

# MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

## PIANO

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**THE TORONTO STAR**

### **Pianist makes tough program look easy**

**JOHN TERAUDS** CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC Nov 12, 2008

It's easy to take for granted the technical ability, background knowledge and sheer willpower needed to turn a concert grand piano – a gleaming, 500-kilogram lump of wood, metal, leather and felt – into a musical instrument.

That is, until you hear the likes of 47-year-old Canadian master Marc-André Hamelin.

Making one of his all-too-rare visits last night at the Jane Mallett Theatre for Music Toronto's recital series, he took great piles of notes and turned them into poetry.

What we heard was so beautifully crafted that it put most pianists' efforts to shame. And Hamelin made it look ever so easy.

Dressed in a dark suit with an open-necked white dress shirt, he looked like someone who had just come home from a long day at the office and sat down at the piano to unwind for a few minutes. The only thing missing was a frosty cocktail.

Yet this was anything but an easy program. Much of it was inspired by the golden age of the piano in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Back then, the big pianists were no mere interpreter, but a creator as well, dazzling audiences with fireworks born of their own imaginations.

Hamelin's playing, likely more technically proficient than anything from 100 years ago, evoked every ghost in the piano pantheon.

From the Polish contingent, we heard two pieces (a *Barcarolle* and the *Ballade No. 3*) by Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) and the over-the-top *Symphonic Metamorphoses on Wine, Women and Song* by Johann Strauss by Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938).

Although the Jane Mallett Theatre's new Steinway piano has not reached the brilliance needed to fully colour this showy music, Hamelin did his level best to wow the audience with breathtaking dexterity as well as an unerring sense of phrasing.

The program opened with two well-known *Sonatas* by Haydn, from the last quarter of the 18th century. Most pianists make them sound astringent in their classical-era purity. But Hamelin added an élan that fleshed out a musical soul that the printed score only alludes to.

In a further nod to golden-era greats, Hamelin played two of his own creations out of a set of 12 *Études* in minor keys: one inspired by Goethe's tragic *Erkönig* poem and a tender Tchaikovsky lullaby reworked for left-hand solo.

(As an encore, he smilingly tossed off *Suggestion Diabolique*, the dressiest set of chopsticks ever wielded on a keyboard.)

As if all this wasn't enough to sate listeners – and exhaust the most accomplished of pianists – the evening's crowning glory was the *Sonata in a State of Jazz* by 89-year-old French pianist-composer Alexis Weissenberg.

This 1982 suite, made up of a tango, a Charleston, blues and samba, is like the ostentatiously illegitimate love child of George Gershwin and Charles Ives: all icy, formalism hiding luscious jazz beats and harmonies. Hamelin deftly plucked the jazz nectar out of each blooming measure.

There is only a handful of pianists in the modern instrument's 150-year history who have been able to do so much with their chosen instrument – and make us smile in the process.

Let's hope Mr. Hamelin decides to make a return visit very soon.

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