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HAMELIN**

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If you were...

...a fictional or historical character, who would you be?

Da Vinci, because his creativity manifested itself in so many different ways

...a book?

Underground comics

...a drink?

Absinthe. I approached it because of the curiosity value, but I happen to like it very much!

...a film?

David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*

...a piece of music?

I'll give you a roundabout answer: the one I always wanted to write but will never be able to because my compositional abilities aren't good enough

...a food?

Sweetbreads

...a tempo?

Allegro con anima expression - 'with the utmost expression'

...a quality?

Openness

...a fault?

Laziness

Marc-André Hamelin is grinning from ear to ear. This is not altogether a surprise – throughout my meeting with the French-Canadian pianist, his animated face was most often wrapped up into smiles accompanied by an infectious laugh. I discover that his delight this time is because he has just come back from a successful trawl round London's Britten-Boosey & Hawkes shop 'score hunting'.

'I look for repertoire that is highly communicative to an audience and that I feel has a chance of survival after being brought out of obscurity. There's always more. It's just one fascination after another.' As his impressive 28-strong catalogue of Hyperion recordings attests (names such as Medtner, Kapustin, Roslavets and Alkan figure prominently in the his output), Hamelin is well acquainted with unusual music. 'The pleasure of the discovery is really half the thing. I don't go in knowing what I'm looking for – it's like walking into an antique shop full of all kinds of exquisite things – you take it home, polish it up and see what you can make of it.'

Hamelin certainly has 'polished up' a fair few of these undiscovered gems, on the way collecting three Grammy nominations, as well as a Gramophone Award in 2000 for his *Godowsky: The Complete Studies on Chopin Etudes*. He confesses to feeling more than a little dissatisfied by the fact that the concert scene tends to serve up the same things over and over again: 'The piano oeuvre is vast, there are always new things to be found. Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is an astonishing work but I don't care if I never hear it again! I fail to understand why all young pianists feel they have to present it in public.'

This reputation for delving into the unusual has encouraged fans and music lovers to approach Hamelin with obscure music. The widow of Canadian pedagogue and musician Alfred Laliberté bequeathed Hamelin her husband's vast collection of scores – a precious collection he was allowed to cherry-pick his way through. Sometimes he's approached after concerts. 'It might be with scores that people like and want to hear played. It doesn't always fit, but a few years ago a woman came up to me after a recital in Tokyo and presented me with about two-thirds of the 20th-century Bulgarian composer Pancho Vladigerov's piano music! If something is really good it will jump off the page at you – in this case it certainly did.'

The collecting bug

Born in Montreal, Hamelin studied at the Vincent d'Indy School of Music in Montreal and at Temple University in Philadelphia. He and his wife, singer Jody Karin Appelbaum (and a vast library) now make their home in Philadelphia. Hamelin may have picked up the collecting bug from his father, an amateur pianist and industrial pharmacist who adored collecting scores. 'My first exposure to Alkan's music came when I was something like seven or eight years old: My father had bought a score and recording and he sat me down on the sofa and we listened to it together. I was also aware of Godowsky's music from pretty early on. I remember sitting down with my father just looking at his scores one after the other – I was marbled-eyed with wonder. All that sort of music is as natural to me as Schumann because I was exposed to it around the same time.'


However, in spite of all the unusual sound-worlds that Hamelin inhabits, core repertoire is still at the heart of his playing, and Brahms, Bach, Schubert, Saint-Saëns and Mozart feature heavily in his schedule this year. 'I don't want to be known for playing Alkan all the time,' he admits. 'I derive huge joy from it, but it's certainly not the only thing I can do.'



I have recorded very little standard repertoire so people think that my repertoire is thus one-sided but that's not the case at all – I want as much if not more to record Mozart, and Beethoven.' So why hasn't he? 'It's a question of reputation. You have to put yourself in the mind of the record buyer,' he says, a little ruefully. 'Half of it is the expectation of what the recording is going to sound like. If people see Hamelin playing Beethoven they're going to say, "No way" – they're not necessarily going to think that I have something interesting to say with these things. My Schumann and Liszt CDs haven't sold badly, but someone like Alkan will inevitably sell more.'

