

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

THE MONTREAL GAZETTE

Happy ending to Strauss night

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History was on offer Tuesday night - in Place des Arts, where white-haired Franz-Paul Decker led the MSO through a program of Richard Strauss, a composer he had met more than 60 years earlier. The handshake and words of encouragement stretched across the decades to create music-making of remarkable vitality and authenticity.

At least in the second half, which began with Burleske, a one-movement piano concerto that is widely ignored owing to its quirky thematics and technical difficulty. These qualities recommend it to Marc-André Hamelin, who dispatched it with a perfect combination of north-German polish and Bavarian wit. He was having fun, as were Decker and the players. As were we.

Then came the Rosenkavalier Suite, a Decker specialty. Rarely are tempos manipulated these days so extravagantly in the interests of full expression. There were points where the waltz beat seemed almost ad libitum. It was a faithful reflection of the Viennese spirit of freedom Strauss recreated in this opera.

Strings sounded rich and the brass added nice touches of sass. Oddly, neither were in top form before intermission in the Symphonia Domestica, a weighty, elaborate tone poem based on a day in the life of the composer. There were some nice woodwind solos, and the multiple climaxes of the final minutes were organized to impressive effect.

Still, the soundscape had neither the depth nor virtuosity one expects from the MSO on a good day. My guess is that Decker placed it first because it was not in great shape. My second guess is that the real performance will be tonight.

There was a healthy crowd in Salle Wilfrid Pelletier, noteworthy in view of the televised competition from Chicago and Phoenix. The ovation was the noisiest I have heard this year. The MSO has long followed a policy of neglecting this former music director. It was good to hear subscribers cast their votes for change.

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