

## Cleveland International Piano Competition Concert Series: catching up with Marc-André Hamelin

by Daniel Hathaway



Montréal-born pianist Marc-André Hamelin will play a recital on the Cleveland International Piano Competition Concert Series at the Cleveland Museum of Art on Tuesday, March 21 at 8:00 pm. His first local recital since 2010 includes sonatas by Haydn, Beethoven, Scriabin, and Chopin, in addition to works by a lesser-known Russian composer, Samuel Feinberg.

I reached the affable pianist-composer by telephone at his home in Boston to ask about his current activities, and to collect some insights into his Cleveland program.

*Daniel Hathaway: You're having a very busy year that includes an extensive tour with Leif-Ove Andsnes, serving on the jury of the Van Cliburn Competition — for which you've written a required piece — and performances of one of your compositions with the Pacifica Quartet.*

Marc-André Hamelin: The two-piano tour with Leif-Ove Andsnes in March and April includes thirteen concerts in Europe and the United States, plus a CD recording in the middle. The Stravinsky *Rite of Spring* is going to be the big draw.

*DH: Have the two of you played together frequently?*

MAH: Yes, and it all started when Leif-Ove invited me to his chamber music festival in Risør, Norway back in 2008. We met over breakfast in London to talk over repertoire and immediately I said, we've got to do the *Rite of Spring*. He wasn't familiar with the piano arrangement, but he really took to it. We did some concerts before playing it there, and we toured it in 2010. All told, we must have

performed it ten or twelve times already, including during a residency he had at the Berlin Philharmonic.

You won't hear all the colors of the orchestral original — that's for sure — but I think the arrangement for piano really has rewards of its own. Like almost every orchestral piece that came out at the time, it was published in a four-hand arrangement to make the piece better known. In this case, the four-hand version had a dual purpose: it was also used for ballet rehearsals. Because it wasn't designed for concert use, some of the passages are not very feasible. It works much better on two pianos, which is what we're going to do. If you play it on one piano, there's a lot of room for collisions.

*DH: That's a lengthy tour with a lot of playing. How do you stay well?*

MAH: We're going to find out! (laughing)

*DH: Tell me about your activities with the Pacifica Quartet.*

MAH: About a month and a half ago, I premiered my own piano quintet with them, which was a commission from the Orange County Music Association in Costa Mesa. They seemed to really like the piece, and we are going to do it in other places as well.

*DH: And that piece for the Cliburn competition. Is that finished?*

MAH: The competition is in May, so I assume the contestants already have the piece in hand. I can't talk too much about the piece because it has to be fresh for them, but I think it's really going to be a test of their musicianship as well as their instrumental ability. I would like them to be as musical as possible. Unlike previous years when a piece was only played by semifinalists, this year everybody is playing it in the first round. It's going to be heard at least 30 times. Since the competition is going to be streamed live, the whole world will have a chance to get sick of the piece — including my fellow judges, who I hope will be kind to me.

*DH: Wow. At a wine tasting, you have opportunities to cleanse the palate. What do you do as a juror to freshen your ears?*

MAH: You can't spit out my piece, so you'll just have to endure it! (laughing)

*DH: We should talk about your Cleveland recital. You're going to be playing two sonatas by Samuel Feinberg.*

MAH: He's certainly well-known in Russia, where he died in 1962, but even there he's not played very much. Although he wrote a significant amount of music, almost all of it for piano, he's most remembered today as a beloved teacher at the Moscow Conservatory. Feinberg left us quite a number of wonderful recordings, among them a complete *Well-Tempered Clavier*. He was the first one in Russia to play it complete and record it. To my mind, it's among the very best, if not *the* best recording of the work.

*DH: I understand you're planning to record the Feinberg sonatas. What are the two you'll be playing here like?*

MAH: You can still trace a lot of Scriabin influence there, along with a lot of individuality. But as you go on in time, Feinberg's language becomes less and less relatable to anything. By the fourth, fifth, and sixth sonatas, he really sounds like no one else but Feinberg. It's still a tonal language, but very tenuously so. There's an awful lot of chromaticism and in some cases, very dark and disturbing moods, although by all accounts he was a very positive and wonderful person.

*DH: Speaking of Scriabin, you'll be playing his "White Mass" sonata here next week.*

MAH: When I say that Feinberg resembles Scriabin, it's mostly middle Scriabin. Late Scriabin is almost another type of music altogether. The Scriabin 7th is an old friend, one of the most successful of the late sonatas, and I don't think it's played enough. It's certainly one of the most coherent, but also one of the most strikingly original. I've always enjoyed playing it very much.

*DH: Do you find Scriabin sometimes incoherent?*

MAH: Not incoherent, but I've never understood the relationship between the writing itself and its inspiration. There's all this mystical background to his late works, but four out of five of these sonatas are in very recognizable sonata form, with key relationships and everything. So there was a lot of conscious craft, and a good deal of traditional thinking behind them — they weren't pure flights of fancy. That's an interesting thing to consider when you're examining these pieces.

*DH: Any other comments about your Cleveland program?*

MAH: I'm overjoyed to return to the Museum. I remember my first time there, when I played the complete *Iberia* back in 2004 or 2005.

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