

The Oregonian

## Classical music review Hamelin makes magic

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Marc-Andre Hamelin has long been a connoisseur's pianist, a low-key personality with titanic technique, a probing intellect and a taste for obscure corners of the virtuoso repertoire. An over-the-top encomium by The New Yorker magazine's Alex Ross a few years ago called him a legend, and placed his hands among the wonders of the musical world.

So the opening of his recital Monday night at Newmark Theatre, where he appeared courtesy of Portland Piano International, likely came as a surprise to listeners who haven't heard his recent Haydn recording. Instead of dark, roiling rapids of notes, the medium for a typical Hamelin thrill ride, the two Haydn sonatas were like delicate trickles into a crystalline pool.

They weren't the best part of the recital, but they were illuminating. The first, in F Major (Hob. XVI:23), began lean and sparkling, though also a bit brittle. Before long, however, his tone warmed and took on color and character. The Adagio sounded like a preview for the Chopin in the second half, with lyrical lines unfolding freely over broken-chord accompaniment, all glued together with plenty of pedal. The second sonata, in B-flat Major (Hob. XVI:41), was a fleet delight, fast and witty.

Hamelin's ability to vary his touch is key to teasing details out of the dense stuff for which he's best known, as he demonstrated in Alexis Weissenberg's "Sonata in a state of jazz." Imagine Liszt and Rachmaninoff collaborating on a suite of tango, Charleston, blues and samba, and you get the idea -- huge gestures and fingers flying all over the keyboard, animated by precise and driving rhythms. Pianophiles will rejoice to learn his recording of the piece has just been released.

Chopin's Barcarolle and Ballade No. 3 began the second half; Hamelin drew both in broad contours with ample rubato and a strong left hand for dark colors and plenty of heft. Two of his own pieces followed, an adaptation of Goethe's poem "Erlkonig" and an arrangement for left hand of a Tchaikovsky song; both revealed the influence of the late Romantic composer-virtuosos as well as Hamelin's own poetic sensibility.

The finale was a wild fantasy by Leopold Godowsky of Johann Strauss's "Wine, Women and Song," a punishing exercise in piano prestidigitation. One felt a little guilty putting Hamelin through it, as you might feel asking a chef who just made a fine meal to cap it off with the biggest, richest pastry ever. But one ate it up anyway.