

REVIEWS

MUSIC REVIEW

A Russian Rhapsody With the Power to Jolt

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

The adventurous Canadian pianist Marc-André Hamelin brought a fascinating "Russian Avant-Garde" program to the Miller Theater on Tuesday and played it with his customary brilliance and insight.

The other story of note, though, is that since George Steel became its director in 1998, the Miller Theater at Columbia University has been steadily drawing eager young audiences to its contemporary music programming. Surely, the younger people who packed the place had not come for the chance to hear some piano works by Nikolai Roslavets. It's just that Mr. Steel has so often delivered on his promise that the Miller's programs will be engaging and out-there experiences that this new generation of listeners trusts him by now.

The only nonconventional element of the presentation was a screen behind the piano on which projected colors and slowly shifting images provided a subtle backdrop. Music

was in the forefront here, and Mr. Hamelin's compelling performances had you riveted for two hours.

Though Roslavets (1880-1944) derived his harmonic language from a complex system he called synthetic chords, his Five Preludes and Three Études sounded anything but theoretical. These are intriguingly amorphous explorations of boldly free chromatic harmony. Only the long-spun, Expressionist lyrical lines provide thematic continuity. The final prelude, marked "Lento-Rubato," had the quality of an epilogue. It was simpler, almost tuneful, rather like a less-tonal Bill Evans in his ruminative mode.

Scriabin's Sonatas Nos. 6 and 7 (the "Messe Blanche") were both composed from 1911 to 1912. In a way, Scriabin's 10 piano sonatas are like one extended work in 10 parts, and Mr. Hamelin captured this searching quality in his rhapsodic performances. The Sixth, in particular, came across like a long, dense, fitful buildup to an outburst that never arrived.



Chris Lee for The New York Times

Though Leo Ornstein, who died last month at 108 or 109, was Russian-born, he became part of the American avant-garde movement. A work like "Danse Sauvage" (1913) remains a shocker: an exuberant dance consisting of nothing but pum-

meling piano tone-clusters for both hands. "À la Chinoise," an impression of Chinatown in San Francisco, is a rush of oscillating, quasi-exotic figurations.

Mr. Hamelin conquered Ornstein's daunting, Ivesian 30-minute Sonata

No. 8. Between the roaring craziness of the first and third movements, the middle movement is a suite of four short musical musings on childhood mementos discovered in an attic. Though completely incongruous, the shift in tone is audacious and the

music disarming. The audience listened raptly, then erupted in applause.

Artists and organizations hoping to revitalize classical music should look to Mr. Hamelin and the Miller Theater for some ideas.

Marc-André Hamelin paid tribute to Russian avant-garde composers at the Miller Theater, dedicating his performance to Leo Ornstein, who died in February.