

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANIST

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Hamelin lives up to his rep

By Arthur Kaptainis, The Montreal Gazette August 8, 2011

Photo: Fran Kaufman

ORFORD – Fair weather, an enlarged hall, good acoustics, silent air conditioning, a full house: There was plenty to like at the Orford Arts Centre Sunday afternoon, including Marc-André Hamelin, whom Orford artistic director Jean-François Rivest matter-of-factly compared to Rubinstein and Horowitz in a introduction from the stage.



Criticism, like life, is a little more complicated, although there was no doubt that we were hearing a major pianist in robust mid-career. Everything Hamelin is famous for was on offer in this recital, as well as a few things for which he is not.

No need, perhaps, to report that Liszt's Sonata in B Minor was dispatched with the utmost force and clarity. Hamelin does not need to slow down to make double octaves sting at high velocity. His ability also enables interpretive choices: I heard songful left-hand lines in new relief amid cascading decorations. Yet there was nothing self-conscious, and the heroic essence of the masterpiece was left intact.

Earlier he played Ravel's Gaspard de la nuit, arguably the most difficult work in the standard piano repertoire, with impeccable ripples in Ondine and much HD scampering in Scarbo. Hamelin took Le Gibet very slowly and placidly, draining it, to my ears, of its death-row gravity. Ivo Pogorelich has tried something similar with the funeral march of Chopin's Op. 35. Interesting, at the very least.

All this was done on a brilliant Yamaha, whose unusual sustaining power was most apparent in Stockhausen's Klavierstück IX. What a fascinating exercise in sonority this was. (And how infinitely superior in imagination and accomplishment to a minimalist Hymn to Orford by Ana Sokolovic.)

Hamelin is willing to veer from interpretive convention: There were passages of Chopinesque velvet in the first movement of Haydn's Sonata in E Minor. If something in irony was lacking in the finale, the songful Adagio made its effect.

There was no encore after Liszt. Perhaps Hamelin thought he had nailed the thought-provoking final minute. Which he had.

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