

Marc-André Hamelin at Severance (Nov. 19)

by Peter Feher



If Marc-André Hamelin had never studied music, he might have become a great novelist instead. At least, that was the impression that the expert Canadian pianist gave during an engrossing solo performance in Reinberger Chamber Hall on November 19.

Hamelin's program, perhaps the most ambitious entry in The Cleveland Orchestra's recital series at Severance Music Center this season, offered a master class in sensitive storytelling.

And the narrative brilliance had everything to do with the alchemical mix of performer and repertoire. On Sunday, Hamelin tackled three multi-movement works whose composers shared a couple of important inclinations. They all were good, but not great pianists themselves, and they all wrote programmatic music, or pieces that tell a story.

Hamelin has made a specialty of interpreting the technically demanding works of composer-performers, some of whom crafted pieces more challenging than they could actually play. He can render a note-perfect reading of such music while remaining remarkably calm. Where other virtuoso pianists prioritize flashiness and personality, Hamelin emphasizes character and clear expression in the same way a skilled novelist does, detailing idiosyncrasies and conveying a perspective while never too strongly identifying with it.

Nowhere were the virtues of this approach more apparent than in the opening piece of the afternoon, Charles Ives' *Concord Sonata*. A musical synthesis of the intellectual and artistic life of one Massachusetts town, Ives' work is still unwieldy a century later. The composer certainly complicated matters with his own book about the piece, *Essays Before a Sonata* — which, though more than 100 pages long, never explicitly states the

relationship between his music and the figures in the American Transcendentalist movement who inspired it.

Characteristically, Hamelin brought a sense of order to this complex 45-minute composition (which he performed from memory, as he did the entire program). This didn't mean smoothing over the rough edges. He dug into the dense harmonies of the first movement, "Emerson," for an account that was ruminative, digressive, and at times ponderous — much like the writings of the philosopher himself. In lightning-fast contrast, "Hawthorne" had the pianist using every fantastical tool in his arsenal, including a block of wood that the score calls for at one point.

The simple hymn tunes that Ives borrowed for "The Alcotts," maybe his most famous five minutes of music, provided welcome serenity. And the meditations of the final movement, "Thoreau," sounded distinctly impressionistic in Hamelin's interpretation, nicely setting up the recital's second half.

Vivid characters gave way to striking scenes. Robert Schumann, one of the 19th century's foremost proponents of programmatic music, was nonetheless wary of providing too much literary detail in his score for *Waldszenen* (Forest scenes) lest it restrict a listener's imagination. Hence, the piece is dotted with enigmas, notably in the beguiling movement "Vogel als Prophet" (Bird as prophet), which Hamelin played with an impeccable balance of precision and mystery.

Maurice Ravel never shied away from extra detail, and in *Gaspard de la nuit*, you can follow beat for beat the lines of the lush poems by Aloysius Bertrand that inspired each movement. The result is one of the most extravagantly ornate and difficult works in the standard piano repertoire, and Hamelin was just the performer to pull it off.

His prolific touch allowed the sensitivity and intelligence in Ravel's style to come through and also meant he still had plenty of energy left for a pair of encores — C.P.E. Bach's *Rondo in c* and Claude Debussy's "Reflets dans l'eau," both pieces of pure pianism.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 7, 2023.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)