

## Late-night Liszt from the Canadian pianist wows

By Nick Shave, August 27, 2011

Pure and apparently effortless displays of virtuosity entertained those who made it to the Late Night Prom on Wednesday. Marc-André Hamelin is never flamboyant or showy: his playing is all about the music. And so to watch him play Liszt – music that shows all the hallmarks of a showman – is to watch a masterclass in modesty of gesture: Hamelin's technique is always placed at the service of the music, and not the other way round.

The programme was nicely varied, beginning with *Legend No. 2, 'Francis of Paola Walking on the Water'*, S175 No. 2 – a piece that takes its programmatic cue from St Francis's miraculous walk across the Straits of Messina, followed by the *Fantasia and Fugue on B-A-C-H*, S529ii – written originally for organ, whose dense counterpoint makes tremendous technical demands.

Hamelin returned to the spiritual in *Benediction de Dieu dans la solitude*, S173 No. 3 – a tribute to the French poet Alphonse Lamartine; *Venezia e Napoli*, S162 – three movements that journey from the hauntingly impressionistic to an ebullient tarantella – concluded the programme. Throughout, Hamelin captured remarkable nuances. Every detail, however small, was delivered with an exacting ear for shading and dynamics.

For the adjacent critic, these wonderful washes of sound proved too much: in the late-night, low-lit atmosphere of the Royal Albert Hall, he was swept into a deep, deep sleep that – to judge by the continual nodding of the head and heavy slow breathing – lasted roughly from the Bachian S529ii to the last pages of the *Venezia e Napoli*, S162.

He missed out. This will undoubtedly stand up as one of this year's outstanding concerts – on a par with Maria João Pires's memorable late-night Chopin recital last year: world-class.