

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Tortelier, SLSO present exciting, satisfying program

By Sarah Bryan Miller

May 1, 2009

Friday morning at Powell Symphony Hall brought the final Coffee Concert of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra's 2009-2010 season. Given the programming, though, it might have been more appropriate to serve croissants than the standard Krispy Kreme doughnuts: this weekend's headliners and offerings were all distinctly Gallic.

The conductor was the elegant, Paris-born Yan Pascal Tortelier, a leader of presence and assurance. The soloist was the virtuosic French Canadian pianist Marc-André Hamelin. The program held four deservedly familiar and distinctively French works: Maurice Ravel's "Le Tombeau de Couperin," Camille Saint-Saëns' Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Claude Debussy's "Sarabande," as orchestrated by Ravel, and, finally, César Franck's Symphony in D minor.

Tortelier is tall and distinguished, with a head of white hair and a balletic way on the podium. He conducted with a deft touch and no baton. In "Le Tombeau," he enhanced the charm already present in the score, offering a lush but clear-eyed account. Assistant principal oboe Barbara Herr Orland and principal trumpet Susan Slaughter were standouts in their solo passages.

Some concertos are collaborations between the soloist, the conductor and the orchestra; some are all about the soloist, with the others acting, essentially, as accompanists, Saint-Saëns's 2nd falls into the second category.

It's a big, showy Romantic piece; Hamelin has the powerful technique to bring it all out and the personality to dominate the stage. He's far from being a pounder, though: his dazzling speed and power in the first and last movements contrasted perfectly with his whimsy and limpid playing in the middle. The energy – and the interest – never sagged, in a most impressive performance.

Hamelin was greeted by a roar of approval from the audience as soon as his fingers left the keyboard. He rewarded their response with an encore, Charles Trénet's "En Avril, à Paris," as arranged by pianist Alexis Weissenberg.

The second half opened with a lush, luscious interpretation of the seductive melodies and exotic Orientalisms of Debussy's brief "Sarabande." The performance was a perfectly conceived miniature, perfectly framed by Tortelier and beautifully played by the musicians.

Franck's lone symphony, composed between 1886 and 1888, is a piece of consummate Late Romanticism; Tortelier explored the score's sweeping passion, and did so with intelligence and clarity, for an interpretively satisfying performance.

Tortelier got generally fine playing from the orchestra, with translucent sounds from the strings buoying up the whole. Some of the SLSO's brass players weren't at their best, and the conclusion of the Franck was marred by some disappointingly splattered phrasing.

Colbert Artists Management

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019

www.colbertartists.com ~ 212-757-0782