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Composer Marc-André Hamelin discusses his commissioned piece for the Cliburn

By Punch Shaw
Special to the Star-Telegram
May 23, 2017 11:46 AM

When Cliburn president and CEO Jacques Marquis wanted a certain pianist to serve as a juror and also write a new work for the competitors in the 15th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, he went to extreme lengths to seal the deal.
In his words, he “seduced” Canadian pianist Marc-André Hamelin.

“I tried to have him on the jury [at another piano competition] many, many times,” says Marquis, pointing out that it is extremely difficult to get busy concert pianists like Hamelin to commit to the Cliburn’s marathon schedule. “He said he didn’t do juries, which was another thing that I liked. When I asked him to be a juror here, though, he seemed to be a little interested. And when I asked him to do the commissioned work, I think I seduced him at that point.”


At all previous Cliburns, the specially commissioned work was performed by only the 12 semifinalists. But in this year’s competition, which begins Thursday at Bass Hall, all 30 of the competitors will play Hamelin’s composition, “Toccata ‘L’homme armé.” And that is something that excites the internationally known pianist, who has been composing since his teens.

“I am primarily a pianist. But I’ve found that over the years, it is essential to compose,” says the 55-year-old Hamelin. “Most composers are happy to have one performance of their piece. This piece is going to be heard 30 times, streamed live on the internet, and also be available on demand anytime. That means that this piece is probably going to have the most exposure of anything I will ever write. And for a composer, that is really golden. I can’t wait.”

While Hamelin’s five-minute work will be brand new to the Cliburn competitors, it has an ancient pedigree.

“‘L’homme armé’ is a song from the French Renaissance,” says Hamelin. “It is the basis for several Masses.”

And although his source piece has sacred roots, it may be devilishly hard to play.

“I tried it, and it is way too difficult for me,” says Marquis, who is an accomplished pianist himself. “Knowing the quality of his work as a composer, I knew it would be challenging. But I think it is important that young pianists play new works like this. There are going to be times in their professional careers when they will be asked to learn pieces new to them very quickly.”

But at least one person feels that the piece is no problem at all.

“I certainly don’t think it is more difficult on the digital level than any Rachmaninoff prelude, for example,” says Hamelin. “My goal was, principally, to write good music. And I wanted it to be understood by the competitors as well as possible. I am much more interested in that than any display of virtuosity.”

At first glance, it may seem that requiring all 30 of the competitors to perform the commissioned work creates an additional burden for all of the pianists. Previously, only a dozen of them had to be able to perform the work. But, in reality, all past competitors have had to arrive at the competition with the commissioned work in good shape, just in case they made the semis.

“If I studied a piece, I wanted to play it. Now everybody is learning it, and everybody is playing it,” says Marquis.

Another difference about this competition’s commissioned work is that it is the first in the event’s history which was not composed by an American. Although he has lived in Boston for the past 10 years, Hamelin hails from Montreal, which is also Marquis’ former home.

“Our goal is to be the premier competition in the world. We are international,” says Marquis. “[Choosing Hamelin] creates awareness of that. It sends the message of quality to the entire world.”
Pianist Marc-André Hamelin performed one of his own compositions at a Cliburn at the Bass performance Oct. 5, 2015. Joyce Marshall - Star-Telegram archives