

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANIST

INDIANAPOLIS STAR

ISO's 'Symphonic Hits' crackles with zest, energy

By Jay Harvey, May 8, 2010

Exuberance and stunning displays of energy pervaded the start of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra's "Symphonic Hits" finale Friday night.

Like drawing a highlighter pen through certain parts of the Classical Series, "Symphonic Hits" is designed to stand out as a familiar, informal and fun ISO attraction for buff and novice alike.

Brahms' Symphony No. 2 in D major led the way in this program's marketing, and the first of this weekend's two performances at Hilbert Circle Theatre had the kind of zip and affectionate scrupulousness that outfit a warhorse handsomely.

Guest conductor Jun Märkl fashioned a reading that lived up to most of his apparent intentions. Surely the outburst that follows the "sotto voce" opening of the last movement ought to have been more clearly articulated. At least no one could doubt from then on that intensity would characterize this "Allegro con spirito."

But that fourth movement could have used a greater infusion of relaxed jollity, in keeping with the sunny nature of nearly everything that precedes it. Long-breathed phrases sculpted by Märkl smoothed the way through the opening movement, with its emotional ambivalence tilting toward contentment.

More detached phrasing suited the second movement well, and there were charming details in the third, indicated by the conductor's careful attention to the plucked countermelody in the cellos, poised against the woodwinds' song.

Before intermission, the stalwart pianism of Marc-André Hamelin provided a zest all its own. The versatile pianist had a chance to show his more reflective side before doing so totally in a captivating encore, his "Little Nocturne," but the main business of Saint-Saëns' "Africa" Fantasy and Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major was spectacle.

Working compatibly with Märkl, Hamelin discarded the image of Saint-Saëns as the doyen of French music in order to make "Africa" as exotic as possible. Bringing out a lavish variety of color from the keyboard and something approaching the vigor of North African street life, Hamelin effectively rubbed the glitter off the Saint-Saëns style to show some of the rawness we get glimpses of in the opera "Samson et Dalila."

The Liszt concerto, a subtler, cunningly constructed work, is crowned by martial music so stirring it almost overshadows its more delicate inspirations. Hamelin had the full measure of those; so did Perry Scott in his brief cello solos.

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