

Intuiting the Rational: Marc-André Hamelin's Toccata on "L'homme armé"

Abstract. Commissioned as the imposed piece for the 15th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in Fort Worth, Texas, Marc-André Hamelin's Toccata on "L'homme armé" received many more public performances, and much more acclaim, than is typical of a contemporary concert work for solo piano. Written in a tonal but chromatic style, this fantasy on the famous French secular song of the 15th century asserts itself unambiguously as a work in F Minor both through the initial statement of the tune and the deployment of a *fortissimo* dominant pedal before the coda. Yet in the final bar there is a precipitous downward flourish with a firm landing on B Flat. While to end a work in a key other than the clearly established tonic is not unknown in music of the common practice period, it remains a violation of the principles of formal design that (as in the case of Chopin's Ballade Op. 38) is felt to require explanation. Here I argue that Hamelin's apparently spontaneous intuitive feint to the subdominant – which the composer characterizes as "a sudden unexpected open window to future possibilities" or a warning that the "armed man" is still at large – can also be rationalized as a tribute to an era when functional harmony had not been codified and a recognition of the significance of the perfect fourth as the melodic step that endows the "L'homme armé" tune with its identity. Compositional choices that strike the listener as surprising (and therefore intuitive) are not necessarily devoid of rational justification, even if composers are not immediately aware of the logic behind a decision arrived at intuitively. Hamelin's Toccata shows the ways in which *ratio* and *intuitio* are locked in a reciprocal relationship.

Keywords: Marc-André Hamelin, L'homme armé, Toccata on "L'homme armé," Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, Manos Panayiotakis, Guillaume Du Fay, Antoine Busnoys.

1. Status and characteristics of Marc-André Hamelin's Toccata on "L'homme armé"

1.1. Basic style

Marc-André Hamelin's Toccata on "L'homme armé" is as easily likened to solo piano concert music of the late 19th or early 20th century as it is distinguished from most art music written for this instrument in the late 20th century or the 21st. Finished on Dec. 29, 2016,¹ the work in one movement comprises 187 measures, lasts between four and five minutes, and is almost entirely tonal. It can be heard as a variant of sonata form with an introduction, abbreviated recapitulation and extended coda. The initial statement of the principal theme is unambiguously in F minor. At least 100 measures have key signatures (not including those in A minor). While the keyboard writing is demanding, it involves no preparation of the piano, electronics or extended techniques.

1.2. Conclusions in a key other than the tonic

Yet for all its apparent conservatism, Hamelin's Toccata veers sharply from common practice in one particular: it ends not in the fully established tonic of F but in B flat, the subdominant. While ending a work in a key other than the tonic is not unknown in canonical concert music of the 19th century, this choice typically fulfils specific expressive needs. The dominant ending of "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai" from Schumann's *Dichterliebe* reflects its introductory role in the song cycle; in the same composer's piano miniature "Kind im Einschlummern" from *Kinderszenen*, the subdominant conclusion portrays a child's falling asleep. Longer works that apparently begin in one key and end in another, such as Chopin's Ballade Op. 38, provoke detailed analysis and discussion, which typically involve a decision in favour of one of the rival tonics or, in the cases of symphony movements (and entire symphonies) by Mahler and Nielsen, invoke the principle of progressive tonality.

1.3. Expectation in the Toccata on "L'homme armé"

The Hamelin's Toccata differs from these examples by taking its harmonic detour after the deployment of a flamboyantly extended dominant pedal beginning at m. 166. This fairly demands a tonic resolution, and indeed receives one, in the form of a subdued perfect cadence in F major at mm. 175–176. Since there is no overt harmonic or programmatic justification for a supplementary cadence in another key, Hamelin's feint to the subdominant scans as an intervention of the intuitive on an otherwise rational scheme.

Here I argue that like many apparently intuitive incursions on rational procedure, this one can be linked to rational elements that explain why a listener might find the ending surprising and satisfying at once. Having

¹ The date inscribed at the bottom of the last page of the Peters edition.

interviewed the composer on three occasions, I shall be guided by his insights as well as my own observations. If not entirely congruent, my views and his converge in productive ways, which call into question the propriety of the confrontational word “versus” as it is integrated into the title of the 17th International Music and Theory Conference. Hamelin’s Toccata, I conclude, illustrates the interdependence rather than the opposition of the intuitive and the rational in music that merits repeated performance and hearing.

