

Pianist Marc-André Hamelin traces ‘thoughtful evolution’ of piano at Severance (May 5)



By Peter Feher|Cleveland Classical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Franz Joseph Haydn was one of the first composers to recognize the untapped potential in a promising new keyboard instrument called the fortepiano, which, as the name suggested, could play both loud and soft.

By the time that Sergei Rachmaninoff was writing his most virtuosic piano works some 150 years later, he had exploited the full sweep of the instrument, from crashing bass chords to glassy high notes of exquisite fragility.

The technical breakthroughs made at the keyboard over this period can all too easily be taken for granted in the 21st century, with many of today’s leading soloists achieving correctness at the cost of artistic expression.

But there’s hardly any hint of that compromise in the playing of Marc-André Hamelin. As far as perfection goes, the 64-year-old Canadian pianist has set an unparalleled standard, even in fiendishly difficult repertoire that few others would dare touch. And yet, mastery of the piano is a deeply personal matter for him, as he intimated in his impeccable performance on Tuesday, May 5, at Severance Music Center.

Hamelin's solo program — the final installment in the Cleveland Orchestra's 2025–2026 recital series in Mandel Concert Hall on May 5 — traced both the spectacular evolution of his instrument and his own thoughtful development as an artist.

The evening began in the Classical era, as well as in Hamelin's childhood, with an illuminating account of Haydn's Sonata in D Major, Hob. 16:37. A decent piano student could pull this piece together, whose three succinct movements are a study in quick contrasts of articulation and character. But only an elite performer could return to the score decades later and rediscover such delights while dispatching every stream of 16th notes at bravura, breakneck speed.

What comes next for a prodigiously gifted student? This question was both asked and answered immediately after in Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 3, a work dedicated to his onetime teacher, Haydn. Although Beethoven goes bigger in every respect — four movements with faster scales, fancier trills, and a cadenza to boot — he still sounds a lot like his mentor here.

The humor and playful sense of experimentation that Haydn and early Beethoven share can get lost in overly serious interpretations, but Hamelin maintained an expertly light touch with this music he knows inside and out.

He was just as engaged in less familiar fare that followed intermission. Mieczysław Weinberg's Piano Sonata No. 6, Hamelin's current recording project, centers on the Polish Soviet composer, and this new obsession served as a neat segue to the recital's second half. The chiming chords and unadorned melody of Weinberg's first movement are simple enough — child's play, in fact — but the technical demands soon ratchet up in a frenetic finale that teeters thrillingly on the edge of falling apart.

Of course, Hamelin kept it all under control. He continued to show remarkable calm as the program roared to its conclusion in Rachmaninoff's Sonata No. 2. This work features some of the Russian composer's most monstrous passagework, yet every section emerged with startling shape and clarity in Hamelin's hands.

It helped that he was using Rachmaninoff's revised 1931 version of the score, which mercifully cuts several minutes of keyboard chaos. Hamelin offered an impassioned alternative — the composer's Etude-Tableau Op. 39, No. 5 — as a prelude of sorts before the sonata proper.

An extra piece was no sweat for the pianist, who finished the evening with three encores: a lavish pair of selections from Claude Debussy's Preludes, Book 2 (“General Lavine, Eccentric” and “Fireworks”) and then a deceptively delicate miniature by Hamelin himself (“Music Box”).

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