

Review | Marc-Andre Hamelin

By JOHN HEUERTZ
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Friday night, Canadian pianist Marc-André Hamelin showed about 700 people at the Folly Theater why he's one of the world's greatest pianists. People didn't just applaud at the end of his program. They stood up and clapped and yelled and whistled and took pictures.

Hamelin opened with Franz Josef Haydn's 1793 Andante and Variations in F minor, a work of two variations on two melodies. Its principal theme is taken from a tragic opera Haydn wrote about Orpheus, in which Orpheus yearns to die after losing his beloved Eurydice.

Like the Mozart that followed it, this sad but vigorous music still lives. Hamelin said after the concert that some of its repeating passages opened up for him in a whole new way Friday night.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was deeply affected by his mother's 1788 death in Paris, and may well have channeled his sorrow into the A minor Piano Sonata that followed the Haydn variations.

Like "Papa" Haydn, Mozart understood loss - Haydn had lost his last, great love - but this was the 18th century, and chewing the scenery was very bad form.

Both these pieces move one by their powerful but restrained emotions. They made excellent vehicles for Hamelin's creamy, beautifully controlled touch.

Franz Liszt wasn't the man to neglect the scenery, and his 1856 "Venice and Naples" showcased Hamelin's fearsome technique in another way.

Playing Liszt this fast is beyond nearly every pianist. But Hamelin's splendid articulation of Liszt's trademark clouds of trills, and his execution of this work's famously difficult prestissimo finale, made it sound not only easy but fun to play.

The second half opened with Gabriel Fauré's 1894 D-flat Nocturne. Hamelin's sensitive touch and pedaling brought forth the best qualities in this sweet, gentle and oddly masculine music.

Most astounding of all was Hamelin's performance of Charles-Valentin Alkan's devilishly complicated 1857 Symphonie for solo piano - "a wild ride in hell rather than to it" - whose nearly insoluble technical problems Hamelin dispatched at top speed with tremendous power and elan.

Listening to Hamelin play Alkan is a strange experience, because Hamelin is a greater artist than Alkan. Hamelin plays from the heart - and writes from the heart, as his delightful little 2006 Nocturne encore showed.

Alkan's music is curiously bloodless. But he influenced great composers after his death. It's to Marc-André Hamelin's credit that he has done so much to help rescue Alkan from obscurity.