2. Marc-André Hamelin and the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition

2.1. The composer

A few words about the composer are warranted. Marc-André Hamelin was born in Montreal in 1961 and emerged in the 1990s as something of a cult figure because of his interest in composers of complex piano music – Charles-Valentin Alkan and Leopold Godowsky are examples – and his unsurpassed ability to play this repertoire. His discography on the British Hyperion label includes much standard repertoire. There are albums of Mozart and Haydn Piano Sonatas. But Hamelin’s international renown is for his work on the margins.

International is a fair word. Hamelin’s activities in November 2017 began with a recital in Carnegie Hall in New York and concluded with a recital in the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall in Moscow. The pianist is active also as a composer, mostly for solo piano and often, though not always, in a virtuoso idiom. When the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition sought a commissioned work (“the imposed piece”, as musicians usually call it) the organization turned to Hamelin, who was also on the jury. The music under discussion was the result.

2.2. Exposure and reception

As the commissioned work in a celebrated contest, the Toccata received 30 performances in the space of a few days in May 2017 by pianists of high calibre to substantial live and streaming audiences that most contemporary composers can only dream of.² Peters, the European publisher of John Cage and a house better known for avant-garde repertoire, printed the Toccata in time for the start of the competition. Despite technical difficulties beyond the abilities of an amateur, the sheet music sold more than 300 copies in the gift shop of the Bass Performance Hall in Fort Worth.³

The work proved popular among contestants as well. Twenty-one of 30 played it from memory, a formidable testament to its accessibility. “It is technically demanding, but the way the piece is structured and the way he introduces the theme and builds on it is really interesting,” was the comment of Daniel Hsu, 19, the Cliburn bronze medallist who also won the special prize for best performance of the commissioned work (Kaptainis 2017: D6). The professional pianist Mari Kodama, like Hamelin a member of the Cliburn jury, said she planned to add the Toccata to her repertoire (Kaptainis 2017: D6).

3. “L’homme armé”: Melodic and symbolic elements

Many readers will be aware that the secular Renaissance song on which the Toccata is based has been more beleaguered by rationalism than any tune in the history of music. Almost 50 composers used “L’homme armé” as the basis of a mass. Donald Jay Grout observed that “composers seemed to think that the Armed Man had issued a challenge to their ingenuity which they were obliged to accept on pain of professional disgrace” (Grout 1973: 114–116).

Richard Taruskin is not the only scholar to associate its 31 rhythmic units (roughly speaking, measures) to the 31 Knights of the Golden Fleece. He is quick to stress that this instance of symbolism and various others in Antoine Busnoys’s *Missa L’homme armé* of c. 1467 are “unavailable to the listening ear but can be easily grasped and relished by the rational mind” (Taruskin 2006: 495). Readers of his analysis of the Pythagorean relations that operate in this mass might question whether the adverb “easily” is justified. Peter Maxwell Davies in his *Missa super L’homme armé* of 1971 goes the Renaissance masters one better by writing a “mass” for speaker and ensemble in which percussion instruments are at the fore and the famous tune is almost never perceptible.

That tune, in ternary form and normally understood to be in the Dorian mode, is vigorous and memorable (Example 1).

² The Van Cliburn Competition claims an in-person audience of 40,000 for its 2017 events and video views of 4.8 million, including views through the medici.tv broadcast service (2017 Cliburn Competition).

³ Personal inquiry by the author.

Example 1. “L’homme armé”

The earliest known inscription of melody and text is the “Naples manuscript” discovered in 1925 by Dragan Plamenac in the Biblioteca Nazionale of this city.⁴ No definitive year of composition (assuming the song is not of folk origin) has been determined. Alejandro Enrique Planchart proposes late 1433 or 1434 as the earliest possible years on the grounds that this is when the membership of the Order of the Golden Fleece reached the necessary symbolic threshold of 31 (Planchart 2003: 312). He also settles on Guillaume Du Fay as the composer (Planchart 2003: 356).

The “armed man” has been variously decoded as Charles the Bold of Burgundy, Christ or the Saracen enemy that conquered Constantinople in 1453. Taruskin conjectures that the falling perfect fifth that so distinctively interrupts the flow the melody is in imitation of a trumpet call and evocative of court life in Burgundy (Taruskin 2005: 485).⁵ Plamenac in 1929 hypothesized that this figure was a remnant of a polyphonic elaboration rather than an integral part of the secular tune (Plamenac 1929: 376–383). Either way, it is useful as a melodic and rhythmic motif, as we shall see.

4. Toccata on “L’homme armé”: analysis

4.1. Thematic and harmonic characteristics

Hamelin’s Toccata begins with a two-bar *fortissimo* declaration based on the first seven notes (and four measures) of the B section of the “L’homme armé” tune (Example 2).

