

Marc-André Hamelin
by Jeremy Siepmann

Some people turning up for Marc-André Hamelin's recitals in the 2007-2008 season may think that they have come to the wrong hall. Haydn-Schumann-Debussy? What's this? No Roslavets, Kapustin, Sorabji or Wolpe? No Ornstein, Feinberg or Catoire? No Rzewski or Eckhardt-Gramatté? The fact that fewer and fewer people will look at those names and say 'Who?' is one of the great achievements in Hamelin's career to date. No pianist of our time has won a wider audience for undeservedly neglected modernists (some of them dating back a hundred years and more). Most of their works, certainly most of those championed by Hamelin, have at least two things in common: they are unbelievably hard to play, and scarcely anyone had ever heard them till Hamelin came along. The two things, of course, are related. It's because they are unbelievably hard to play that almost nobody knows them. It's not because they are unbelievably hard to play that Hamelin plays them. It's because they engage both his pianistic and his musical interests. It's because he believes in them, because they convince him, because he thinks (and his experience bears this out) that they offer something of serious interest to the listener. That they also offer very great pleasure - in his hands, anyway - is another factor. Mr. Hamelin likes his audiences to enjoy themselves. They oblige without difficulty. What beggars belief is what he does (or appears to do) without difficulty.

For many (these things are not objectively verifiable), Marc-André Hamelin is quite simply the greatest virtuoso of our time. He is also one of the most elusive. Or at least the nature of his virtuosity seems to be. In an article for *The New Yorker*, Alex Ross wrote that 'Hamelin's hands are among the wonders of the musical world. No living pianist is capable of playing more notes more clearly in a shorter span.' That description better suits the *Studies for Player Piano* by Conlon Nancarrow (a great influence on Hamelin, as it happens, but as a composer more than as a pianist). To Hamelin, such statements are disturbing, representing, as he puts it, 'the farthest possible thing from what I'm about as a musician and as a performer.' William Aide, himself a remarkable pianist, puts the matter in an altogether different perspective, by adopting a different vocabulary, when he writes 'Marc-André Hamelin controls the most heart-stopping hands on the planet.' The two key words there are 'controls' and 'heart-stopping'. What controls those hands is a combination of powerful musical instinct, a very acute and well-trained musical mind, and an unflinching devotion to artistry at the highest level. And 'heart', stopping or otherwise, has everything to do with it. Hamelin does what he thinks, what he feels, is required by the music. He takes his orders straight from the composer. He is not a show-off, and has no need to be. One aspect of his effect on audiences, whether in the hall, the living room or the iPod, was well described by Tamara Bernstein after a concert in Toronto. 'His seemingly limitless technique,' she wrote, 'gave an exhilarating sense, not of the pianist's own powers, but of the potential of the human spirit.'

In both manner and musicianship, Hamelin is a genuinely (though never exaggeratedly) self-effacing artist. His career is not the most important thing in his professional life. Performing is. Had fame and fortune been his consuming desire, he could have had both, long ago. He is not indifferent to either, and would seem to be enjoying his present eminence, but it has never been his goal. If it had been, then he has proved himself a reassuringly terrible strategist. If you want to pack the biggest halls worldwide, if you want to top the record charts, if you want your name rubbing shoulders with the Hoover and the biro, then not only do you avoid any, let alone all, of the composers named above, you steer clear, too,

of such names as Busoni, Reger, Medtner, Alkan, Godowsky, Szymanowski, Dukas, Grainger, Villa Lobos, even Albeniz, Scriabin, Barber and Ives. And still, despite the influence of Bolet and Brendel, you think twice about Liszt. Add these names to those above and you not only have a representative cross-section of Hamelin's prodigious repertoire, you have also, perhaps, an explanation as to why he is looked at askance by some, and not at all by some who should know better. The world of music is as full of cynics as any other, and there are, or have been, those who suggest that Hamelin has been running scared of the mainstream, of the really 'great' composers; that he is, in a phrase, not up to them. In recent years, he has given the lie to this calumny with a series of critically acclaimed recordings and performances of Beethoven, Haydn, Schumann, Schubert and Brahms, and the addition to his public repertoire, as evidenced here, of the second book of Debussy's *Préludes*. But, he points out, this is not a sudden discovery of the traditional repertoire. He grew up with it, has never forsaken it, and never will. He has never stopped playing Mozart and Beethoven in public, but his main priorities, particularly where recording is concerned, have been elsewhere. He is deeply concerned by the over-exposure of a relative handful of works at the expense of the many, and what it represents. 'Most pianists simply don't realise how immense the piano repertoire is. Of course, there's a lot of junk out there, but there's also a lot of good stuff that's consistently side-stepped.' And it's the good stuff, and only the good stuff, that Hamelin has always been concerned with. By widening our awareness of the repertoire he has widened the repertoire. His hope is that other pianists will also take it up - that what was neglected will now live. Among his stated goals in life is 'to make a dent in the course of musical appreciation, of musical awareness.' At 47, he is far beyond the dent stage.