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King of Virtuosos Is Weary Of His Crown

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Marc-André Hamelin at the Mannes College the New School for Music, where he will perform a program of 19th- and 20th-century music.

WHEN Marc-André Hamelin gave a piano recital at Le Poisson Rouge in September, he displayed all the hallmarks of a first-rate artist: a stellar technique, poise and probing musicianship. He did so in a program consisting entirely of his own compositions, a rare feat in an era when the composer-pianist is an increasingly endangered species.

Mr. Hamelin, who turns 50 in September, has recorded his own works alongside a vast collection of little-known repertory, making a name for himself with terrific releases of worthy obscurities on the Hyperion label. More recently he has also recorded excellent discs of work by mainstream composers like Haydn, Schumann, Chopin and Liszt.

On Friday evening at Mannes College the New School for Music, as part of the International Keyboard Institute and Festival, Mr. Hamelin will perform a program of 19th- and 20th-century music: Berg's Piano Sonata (Op. 1), Stockhausen's Klavierstück IX, Ravel's "Gaspard de la Nuit" and Liszt's Sonata in B minor.

Mr. Hamelin's imaginative and soulful recording of the Liszt sonata is one of his latest releases on Hyperion. Among his many other notable recordings are several of music by Charles-Valentin Alkan, a 19th-century French virtuoso pianist and a friend of Chopin's.

Mr. Hamelin finds the word "virtuoso," which is invariably applied to his playing, a somewhat derogatory descriptive that implies mere showmanship, he said during a recent interview in a practice room at Mannes. But he wields his jaw-dropping technique, impressive even alongside the technical wizardry of many contemporary pianists, entirely in the service of insightful, passionate music making. There is nothing remotely flamboyant about his playing or his stage presence; he moves his upper body little. But the agility with which his hands fly over the keys is dazzling.

A virtuoso technique is imperative to make any sense of the thickets of notes in Alkan's works. As David Dubal, the piano scholar and Juilliard professor, said in a telephone interview, virtuoso "is a term that has not since Paganini



and Liszt found a resting place."

"It's a very wonderful thing to be a virtuoso," Mr. Dubal added. "You can't play the Godowsky études without being one.

"Mr. Hamelin has a marvelous stature in the world of piano in that he has brought back and explored many wonderful things that can give the piano a future. He is not afraid of anything. We're talking about one of the only pianists with a more comprehensive outlook on the repertory, which can inspire young people to play beyond the restricted repertory that exists. That's where his importance lies."

Mr. Hamelin's fascination with Alkan and other composers off the beaten track (he has recorded works by Nikolai Kapustin, Leo Ornstein, Nikolai Roslavets, Georgy Catoire and Xaver Scharwenka) began as a child in Montreal, where he grew up speaking French. His father, Gilles Hamelin, a pharmacist and an accomplished amateur pianist who died in 1995, was an avid collector of scores and recordings. He encouraged his son's natural curiosity about a wide range of music. Mr. Hamelin's mother, Jacqueline Hamelin, doesn't play an instrument, he said, but is "a very keen listener."

Mr. Hamelin enjoys unearthing rare scores in secondhand shops. But the demise of brick-and-mortar outlets has meant fewer opportunities to discover gems.

Some works, like Dukas's mammoth Piano Sonata, Mr. Hamelin said, fell into obscurity because they were never promoted by a big-name exponent. Mr. Hamelin grew up listening to recordings by golden-age pianists, many of whom — like pianists in the 19th century — played their own arrangements and compositions.

