

Intelligence, virtuosity and daring put Hamelin in a class by himself

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

You don't get to be a star of the music world by pursuing obscure repertoire and lavishing enormous amounts of intelligence and technical bravado on it. If you follow that course, the only thing you become is one of the most fascinating and important artists of your day.

That's the chosen career path of the brilliant Canadian-born pianist Marc- André Hamelin, who made an incendiary and long-overdue San Francisco debut in Herbst Theatre on Tuesday night.

Hamelin's artistry has long been a well-kept secret among aficionados, thanks in large part to his recordings of music by such comparatively out-of- the-way composers as Nikolai Roslavets, Leo Ornstein, Nikolai Medtner and Frederic Rzewski. His combination of ferocious keyboard technique and exploratory fervor illuminates even the most shadowy corners of the repertoire.

Tuesday's program, presented by San Francisco Performances, wasn't all that esoteric -- it included music by Bach and Schumann, after all -- but it was a revelatory encounter nonetheless. It was, among other things, a breathtaking display of fiery virtuosity and interpretive subtlety.

But beyond that, Hamelin had a concrete point to make with this program, which included excerpts from his own piano suite "Con Intimissimo Sentimento." It was to stake his claim to a place in the tradition of pianist-composers that goes back to Schumann, Chopin and Liszt -- a tradition maintained most notably today by Rzewski.

And even though the charms of Hamelin's music were determinedly small- scale, the point was well taken. Composing as a regular complement to performing is evidence of an active engagement with the world of music that shows up everywhere in a recital program.

Certainly the performances of the standard works in the first half -- Busoni's fierce, bombastic piano arrangement of the Bach D-Minor Chaconne and Schumann's "Phantasiestücke" -- were the work of a musician taking nothing for granted. Each phrase and each measure sounded newly considered, with a speculative, almost improvisatory feel to the results that was exhilarating.

The Bach, as channeled through Busoni's expansive imagination and then through Hamelin's classicizing influence, sounded especially striking. The weighty chords of the opening and closing sections were perfectly judged, and the intervening variations charted a surefooted course through all the implications of the basic material.

The Schumann collection, eight character pieces of wide-ranging mood and tone, found Hamelin alternating between playing of ebullient lightness and almost startling brutality. The opening "Des Abends" was a feathery prelude, done as if in a single anticipatory breath; the questing melody of "Fabel" kept rising with a poignant, delicate uncertainty.

Schumann and Chopin are the models for "Con Intimissimo Sentimento," a loose-knit collection of seven short character sketches. Hamelin played four of them -- spare, moody little musings, often with chiming, high-pitched melodic filigree over a simple ostinato bass. The effect was sweetly low impact.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the program came at the end, with the Symphony for Solo Piano by the evocative 19th century Frenchman Charles- Valentin Alkan. This is a group of four consecutive excerpts from a set of 12 etudes, a deliberate mimicry of the four-movement plan of a Beethoven symphony.

The writing, too, is expressly Beethovenian, though with a twist. The Funeral March that serves as the slow movement tips its hat to the "Eroica," but its jaunty swagger suggests that Alkan's tongue may be somewhere in the vicinity of his cheek.

The minuet is straightforward enough, but the Presto finale is an unmitigated flurry of keyboard virtuosity in which the spirit of Beethoven seeks to out-Liszt Liszt. Hamelin tore his way through it with a bravado that was nothing short of astonishing.

The encores were Debussy's "Reflets dans l'eau," a very funny, stiff- legged "Humoresque" by Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin and the first of Prokofiev's "Sarcasms."

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