Example 2. Hamelin, Toccata on “L’homme armé,” mm. 1–2

In their declamatory style and decisive establishment of a dominant, these measures can be compared with the opening of another Toccata: Schumann’s. Fourteen bars of energetic semiquavers in alternating hands follow, including a trill on C in m. 13. This introduction prepares the ear for a faithful statement in the tonic, F minor, of the A section (Example 3).

After a partial restatement starting at m. 25, the right hand rises two octaves rather than one at m. 32, an ascent that emphasizes the independence of the B section. Three phrases end on a semibreve C. Modern ears can hardly fail to hear C as the dominant, despite the characteristic Dorian absence of a leading tone. Indeed, the dominant character of C is arguably redoubled by the closing of the “exposition” in the tonic at mm. 44–46, a peculiarity I shall consider later.

⁴ MS VI E 40, fol. 62v. See <https://www.diamm.ac.uk/sources/1013/>

⁵ Taruskin speculates that a “brass trumpet” purchased by the court in 1364 was still in use a century later (Taruskin 2005: 485).

The development, marked by the double bar at m. 47, begins with a statement of the main theme in the left hand. The descending-fifth fanfare appears at m. 61. There are accidentals and non-harmonic notes by the hundreds but rarely do we feel that the key eludes us. The cancelled flat at m. 66 denotes a modulation to A minor. We are in D minor at m. 85 and – significantly for my thesis – B flat minor at m. 91. There are also a few interludes of B minor, as at m. 106, following more than three bars of V.

Only in mm. 148–149, a sequence near the end of a long *crescendo* and aptly marked *frenetico*, is key identity disrupted. Even here a rising figure in the treble, coupled with a *crescendo*, stabilizes the musical narrative while propelling it forward. In any case, this brief episode of harmonic chaos is resolved promptly by the *fortissimo* assertion of F minor at m. 152, which I have identified, with the assent of the composer, as the recapitulation (Example 4).

Example 3. Hamelin, Toccata on “L’homme armé,” mm. 17–34

Example 4. Hamelin, Toccata on “L’homme armé,” mm. 152–163

4.2. Dominant pedal and cadence in the tonic

More harmonic than melodic, this greatly abbreviated recapitulation leads at m. 166 to what might justly be called the dominant pedal to end all dominant pedals, a thundering low C doubled at the octave that issues an unequivocal invitation to expect an equally affirmative expression of the tonic. In mm. 168–170 Hamelin has ingeniously combined the A and B sections of the melody in the right hand, with the B section on top. But mm. 166–175 are mostly about the assertion of the dominant with the lowest C available on the piano (Example 5).

In mm. 174–175 the top line reminds the listener of the rising fourth with which “L’homme armé” begins. Also in m. 175, a rare appearance by the leading tone, E, along with the dominant seventh, B flat, secures a feeling of having achieved a resolution in F major at m. 176. The key is reaffirmed in m. 178 and m. 180, albeit provisionally, as added notes introduce a subversive touch.

4.3. Tonic overturned

This is where we might expect playful post-cadential elaboration, possibly with fleeting modulations to related keys, before an unequivocal restoration of F. But rather than question the tonic, Hamelin overturns it at m. 182 with a *fortissimo* V–I cadence in B flat. The presence of the leading tone and dominant seventh leave no doubt of the new harmonic neighbourhood. Both hands rise in a flurry of semiquavers in mm. 184–185 to B flat in the treble, an ascent that is followed by a descending fifth in octaves in the left hand, Taruskin’s trumpet fanfare. Such a gesture, decisive in rhythmic profile and harmonic connotation, will have an air of conclusion to modern ears regardless of key. And thus Hamelin uses it, in the bass register at quadruple forte, to trump the tonic (Example 6).

Example 5. Hamelin, Toccata on “L’homme armé,” mm. 166–175

Example 6. Hamelin, Toccata on “L’homme armé,” mm. 176–187

Boston, December 29, 2016

5. Subdominant conclusion: discussion

5.1. Thoughts of the composer

The question is why. At this point I shall appeal to the composer, who supplied different answers on three occasions to the question: “Why does the Toccata end in the subdominant?” They are as follows.

