

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

ARTSJOURNAL

on the record

Exploring America's orchestras... with Henry Fogel

Marc-André Hamelin: A Pianist of Style, Substance, and Depth

May 22, 2009

I rarely use this space to talk about specific artists, though from time to time I have done so (Gustavo Dudamel, Gidon Kremer). But recently I encountered a pianist who so embodies the spirit that I have written about--the spirit of spontaneity and freshness and freedom in the making of music--that I cannot resist.

I have known and admired Marc-André Hamelin's recordings for many years now. But recordings, as much as I love them and collect them, cannot substitute for the live music experience, and it was with the excellent Seattle Symphony in April that I had my first in-person encounter with Hamelin. He played two works by Liszt, *Totentanz* and the arrangement for piano and orchestra of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*.

The accuracy, speed, and rhythmic precision of Hamelin's playing were something to behold. Even in today's era of great technical accomplishment, there are few pianists who can equal Hamelin's clarity and fireworks. But while that is an important part of his musical arsenal, it is not what makes him so special. What knocked me over about his performances was the beauty of the slow music--played with incredibly subtle dynamic shading, phrasing of remarkable suppleness and imagination, and an ability to draw 2,000 listeners right into the music, each with the feeling that he was playing "just for me." *Totentanz* can come off as a shallow showpiece that you tire of halfway through its twenty-minute length, but this performance convinced you that it was music of integrity and substance as well as brilliance.

And then there's the matter of color. Hamelin's palette of colors is extraordinary--far broader than that of most pianists. He clearly hears color and harmonic motion as interrelated, and as integral parts of the musical whole. And he's able to convey that in a totally absorbing manner.

A look at Hamelin's recorded output reveals a probing musical mind, a very real musical curiosity, and a wide range of musical interests--including much more than the heart of the Romantic repertoire. He has recorded contemporary music (particularly American), jazz, and such relatively unknown pianist-composers as Kaikhosru Sorabji (1892-1988) and Valentin Alkan (1813-1888). Hamelin seems to me to be an artist of extraordinary individuality and sensitivity, and I look forward to encountering him many times in the future. Meanwhile, his recordings will now have even more impact on me, because my mind will fill in the experience of hearing him live.

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