

## International win turns Cultural Centre pianist's life upside down

By Brock Weir

Just a couple of years ago, Quebec native Charles Richard-Hamelin was enjoying what he describes as a 'nice, local career.' But, a lot can happen in a year or two. Now, 'all kinds of crazy things happen.' People wait outside concert halls for selfies, throw gifts on to the stage, conspiring for a very 'surreal' experience.

The fans of Charles Richard-Hamelin are a passionate bunch and the Aurora Cultural Centre hopes to instill a passion for his talent in the local community as they host the pianist for an evening of Chopin this Friday.

Richard-Hamelin is the first artist to kick off this season of the Centre's Great Artists Piano Series, sponsored by Grammy Award-winning Aurora artists Bonnie and Norbert Kraft.

Fresh off a world tour, Richard-Hamelin's world was turned upside down last fall when he won the Chopin International Competition in Warsaw, Poland, the renowned biennial piano contest.

'This really is the Olympics of piano,' he tells The Auroran. 'I went in with no expectations. I was just so happy I was selected to participate. In Warsaw, I felt more at ease and at home and I was able to control my nerves and it really changed my life. In a year, I have played about 80-something concerts in 12 different countries all thanks to this award and it put me on the map for what seems to be a really nice concert career for now.'

'There is no guarantee that it will last a long time, but I am certainly going to make the most of it!'

Having your name thrown around everywhere on the musical scene, not to mention being mobbed by fans around the world? particularly in Asia? is something to get used to. It keeps him on the road quite a bit, he admits, but says it is a 'small price to pay for being a musician earning a living. It is the best thing to hope for.'

Richard-Hamelin first became interested in the piano around the age of four. His father, also a pianist, sowed those first seeds and, with the help of a teacher, a passion was cultivated. By the time he reached his teens, he realised that having a passion? and a talent? is not enough. 'You have to put in the hard work and the hours to turn it into something more.'

'Often, I didn't like it so much,' he says. 'When I fell in love with practicing, that really opened me to reach a higher level of playing. Now, practicing is my favourite part of the day.'

This Friday night, however, is all about the performance? and particularly Chopin.

There are usually two kinds of pianists today, he explains: those with an affinity for Chopin, and those who gravitate towards Liszt. Both romantic composers, they are very different in their approach. Liszt, he says, is more 'extroverted, virtuosic and loud' while Chopin has a lot more subtlety. And that, he says, makes things a bit more challenging and fun.

'You cannot get away with a lot of faking in Chopin,' he says with a laugh. 'You cannot fake emotion or sensibility. It's a bit like The Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Chopin is a perfect introduction to classical music for a lot of people who aren't normally attentive to classical music, Chopin is really, to me, one of the best classical composers to get introduced to because it features a lot of the things people love in music. Melody is always very important. It is very singable, harmonically it is very interesting, and it is very impressive to see the natural virtuosity of his music is something that will appeal to a lot of people.'

'People who love jazz, for instance, love Chopin because his harmonies are very interesting, intricate and forward looking. I think people should try to, who don't necessarily know Chopin, should come to discover his music. What I am offering is a really wide perspective of his work from the small scale nocturnes to the really big third sonata. By the end of the concert I think you will have a really good idea of what Chopin is all about and hopefully it will light the spark that will lead the people to go to concerts even more and listen to the music of Chopin.'

Tickets for this Friday's concert (\$34 for adults and \$28 for seniors and students) are available through the Aurora Cultural Centre at 905-713-1818. For more on Mr. Richard-Hamelin and his latest CD, Beethoven, Enescu & Chopin: Works for Piano, visit [www.charlesrichardhamelin.com](http://www.charlesrichardhamelin.com).