- 1) “Because it does.”
- 2) “One could perhaps see it as a sudden unexpected open window to future possibilities. But that’s something I didn’t need to explain to myself.”
- 3) “Don’t stop worrying. This is a serious problem: the armed man.”⁶

The first apparently tautological answer in part reflects surprise at the question. Nonetheless, the answer has significant content. Its implication is that artistic choices are self-explanatory and require no formal justification even if they involve an apparent violation of expected procedure. One might compare the answer with Debussy’s oft-recounted (though difficult to verify) response to the registrar of the Paris Conservatoire who asked which rule the young composer would follow: “mon plaisir.”

Such logic is impregnable to challenges. But clearly Hamelin gave the matter further thought and a few days later offered the more illuminating second explanation, in which he recognizes in non-pejorative language that the subdominant conclusion can be viewed as a violation. He adds, however, that he did not perceive the ending as being irregular during the act of composition. The self-analysis is entirely after the fact.

His final answer, offered at a third interview months after the competition, invokes the 15th-century text, which advises listeners to be wary of the unidentified armed man, avers that the alarm is already widespread and recommends chain mail as protection. Few people hearing the Toccata would know the words. Nevertheless, the subject of the armed man and imminent danger he poses has a clear influence on (and perhaps determines) the stalwart and martial character of the tune. To modern and early-modern ears alike, “L’homme armé” surely does not sound like a love song. By ending his Toccata in B flat, Hamelin denies us the peace of mind and sense of finality that comes with a tonic conclusion for the good reason that the armed man is still at large. He might turn up anywhere (including the subdominant).

5.2. Further explanations

Hamelin’s explanations for the conclusion in the subdominant do not invoke melodic characteristics of the song or his harmonization of it. Yet there are significant “musical” aspects to be considered in assessing the effect of the ending.

First, the rising interval of a perfect fourth represents the inaugural thumbprint of the melody. An educated listener hearing the first three notes rendered in unison by a male chorus, even as vocalise, might reasonably guess the song to be “L’homme armé.” The strength of B flat as a melodic identifier⁷ inevitably privileges the key of which it is the tonic. Nor are exceptional powers of aural perception required to recognize the descending fifth of the final bar of the Toccata as an inversion of this inaugural rising interval. The inversion as embodied in the familiar “fanfare” phrase (the inherently conclusive nature of which I have discussed) creates a strong sensation of closure. One might even venture the opinion that the gesture closes the Toccata “because it does.”

Second, B flat minor is no stranger. I have mentioned its appearance in m. 91. There is another in m. 110. For 10 bars starting at m. 131, the left hand plays nothing but F’s and B flats. I do not propose that these appearances, whether fleeting or extensive, justify ascribing to the Toccata a double-tonic complex, even assuming that such a thing can exist. Nevertheless, the frequent visitations make B flat a more acceptable pretender to the tonic throne than other related keys might be. And the failure of the section I have identified provisionally as the exposition (mm. 7–46) to end in the relative major (and thus destabilize the tonic as it would in a traditional sonata allegro) paradoxically gives the tonic the sound of a host who has monopolized the conversation. The displacement, to some listeners, will come as a welcome one.

Finally, the unexpected shift to the subdominant pays homage to the modal character of the tune and recognizes its origins in an era when the need to end in the tonic was not entrenched. Innumerable works of the Renaissance begin and end in different keys. Often the terminal tonality is the subdominant. The most famous of all Renaissance masses, Palestrina’s *Missa Papae Marcelli*, offers a handy example. Its Kyrie opens in G and ends in C.

⁶ For a discussion of the identification of the armed man with the “Turk” see Wegman (1999): 175–214.

⁷ When performed in F. The more typical key is G.

C is also the key in which the work as a whole concludes.⁸ Palestrina's scarcely less admired *Stabat Mater* establishes A as the tonic with repeated cadences before ending in D.

As I have mentioned, "L'homme armé" is in the Dorian mode. This circumstance makes a detour away from the tonic more feasible for the modern listener than it would be in the case of a more conventionally diatonic melody with a leading tone. As Hamelin points out, the armed man of the mid-15th century remains a threat. He has not been captured or subdued. This is to say that he is unshackled by a leading tone. Furthermore, his escape via the subdominant is entirely consistent with the harmonic practice of his age.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Declining prestige of the tonic

Let me acknowledge in conclusion that my reasoning potentially involves a circularity. I have assumed that ending in the tonic is rational and that any other choice is intuitive. This assumption is not equally valid for all genres of music in all periods. Clearly the tyranny of the tonic is not what it once was for composers of concert music. Many contemporary works move up and down within a certain ambitus and change tempo and texture without ever establishing a key centre or creating a feeling of functional harmonic motion. Manos Panayiotakis has spoken of the search in the 1950s for an alternative to tonal tension and release and the appearance of C major at the end of Krzysztof Penderecki's otherwise atonal *Polymorphia* – a conclusion even more surprising in its context than Hamelin's subdominant in the Toccata.