Mr. Hamelin's 12 Études, in all the minor keys, which he performed at Le Poisson Rouge in September (and which have been published by Edition Peters), were inspired mostly by 19th-century composers and writers. The poetic Étude No. 7 in E flat minor ("After

Tchaikovsky,” for the left hand alone), for example, is modeled on Tchaikovsky’s “Lullaby” (Op. 16, No. 1). The Étude No. 3 in B minor (“After Paganini-Liszt”) takes its inspiration from “La Campanella,” and the Étude No. 8 in B flat minor (“Erlkönig, After Goethe”) mirrors Goethe’s famous poem. Composing, transcribing and arranging are now mostly lost arts for pianists, Mr. Dubal said, praising Mr. Hamelin’s eclectic interests and talents. Composition, Mr. Dubal added, should be encouraged in conservatories to facilitate broader and more creative artistry, rather than the “robots culture, a mechanical culture” that exists today. “Just because you can play the octaves of the Tchaikovsky Concerto,” Mr. Dubal said, “you can’t expect to be called an artist or a musician. I’m adamant about that. I teach many pianists at Juilliard, and it doesn’t mean they will ever be artists or even musicians.” To be a complete musician like Mr. Hamelin, “you have to learn how to compose, how to transcribe, how to arrange music,” he added. “It’s all part of a great tradition.” That tradition has faded because of changes in conservatory training leading toward a system that encourages rote study and memorization of large segments of the mainstream pianistic repertory. “It’s much more important than many students realize to have a thorough grounding in harmony, counterpoint, theory and ear training,” said Mr. Hamelin, who studied at the École de Musique Vincent-d’Indy in Montreal and received undergraduate and graduate degrees in piano performance from Temple University in Philadelphia. “Without that you will be a very incomplete musician.” Mr. Hamelin, who writes music by hand and never uses any of the popular computer tools, called composing “essential for many reasons.” “It helps you not to take the composers you play for granted,” he said, “and it allows you to experience fully at first hand what they went through at the moment of creating the piece you are playing. It also helps you understand the system of notation. I’d be a very different performer if I didn’t compose.” Mr. Hamelin’s ability to dissect a piece aurally is evident when he highlights multiple voices in even the densest of scores. His playing is notable for its clarity of texture and for its momentum, particularly in vast sonatas that can sound meandering in less capable hands. Because of this focus on clarity, his interpretations have been called cold. “Every concert I do is like a love offering,” he said, “and I just want to give

everything I have. But some people confuse clarity with coldness. Admittedly I’m not much to watch at the piano, which bothers some people.” Mr. Hamelin, an affable, unassuming man with an explosive laugh, is going through a divorce. He lives in Boston with his fiancée, the pianist and WBGH radio host Cathy Fuller, to whom he dedicated his Theme and Variations. Mr. Hamelin doesn’t own a piano and practices on Ms. Fuller’s Steinway. His actual time at the instrument varies. “I practice 24 hours,” he said. “I’m not kidding,” he added with a laugh. “It’s not the time but what you achieve. There is also the factor that if you spend all of your days in the practice room, what are you hoping to express musically and emotionally, if all you see is four walls? You have to live and gather experience and go through the good and the bad.” “You have to concentrate your work as much as possible,” he added, “and practice as little mechanically as possible.” Simon Perry, the director of Hyperion Records, said he enjoys working with Mr. Hamelin “because he is just a straightforward guy with no airs and graces who is really fun to be around.” “He is astonishing in the studio,” Mr. Perry added. “There are works he has recorded for us where you could imagine the strain and stress, but he seems to find it easy.” Young performers who immediately want to record staples of the repertory, Mr. Perry said, “are asking for trouble, given that everything has been recorded umpteen times by the greatest performers in 50 years.” Mr. Hamelin, even given his age, experience and prodigious gifts, is still waiting to record staples like the late Beethoven sonatas. “The presence of so many wonderful recordings,” he said, “makes me want to wait until I’m capable of realizing exactly what I want.” In the meantime he has plenty to focus on, including two concerts at the BBC Proms in London this summer: a late-night Liszt recital on Aug. 24 and a performance of Rachmaninoff’s Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales on Sept. 3. In October he will perform Szymanowski’s Symphony No. 4 for piano and orchestra (“Symphonie Concertante”) with the Berlin Philharmonic. This is all music for virtuosos. “I play things that are outwardly flashy,” Mr. Hamelin said. “But if there were no music in it, I wouldn’t bother with it. If people only see the artifice, I feel that I’ve failed.”