It's a self-effacing remark but Hamelin sees it simply. He has a strong sense of feet-on-the-ground realism, a philosophical approach that lies alongside the confident laughter and good humour. But there is little need for caution in record buyers' minds. Hamelin's supremely sensitive yet staggeringly virtuosic playing has given Hyperion something to be very proud of: his recording of Ives's *Concord Sonata* and Barber's *Sonata* had all the critics cheering, and the disc enjoyed very healthy sales, while his Kapustin disc was Hyperion's second-best selling album last year. With two new Hyperion records

THE UNCOMMON TOUCH



Unusual music played unusually well: that's Marc-André Hamelin's trademark. But the cheerful French-Canadian pianist loves to play Beethoven too. **Nina Large** meets him

planned, perhaps his reputation will start to broaden. In December he goes back to his favourite recording studio, Henry Wood Hall in London, to record a disc of Haydn Sonatas. Early in 2006 he'll be recording the Brahms Piano Concerto No 2. One day he hopes it might be possible to record the last three Beethoven sonatas and the Schubert B flat Sonata.

Virtuoso ad absurdum

Hamelin's latest release is Isaac Albeniz's *Iberia*. It's virtuosic stuff, at points pushed to levels of absurdity, but that's all par for the course for Hamelin who routinely seems to make even the most fiendish of pieces bloom easily beneath his fingers. Critics are quick to remark on his formidable technique; indeed, *The New Yorker's* Alex Ross once said of him, 'No living pianist is as capable of playing more notes more clearly in a shorter space of time.' Hamelin, however, wishes he could get reviews that didn't always mention his technique: 'I would really like people to forget about my part in playing this; ideally I want them to listen to the music, full stop,' he says sincerely. 'I don't want them to listen to me. Giving a concert is all about sharing the miracle of human creativity through music and

in this case musical composition and I'm not there to show how wonderful I am.'

Hamelin divulges that he was bored by technical exercises as a child and still doesn't use them much ('every so often I go through a few scales to freshen up but it doesn't necessarily have a direct bearing on what I'm working on at the moment.') Instead he attempts to understand each work as an emotional as much as a physical entity, and it is undoubtedly this which ensures that, for all its musical pyrotechnics, Hamelin's music always sings from within. 'Bringing genuine poetry into what can sometimes be a circus act', is how critic Stephen Peritt described a Hamelin Wigmore recital a few years back.

For Hamelin technique is as much about polyphonic and timbral awareness as good octaves or good thirds. 'It's generally underestimated how much a good mind for music and a good ear has to do with good technical ability. You need a mastery of all the means necessary to realise the emotional message of a piece.' Pedalling is another: 'You need complete control of it. The pedal affords you with an infinite amount of tonal gradations, so much so that it's impossible to notate pedalling in the score. You have to pedal not with your foot but with ▶

'I don't want to be known for playing Alkan all the time. I derive huge joy from it, but it's certainly not the only thing I can do'



your ear. The pedals are the lungs of the instrument; it's what allows the music to breathe and it can do so much as far as the control of texture spreading of all manner of colour in your playing. To my knowledge there has not been a proper examination in writing of what the pedal can do, but I'm not sure that's even possible, because after a certain time it becomes so personal that much of it is impossible to describe.'

Hamelin believes that a huge part of technique is developing a capacity for solving problems. 'You have to have an arsenal of means to overcome hurdles in difficult pieces. If you can really concentrate your work and zero in mercilessly on your weaknesses in order to make them strengths, I really don't think that you have to spend 10 to 12 hours a day at the keyboard. Let's face it, what are you hoping to express through your music if you haven't had the time to live a normal life?'

