

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

THE AUSTRALIAN

A virtuoso who won't show off

Graham Strahle | September 14, 2009

Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. Conductor: Arvo Volmer. Pianist: Marc-Andre Hamelin. Adelaide Town Hall, September 11.

IT takes patience and careful thought to produce a worthy performance of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.3 in C minor.

For the soloist, there's the double problem of having to sit through over 100 bars of orchestral introduction before playing a single note, and then having to trump the orchestra, which has by then presented all the main themes. Canadian pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin had an answer whose cleverness only revealed itself at the end.

Soloists are usually tempted simply to outdo the orchestra, magnifying all it has said, but this can prove wearing and killing for drama if the long structure of the first movement is to be sustained.

Rather, Hamelin held back, matching while at no time exceeding the orchestra. He was robustly forceful and delicate when it counted, but only just. Some pianists have made the lyrical moments more meltingly beautiful, one may have pondered, but there was just enough understatement to implant doubt.

Then, however, came his coup de grace, a towering, mighty performance of the cadenza in which all the movement's beauties were finally, and definitively, revealed. **Transforming from the toweringly powerful to the sweetly magical, with the smoothest imaginable trills at the very end, it was entrancing. It's this kind of structural thinking that makes Hamelin one of the great pianists of the present day.**

Britten's Sinfonia da Requiem is an oddly brutal work for what was apparently conceived as a memorial to his parents. It stands more as an anti-war statement, which he said was also its function. From its opening pounding hammer blows, this symphonic poem-like work never lets up. Melody is stretched and contorted with relentless violence, and a conclusion of effusive, cinematic grandeur leaves mystery hanging in the air. The Adelaide Symphony Orchestra's performance, under its chief conductor Arvo Volmer, was appropriately forceful.

It's not often that Shostakovich sounds petite and playful in comparison with other composers, but he did on this occasion. His Symphony No. 9 is a sparsely scored, compact work that bears a strong resemblance to Prokofiev's Classical Symphony, composed 28 years earlier.

With a blaring trombone answered by twittering piccolo, perverse whacks of bass drum and a folk fiddle solo thrown in as if randomly, Shostakovich was clearly having fun in this symphony, in his typically mocking way.

Seeming to understand perfectly its quizzical emotional content, Volmer and the ASO delivered an intensely colourful, vital performance.

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