

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANIST

RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH **MUSIC REVIEW: Marc-Andre Hamelin**

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Monday, April 10, 2006

MUSIC REVIEW **MARC-ANDRE HAMELIN** **AT: VCU's Singleton Center on Saturday**

Marc-André Hamelin is a matter-of-fact virtuoso - a stocky, bespectacled pianist who negotiates dense thickets of notes and summons extraordinary tone without histrionics or much visible exertion.

Performing Saturday night at Virginia Commonwealth University, Hamelin presented a varied program - a Schubert sonata, the signature piece of Bulgaria's leading composer, three of Liszt's opera paraphrases, a bit of Debussy - with an intensity and outpouring of sonorities that made you wonder whether steam would rise from the Steinway.

No, but the collective pulse rate of the audience surely quickened.

The pianist, by contrast, seemed almost serene. In the most complex or physically demanding music, Hamelin looked like a master chef wielding a chopping knife, speedily but securely and with great concentration.

His technical prowess - consistently even fingering, absolute tonal control, nuanced phrasing and dynamics - was best displayed in Liszt's paraphrase on "Isolde's Love-Death" from Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde," the Sonatina Concertante by Bulgaria's Pantcho Vladigerov and an encore of Debussy's "Fireworks."

Hamelin's most striking work, however, came in his renderings of tone colors and telling details.

The obscure Vladigerov sonatina dazzled the ear with prismatic color and exoticism, sounding like oriental Ravel. Liszt's paraphrases on "Tristan," Verdi's "Ernani" and Bellini's "Norma" throbbed with drama as they glittered with pianistic effect.

Hamelin, who varies his programs slightly on each tour stop, forgot which variation he was playing in Richmond, and - for the first time in his career, he said - turned to the audience before the last selection and asked, "What comes next?"

What a temptation to yell back, "Gaspard de la nuit!" or some other famous fingerbuster of the piano literature, and see if he would rise to the bait.

Instead, a patron politely offered Hamelin a program book, and he proceeded to "Norma."

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