

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

COVER STORY **The Secret Star**

How one of the most important pianists of our time manages to slip under the radar in his hometown.

by Peter Burwasser THE PHILADELPHIA CITY PAPER Published: Oct 11, 2006

Marc-André Hamelin is a hard man to get a hold of. There was an e-mail from Australia. Then a phone call from New Mexico. A few days later, another call in between flights, en route to Wake Forest, the conversation occasional interrupted by blaring airport announcements. Such is the life of the international classical music soloist, especially an acclaimed talent in high demand. It is an exciting, turbulent lifestyle that Hamelin has not tired of. But everyone needs a place to call home, and for Hamelin, that place is Philadelphia. The Montreal native came to Philly in 1977. "I was offered a full tuition scholarship at Temple. This came about because I had taken a year of lessons with Harvey Wedeen, who was then, and still is, the chairman of the keyboard department at the university. At that time he made regular monthly visits as a guest teacher to the Vincent-d'Indy School in Montreal where I was studying

"I didn't know anything about Philadelphia then, and I had only made a handful of trips to the States, mostly for competitions. In order to give myself more options, I did apply to the University of Montreal, and was accepted, but then the Temple offer came through, so I left for the States. It didn't take me long to realize that this was an excellent thing to do; it brought me so much more, not only musically but culturally."

Amongst the critical community around the world, Hamelin is almost universally regarded as one of the most important pianists of our time. And yet he is hardly a household name here. There are many reasons why this is so, including some nuts-and-bolts issues. "My career was greatly slowed down in the late '80s and most of the '90s by inefficient management in America, which is why it has developed much more in Europe than it has here. So I have a lot of catching up to do, not only in Philly, but everywhere else in the country. Since I changed agents in 2000, things have been immeasurably better."

But the very nature of Hamelin's approach to music has as much to do with the shape of his career. He was a child prodigy, and grew up in a home filled with music; his father was an amateur pianist, and a connoisseur of historical piano heroes. Hamelin, who never really considered any career other than music, was given the finest instruction. "My main teacher was a lady by the name of Yvonne Hubert. She is probably the most renowned pedagogue that the province of Quebec ever had. She was Cortot's [one of the great French pianists of the last century] assistant in France. She came to Montreal in the '20s and radically modified people's thinking about piano technique and interpretation. Her influence was incalculable. I studied with her for six years, from 1973 to 1979, but I don't think you can trace my interest in repertoire to her because she was actually quite conservative."

So conservative that when Hamelin discovered the massive scores of such composers as Charles

Colbert Artists Management Inc.

111 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019
(212)757-0782 - Fax (212)541-5179 - West Coast (858)794-0182
E-mail: NYColbert@ColbertArtists.com

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

Ives and Pierre Boulez, he studied them in secret. "I was actually scared to tell anybody. Hubert was quite condescending towards new music. Almost anything atonal was anathema. When I expressed great love for the Scriabin *Fourth Sonata*, at about the age of 16, she told me early Scriabin was bad Chopin, and you can't spend your time with it. I still haven't forgiven her for it, because it's one of the most magnificent pieces from that part of the century. I really resented that kind of opinion, and it led me to act on my own."

Hamelin went on to discover the vast, dense works of such composers as Godowsky, Sorabji and Alkan, music that is obscure, in part, because it is so incredibly difficult to play. To the astonishment of piano music aficionados around the world, not only could Hamelin play the music, but could do so with elegance and insight. One of his early recordings, of the massive Alkan *Concerto for Solo Piano* (on the Music and Arts label), created a sensation and established his truly legendary reputation. A reviewer for a prominent musical journal flatly declared it to be one of the great piano recordings of all time.

This would seem to be a springboard to a major career, and in many ways, it was. But the music business has its own rules. Hamelin continued, as he does to this day, to play what he wants. This branded him as a specialist, a super virtuoso. This became a source of frustration for the pianist. "To the day I die, people are going to have a misconception, because that is what they want to think. I can say it very plainly, some people may not believe me; I don't care. Virtuosity in itself does not interest me — capital letters, boldface! I am interested in communicating a message. Certain people think I like virtuosity but don't like to admit it; that couldn't be farther from the truth. What interests me is a celebration, in composition and in performance, of the enormous expressive, textural, polyphonic and orchestral possibilities of the piano as an instrument. I have a taste for density, I know. So I tend to be attracted to pieces that exploit those tendencies. Basically, I'm saying, with my playing, 'Listen to how remarkably beautiful this music is. This composer sweated blood to get this on the paper.' The thought and soul that is in the music is what should be appreciated, not the virtuosic surface."

Hamelin has played with the Philadelphia Orchestra several times, and is a regular recitalist with the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society (he will be at Perelman in January). He has also been heard often as the accompanist for his wife, soprano Jody Karin Applebaum. But he would not mind an even higher profile here (which he richly deserves; it is absurd that he is not included in every Philadelphia Orchestra season), and even admits to a strategy: "It is my dearest wish — and this goes for anywhere I play as well as Philadelphia — that I be recognized as a more well-rounded musician than just one who likes to explore the more unusual corners of the repertoire." In the meanwhile, his base will continue to be his Queen Village row home, which overflows with scores, recordings and mementos of his travels around the globe. "When you're as much of a pack rat as I am, you really think twice about moving anywhere."

Colbert Artists Management Inc.

111 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019
(212)757-0782 - Fax (212)541-5179 - West Coast (858)794-0182
E-mail: NYColbert@ColbertArtists.com