

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

PROFILE

Marc-André Hamelin: An artist for all seasons - and pianos

Lanaudière performance provides a glimpse of the vast scope of his interests and talent

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS, The Montreal Gazette

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"I don't consider that an oddity myself," Marc-André Hamelin said from his home in Boston. Well, let's see. I had just learned that this internationally acclaimed virtuoso, known also as a composer of piano music, with a discography of more than 40 titles on the Hyperion label alone, does not, in fact, own a piano.

It is certain at least that Hamelin will be supplied with one on Tuesday at the Church of L'Assomption, where his Lanaudière festival performance marks his first local appearance in more than a year. Nothing personal. His schedule, more packed with glamorous engagements than it used to be, just worked out that way.

Bear in mind that the 46-year-old Montreal native has long lived elsewhere, notably Philadelphia, where he moved in 1980 to pursue doctoral studies at Temple University.

So why was I calling him in Boston?

"I have found my soulmate, purely and simply," Hamelin said, referring not to the Steinway he now practises on, but its owner, WGBH public-radio announcer Cathy Fuller. Fans are cordially invited to go to wgbh.org and listen to the Oct. 6, 2003, interview that started it all.

"Anyone, anytime can listen to the first hour of our relationship," he observed. "I think that is very romantic."

The romance that matters to the world at large, of course, is the one that Hamelin has with piano literature. No pianist has a vaster repertoire.

A soon-to-be-released disc of waltz transcriptions by Leopold Godowsky (including a reconstruction by Hamelin's late pianophile father Gilles) suggests that his fascination with the technical outer limits remains entrenched. But his next Hyperion issue will be another instalment of Haydn's perfectly standard and highly accessible piano sonatas.

In the most delicate terms, Hamelin confesses to liking them better than Mozart's. "In Haydn, there is an angularity, a very strong tendency to break taboos, which appeals to me," he explained.

While no Haydn will be heard on Tuesday, the program gives some sense of the scope of Hamelin's interests. First up is Alban Berg's thorny and tonality-stretching Sonata Op. 1, a rare item, even if was a favourite of Glenn Gould's. The evening ends with the outrageously difficult Concerto for Solo Piano of Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888). Hamelin might be the only name-brand pianist in the world who plays it publicly.

Between this odd couple sits Chopin's Op. 35, among the most familiar of all piano sonatas. Its dum-dum-da-DUM funeral march is ubiquitous. Many of us, as Hamelin observes, learned it from Bugs Bunny.

No matter. Whether the music is by Chopin or Alkan, Hamelin follows a firm code: "I always try to play

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whatever it is as if nobody in the audience ever heard it before. This forces me to be clear in emotional communication and careful in preparation, even with the most familiar music."

Hamelin goes one step further. He learns music as if he, also, had never heard it before.

"Most musical appreciation is based on recordings and other people's performances. That's because most people do not have the musical training to go to the score.

"This might be a dullard's answer, but someone once asked whether I had a hero. I said, 'The printed score.' "

This is not to say he has no interest in other pianists. When I mentioned a recently resurfaced 1947 Horowitz performance of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6, Hamelin remembered it from a disc in his father's collection. He effortlessly cited a tempo adopted by Sviatoslav Richter to make a point about Schubert sonatas.

And while Hamelin does not consider himself a jazz performer - despite his recent Hyperion anthology of jazz-influenced pieces - he listens with interest to Thelonius Monk, Art Tatum, Cecil Taylor and, particularly, Martial Solal.

After a millennial change in managers, Hamelin is less a cult figure and more a touring artist in general demand. This partly explains his philosophical attitude toward not owning a piano. He is usually playing someone else's.

His New York Philharmonic and Tanglewood debuts are now behind him. But he has not forgotten Montreal. In November he plays in a Strauss concert with the MSO under Franz-Paul Decker.

Pro Musica has organized a four-concert weeklong festival in March featuring Hamelin as an accompanist (to violinist Lara St. John, the Leipzig Quartet and soprano Karina Gauvin) and concerto soloist (playing Haydn with Les Violons du Roy) and recitalist (Haydn, Chopin, Weissenberg Godowsky and Hamelin).

What you will not hear from Hamelin, live or on disc, is Pierre Boulez's Piano Sonata No. 2, which he considers one of the two pinnacles of 20th-century piano literature, the other being Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*.

"I think it is a very passionate work," Hamelin says of the atonal opus, which is almost never encountered outside of graduate seminars. "I think it is full-blooded, with an incredible intensity.

"I expect never to play it."

Not odd at all.

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