique is far more than digital speed. It encompasses voicing chords, playing fortissimos that aren't labored and pianissimos that don't disappear. Particularly as the sonata wound down, Hamelin found deep wells of expression in single notes, if only because he gives them thoughtful gradations of color at any level of the volume spectrum.

Anybody expecting wispy, colorful bits of musical haiku from Hamelin's selection of Debussy preludes (Book II) got something far more aggressive. The abstract musical characters that inhabit these pieces sounded malevolent, even dangerous, in ways that created a meeting point between the outdoorsy pictorialism of the French impressionists and the more interior angst of the German expressionists, with colors I've never heard from these or any other Debussy pieces.

Then came a selection of five etudes Hamelin wrote himself. All had something different to say and crossed stylistic centuries - he'll give a salon music melody some modern harmonies, for example - and were consistently too long for their own good. But composing keeps performers young. Even the encore, Haydn's lightweight *Fantasy in C*, was never merely pretty. Hamelin usually leaves me in a state of information overload - which can be fun if you enjoy being bewildered - but this time, the overload came from so much meaning in so little time.

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