

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANIST

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CONCERT REVIEW MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN PLAYS SHOSTAKOVICH

Hamelin works the keys like a baker kneads dough

Cool as a cuke pianist closes out Edmonton Symphony Orchestra season

By Elizabeth Withey, June 13, 2010

EDMONTON - Pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin strode briskly toward the Winspear Centre just minutes before show time Friday. This meant one of two things: he was a laid-back, confident fellow, or the nervous sort who needed to walk off his pre-show jitters.

I decided it must be the former. Pros gets stage fright, yes, but Hamelin was cool as a cuke during his solo with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra. The Montreal native, now based in Boston, acted as though he were sitting in his favourite easy chair watching a Red Sox game (while playing piano for a nearly full house).

The ESO's last concert of the season began with two homegrown compositions: Allan Gilliland's *Shadows and Light*, an ESO commission, and Godfrey Ridout's feisty *Fall Fair*, one of the most frequently performed Canadian pieces. Music director Bill Eddins shared the podium with conductor-in-residence Lucas Waldin.

With the audience warmed up, Hamelin took his seat at the Steinway and drummed out the signature opening riff of Shostakovich's *Concerto for Piano, Trumpet and Strings*. Eddins gave the downbeats. The work began with a sure-footed, naughty sort of urgency, then took us through bright, lively passages reminiscent of a lazy summer picnic and frantic, minor-key moments of blurred-finger brilliance. Hamelin vacillated from mellow to sassy to jubilant, his style matching the moods of the movements. Fellow Quebecer Robin Doyon, the ESO's principal trumpet player, shone modestly as he soloed alongside Hamelin.

After intermission, Hamelin returned to perform Strauss's *Burleske*, a piece he recently recorded with the Berlin Radio Symphony. It's an unrelenting, ambitious number for the pianist and Hamelin rose to the occasion, at once fierce and tender, firmly and rhythmically working the keys like a baker kneads bread dough. He will earn his Grammy yet.

The show wrapped up with Debussy's *La mer*, a sweet piece well-suited to daydreamers reminiscing about a symphony season that flew by. Among the bright spots: erhu whiz kid George Gao, pianist Gabriela Montero, baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky and soprano Dawn Upshaw. Add Hamelin to that list.

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