

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANIST

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Piano pieces provide contrasts

By Rob Hubbard 05/20/2010

While it's doubtful the final two contestants on "American Idol" will be asked to perform pieces inspired by waltzes or play piano one-handed, a similar sense of musical competition permeates this weekend's Minnesota Orchestra concerts.

In this corner is Germany's last romantic, Richard Strauss, building his works around fiercely individualistic literary characters. Countering him is France's Maurice Ravel, no less evocative but more concerned with the realities of the 20th century than the old-world ideals of the 19th. The two trade rich orchestrations and very challenging piano pieces on this provocatively constructed program. The winner at Thursday morning's concert? Anyone who had the pleasure of experiencing pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin's inspired execution of a devilishly difficult doubleheader.

After guest conductor Gilbert Varga brought his gracefully enthusiastic style to an outstanding performance of Strauss' orchestral showpiece, "Don Juan," Ravel responded with a bracing dose of darkness. His Concerto for Piano Left Hand was written for a virtuoso who lost his right arm in World War I, but Hamelin seized upon opportunities to emphasize triumph over tragedy. And a triumph it was, for seldom does a pianist bring so much color and complexity to this piece.

Hamelin returned to the stage after intermission for Strauss' "Burleske," a work infrequently performed, presumably due to its difficulty. But Hamelin makes a specialty of such challenges, not only conquering many of the piano repertoire's most daunting "knuckle busters," but doing so with expressive musicality.

An exquisitely turbulent interpretation of 1920's "La Valse" proved an ideal last word from Ravel. Varga and the orchestra captured its beauty, mystery and madness, evoking a Vienna (or perhaps all of Germanic culture) that sounds as if it's dancing aboard an elegant ocean liner as it capsizes. It seemed an appropriate wave goodbye to Strauss' world, with one eye cast forward to what Europe would soon become.

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Who: The Minnesota Orchestra with conductor Gilbert Varga and pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin

When: 8 p.m. today and Saturday

Where: Orchestra Hall, 1111 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis

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