

Classical & Opera



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Is this the world's best pianist?

He's a brilliantly skilled ivory-tickler who takes on famously complex works with ease. Marc-André Hamelin speaks to **Jonathan Lennie**

It is with some trepidation that I dial the number in Boston, USA, to speak with the man acknowledged as the world's most technically accomplished pianist. Marc-André Hamelin is the pianist's pianist, revered for his seemingly effortless tackling of devilishly difficult repertoire by composers such as Alkan, Medtner and Godowski. He has even composed and recorded a set of 12 études (studies) in all the minor keys – the first, for example, is a triple étude simultaneously presenting three Chopin studies in a single piece.

Clearly, such a person must be a withdrawn eccentric in the Glenn Gould mould. Fortunately, this couldn't be further from reality, as the 49-year-old Montréal-born musician is engagingly modest, laid back and easily given to a hearty laugh. He is appearing this weekend at Wigmore Hall with others, playing highlights from this year's Risør Festival of Chamber Music – an event curated by pianist Leif Ove Andsnes and viola player Lars Anders Tomter – since 1991 the pair have been coaxing world-class musicians to the fishing town in their native Norway.

Along with a Mahler song cycle (with soprano Measha Brueggergosman), the highlight promises to be Hamelin and Andsnes playing the two-piano version of 'The Rite of Spring'.

You must be asked to play at lots of festivals. Why Risør?

'I was invited personally by Leif Ove Andsnes back in 2008. Risør is wonderful. I guess you could call it a fishing village; lots of wonderful scenery and the local people are very committed to the festival, and the church where almost everything happens is always full.'

All pianists work on technique; why do you think yours is so special?

'That I really can't answer, and in many ways it should not matter because it is the end result that really should be coming through. I do everything I can to present the music in its purest form to audiences and that, of course, includes rounding out all rough edges and rough corners.'

Clearly it is a product of hard work.

'Oh, of course it is, but there is a lot of predisposition involved as well.

I mean, if I did not have a mind for music, it would be a lot more difficult. When I started lessons when I was five, it was clear from the beginning that I possessed a certain facility that made everything easier and the assimilation process, both mental and physical, much less arduous.'

You seem to have managed the impossible – a contemporary composer with a complex technique who writes music that people might actually like.

'Well, that's good. When I started to write I had a very definite penchant for atonality, because in my teens that is what I was mostly preoccupied with. But then I found I was more comfortable – and that goes with some of my repertoire proclivities – with music that is basically tonal, but either very chromatic or in extended tonality. And that is how I tend to write most of the time.'

Having mastered playing very difficult music, is easier music, like, say, Haydn, less satisfying?

'No, not at all. Because, I mean, technique is really the means to an end. [Sighs] It also depends what you mean by "technique", because it is

kind of a misused word. When people say "technique" they mostly mean "mechanics". Technique is the whole arsenal of means at one's disposal to realise an artistic vision, whether it be mental or corporal. Now, if people talk about my technique as far as this definition is concerned, then that is very flattering – it shows that my artistic aims are being realised – but if they only mean mechanics, then maybe they are not listening as much as they should.'

Did you practise much harder than your childhood peers?

'I'm not sure I was that much of a hard practiser, but I had some very good exercises at my disposal; my father had lots of exercise books. But I think I did have a predisposition; I mean, having perfect pitch right away helps a great deal, and I seem to have a very good capacity for absorbing just about anything, and this got me to develop abilities to solve problems very efficiently.'

Of the current crop of pianists, who do you find most inspiring?

'I just bought Radu Lupu's complete Decca recordings as a box set and I have been re-listening to them, and to me there is no doubt in my mind that he is one of the all-time greats.'

Some critics say you are the best pianist since Leopold Godowsky.

'Well, you know I can't really say anything to that.' [Laughs]

Do you read your reviews?

'Oh yes, I read whatever I can – it's impossible to read everything. Every so often you don't get the feeling that you've really been understood. I keep being referred to as a "virtuoso", and that is a double-edged sword, really, because I seem to have a reputation for playing difficult things and people automatically assume that I play difficult things because they are difficult and I want to prove myself. Now, that's just completely silly. I am concerned with sharing good music with audiences and that's it. I'm concerned with sharing the miracle of human creativity on stage and that is all I go on stage for. I don't go there to show myself – I am really way above

that – it may have been the case when I was much younger, but I think that's natural. I am way past that stage. [Laughs]. Music is such an immense field of wonder and mystery, and just to have that at our disposal is something we should be thankful for every minute of the day. And

what better occupation can there be to be able to share that?'

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Marc-André Hamelin plays at the Risør Festival of Chamber Music Highlights at Wigmore Hall, **Fri Nov 26-Sun Nov 28.**

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