Music on the mind

A love of good food, a delight in language (he is full of play-on-word jokes), two adored dogs (Niles and Frasier – photos were duly produced), and his wife all keep Hamelin 'normal', but even then he declares that he's 'always at least thinking about music.' In fact, he's always pretty much had music on his mind. 'I had a really good predisposition for music, so it was always very natural for me. But it wasn't until I started winning local competitions in my early teens that it became obvious that that's what I was going to do – even then I didn't have a picture of what a career would represent.'

I had always assumed that he must enjoy the challenges of playing difficult works, but he surprises me: 'I don't! I enjoy it when it really works, but I wish these pieces were really easy. I'm very lazy by nature. I keep saying this, nobody believes me, but it's true.' It's not a word that springs to mind for someone who seems to have a new record out every time you look and who spends his time clashing about Europe and the USA. 'I don't enjoy playing difficult music but if the music is really marvellous I will do everything that's necessary to bring it to the public, and *Iberia* is one example.'

Hamelin is diligent in his preparation of new works and tends to ignore the biographies and history books in favour of the score itself. 'It's essential that one at least tries to understand what a composer feels like and it's my firm belief that you

'I think it's generally underestimated how much a good mind for music and a good ear has to do with good technical ability'

can find it all in the score. You have to observe not only what is expressed but also what is implied by notation.' Artur Schnabel told his students to take a piece of music they knew and copy it on to manuscript page – something that Hamelin advocates as well. 'It makes you realise how many details you're missing and it acquaints you a little bit with the physicality and the process of notation, which I fear quite a few performers, especially young ones, completely take for granted.'

He is unlikely to listen to other recordings of a work he is learning, feeling that he can get a surer opinion of the piece by just looking at the music. 'Time and time again I will say, "Oh my God! I didn't know it was written like this, it's always played so differently – *That's* what it's supposed to sound like!" There are certain traditions that have sprung up about certain passages in some pieces that really stray away from the scores – it's amazing!' He exclaims, 'In the 'Emperor' Concerto, for instance, there is a section in the first movement in which there's an eight-measure passage when the music gets to C flat major where everything slows down to a crawl – it's a tradition that has absolutely no musical basis!'

Black dots

Taking Schnabel's approach one step further and actually composing something is another way Hamelin works. Hyperion has released two discs that include his own music and a few years back he was commissioned to write a piano quintet by a music festival in Canada. 'Since I first discovered music I've always had the impulse to feel what it's like to put these black dots on paper,' he says. 'It can be very illuminating. It teaches you to determine how each composer understands the science of notation, and they all understood it differently.'

Improvisation is closely linked to this, and Hamelin confesses that his CD player at home largely plays jazz and experimental rather than classical music. Cadenzas offer a chance for pianists to represent their understanding of a work and even allow performers to take the music in a direction that it wasn't necessarily going to go to in – something that very much appeals to Hamelin. 'I've written a couple of cadenzas for Mozart concertos that are really quite unusual because most of them verge into atonality, but they are sufficiently related to the character of the rest of the movement that they become justified. The slow movement of the E flat Concerto K271 has a very contained tragedy, and when the cadenza comes I've made it this massive build-up over the space of three minutes that quietly dies down – in a way it's a kind of exteriorisation or explosion of what has remained within the whole movement.'

Above all, Hamelin remains a deeply committed performer. 'I would like people to trust me to produce something that will be really viable and authentic as far as the composer's intentions are concerned. Ultimately you can forget the theatrics and whether it's a well-known piece or not. It's all about the music and that's what I hope I'll always be part of.' ■

Marc-André Hamelin plays a programme of transcriptions at the Lichfield Festival (12 July), the Petworth Festival (22 July), the New York International Keyboard Festival (30 July) and the Ravinia Festival (24 August). He performs Liszt's Totentanz with the New York Philharmonic under Bramwell Tovey (30 June & 1 July), and tours with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra and Neeme Järvi in September and October.