

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

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Hamelin takes on the complex, renders clarity

By Rob Hubbard, Oct.21, 2008

Marc-André Hamelin opens the Schubert Club's International Artist Series, St. Paul, Ordway Center

Pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin clearly doesn't believe that classical music should be a forum for the familiar. His concerts tend to center around the challenges of exploration, blending seldom-heard music with unusual and imaginative interpretations of works you thought you knew.

Such was the case at St. Paul's Ordway Center on Tuesday night, when Hamelin opened the Schubert Club's International Artist Series with a **highly unconventional and wonderfully exhilarating recital**.

Offering fascinating takes on works both Romantic and modern, Hamelin showed why he deserves to be mentioned among the great pianists currently performing.

If anyone was consumed with dread when they opened the program and saw that an Alban Berg sonata was batting leadoff, there was no cause for alarm.

In Hamelin's hands, this work from the Second Viennese School became almost lyrical. He made the sonata a lovely ride through some rough-and-tumble territory, complex but never confounding.

Hamelin's approach to the opening of Chopin's "Funeral March" Sonata was a surprising flurry of nervous energy and conflicting emotions. Chopin was presented not as the brooding bringer of sadness, but an agitated, anxious angel of death.

Hamelin cloaked the familiar funeral march of the third movement in the weight of palpable grief, alleviated by a delicate, wistful interlude before the closing Presto scurried about in a frenzy. If one was looking for individuality of interpretation, Hamelin was delivering it in spades.

The second half of the concert was given over to a Concerto for Solo Piano by Charles-Valentin Alkan, a work so demanding that it rarely sees the light of day.

It's a magnum opus that the man whom Franz Liszt said had the best technique he'd ever encountered clearly intended as a means toward raising the bar for pianists.

Hamelin ascended this Everest of a work with deep emotional insight and consummate confidence, making it a tremendous showcase for his brilliance.

And the Debussy prelude that he offered as his final encore put an exclamation point on an excellent recital.

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