

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANIST

MUSIC REVIEW

Hamelin both composed, graceful

Pianist's program incisive, beguiling

By CHARLES WARD - Copyright 2006 Houston Chronicle - January 23, 2006

Some pianists love to decorate their performances with visual funny business ó the physical flailings meant to persuade us that the playing is fantastic.

Marc-André Hamelin was the other kind of performer Friday at his recital for Society for the Performing Arts and the University of Houston International Piano Festival, held in the Wortham Theater Center's Cullen Theater.

After sitting down at the keyboard, he paused a few seconds to compose himself, perhaps to commune with his artistic muse, maybe to shame the audience into quieting itself. But, like flamboyance, that visual cue signaled the exquisitely shaped music-making to come.

The Montreal-born pianist is one of a small group that hovers around the edges of greatness (though his biography goes a little overboard in calling him "a true avatar of the piano").

He is known for incisive, beguiling playing, which he abundantly displayed, as well as a voracious curiosity about piano music, which he did not.

His Houston program was safe but neither formulaic nor obvious: a French Suite by Bach, a set of short pieces by Brahms, a Liszt knuckle-buster honoring Bach and, finally, a great Schubert sonata.

Even his encores had interesting twists: a Liszt arrangement of Chopin's Polish Song No. 5, and, "something of my own, dedicated to a special person in the audience, (pause) whoever he or she might be." Titled *Valse-Irritation*, it was a play on a Nokia ringtone he'd heard during the recital.

Once composed, Hamelin explored a wide range of emotions, always with physical and interpretive calm.

In the French Suite No. 5, he sped like the wind in fast movements and wove lacy decoration in the Sarabande. The familiar Bourrée bounded.

For Brahms' Piano Pieces, Op. 119, Hamelin switched from the rigorous beauty of Bach to self-indulgent Romantic expression. Freedom reigned in phrasing and rhythm. The muse seemed to have urged him to let go ó but with restraint.

In his Fantasy and Fugue on B-A-C-H, Liszt used a favorite device for honoring the Baroque master: building a piece on a four-note motif that, using the German names for notes, spells out Bach's name. Those notes suggest rampant chromaticism, and Liszt created a surging mass of harmonically restless music that raged, occasionally paused to re-gather wits, and then raged some more. Cascades of octaves can push pianists to their physical limits. Hamelin, though, seemed unfazed. He was in total, cool, impressive control.

After intermission, the opposite of fierce bravado reigned: a deeply and quietly felt interpretation of Schubert's Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960. The playing sparkled with crystalline clear tone, the surface means to a masterful exploration of the music. He laid out a panorama of emotions ó from lost-to-the-world dreaminess to impish playfulness. Schubert's big works can seem long and sprawling. Hamelin's concentrated style of music-making produced taut, impeccable organization that made the piece speed through time.

In all, his D. 960 sonata was a gem of intimacy and grace.

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