

Romantic Temperament Applied to Monuments

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The pianist Marc-André Hamelin is fearless. No successful performer can afford to show fear from the stage, but with Mr. Hamelin, fearlessness is something more: a positive attribute, a confident calm that he exudes even while unleashing volcanic eruptions of sound and emotion.

Mr. Hamelin came by his assurance rightly, having spent the early decades of his career slaying keyboard dragons of the late-19th and early-20th centuries, many of them obscure as much for the technical difficulty of their piano writing as for their occasional lapses into sheer display. But in recent years Mr. Hamelin has applied his prodigious gifts to more standard repertory — Haydn, Chopin, Albéniz — with exquisite taste and artistry.



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

His recital at Mannes College the New School for Music on Friday night shaped up as a fitting culmination of the 2011 International Keyboard Institute and Festival on its final weekend. And the overflow crowd, full of piano mavens, gave him a hero's reception.

Mr. Hamelin opened with Berg's Opus 1 Sonata, making it sound less a harbinger of modernism than a Romantic effusion mildly tinged with dissonance. Nor could Stockhausen's Klavierstück IX, cosseted by Mr. Hamelin's Romantic temperament and fluent command, have riled even the most hidebound listener as it made its way in fits and starts from repeated, fading dissonant low chords to a dissipating flurry of activity at the top of the keyboard.

What did bother some in the audience was music coming from elsewhere in the building during what should have been eloquent decrescendos and silences in this music (as well as immediately before and after the Berg). Not to disparage the normal work of a conservatory, but shouldn't such a high-profile public presentation be shielded from intrusions?

Mr. Hamelin then turned his attention to two monuments of the piano literature. His control in Ravel's "Gaspard de la Nuit" was astounding, in sustaining the interlocking watery trills of "Ondine," in the evenness of the B flat pedal tone anchoring "Le Gibet" and in the manifold difficulties of "Scarbo."

And if none of that were scary enough, Mr. Hamelin concluded the program with Liszt's daunting Sonata in B minor, which he recently recorded for Hyperion. He may not have plumbed the quasi-spiritual depths that Claudio Arrau and others have sometimes found in the choralelike episodes, but that's what the later years of a career are for. The music was all there in its power and grandeur.

Saying that he hesitates to play an encore after the Liszt sonata, Mr. Hamelin played two: Ravel's "Jeux d'Eau" and a prelude by one of those obscurities, Leonid Sabaneyev.