It is common to hear jazz arrangements that end inexplicably in a key other than the tonic. Sudden modulations up a tone or semitone, ostensibly in the interest of heightening excitement, are clichés of popular music, as is the harmonically inconclusive fadeout. Most Sousa marches, including *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, end in the subdominant. This is a choice of convenience, since the B section of a Sousa march is typically in the subdominant. Nevertheless, failure to restore the tonic might also reflect in a subtle way the open-endedness of military music. Who can determine in advance when a battalion should stop its marching?

6.2. Balancing *ratio* and *intuitio*

All of these examples merit investigation. Yet as I have tried to demonstrate, Hamelin's Toccata occupies another aesthetic world. It behaves, until its final page, like a tonal piece of the common-practice period. It is, in short, the sort of work one expects to end in the tonic.

Opinions might differ on whether the Toccata's conclusion in the subdominant is fully satisfying. I regarded it as surprising on first hearing and felt the need to seek an explanation as to why it "worked." Without this element of surprise, there would, of course, have been no such quest. And surprise, by definition, is caused by a departure from expectation, which is itself established by schematic and rational order.

There are levels of listener satisfaction, which will vary according to the individual. In all cases, however, satisfaction is related to a balance of intuitive and rational procedures. Where the intuitive is absent, and the trajectory of music is entirely predictable, listening becomes passive and engagement is futile. Where rational antecedents are missing – as they arguably are in, for example, the more chaotic works of Charles Ives – the intuitive becomes a synonym for the irrational, and spontaneity becomes a euphemism for disarray. The appropriate proportion of the rational and intuitive in a given composition may be difficult to establish in objective terms. Nevertheless, this proportion will continue to determine, at least in part, the aesthetic merit individual listeners attribute to any piece of music.

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⁸ It needs to be borne in mind that like all masses of this era written for liturgical use, the *Missa Papae Marcelli* would not be heard as an uninterrupted composition.

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Racionalumo intuityvinimas: Marco-André Hamelino *Toccata* „L'homme armé“ tema

Santrauka

Marco-André Hamelino *Toccata* „L'homme armé“ tema, užsakyta 15-ajam Vano Cliburno tarptautiniam fortepijono konkursui, yra artimesnė XX a. pradžios solinių fortepijonių kūrinių stilistikai. Nors ir virtuoziškai parašytas, kūrinys yra beveik grynai tonalus, be elektronikos ar išplėstinių technikos priemonių. Dvidešimt vienas iš trisdešimties Vano Cliburno konkurso dalyvių 2017 m. gegužės mėn. atliko šį kūrinių mintinai. Prancūzų pasaulietinė daina „L'homme armé“ buvo viena iš labiausiai Renesanso meistrų plėtotų temų, o Hamelino *Toccata* gali būti traktuojama kaip sonatos formos variantas f-moll tonacija. Ši tonacija prieš pat pabaigą yra galutinai įtvirtinama dominantiniu pedalu (*fortissimo* dinamika) ir aiškia (nors ir kiek užslėpta) tobulą kadencija. Vis dėlto po jos eina dar viena tobuloji kadencija, B-dur tonacijos, o bosinė *si* nata yra eksponuojama *ffff* dinamika. Nors pabaigti kūrinių kita tonacija (nei aiškiai įtvirtinta tonika) nėra analogo neturintis reiškinys koncertinio repertuaro praktikoje, tai visgi yra formalios struktūros pažeidimas (kaip ir Chopino Baladės op. 38 atveju), kurį reikėtų paaiškinti atskirai.

Straipsnyje argumentuojama, kad akivaizdus spontaniškas nukrypimas į subdominantę (jį pats kompozitorius apibūdina kaip „staigų, netikėtą, atvirą langą su ateities perspektyvomis“ arba kaip įspėjimą, kad „ginkluotas žmogus“ vis dar aktualus) gali būti aiškinamas grynosios kvartos manifestavimu, juolab kad šis melodinis šuolis „L'homme armé“ dainos atveju yra vienas ryškiausių jos atpažįstamumo atributų; kartu tai ir duoklė erai, kai moderni funkcinė harmonija dar nebuvo kodifikuota ir perėjimai į kitas tonacijas (tarp jų – subdominantines) buvo įprastas reiškinys. Kompoziciniai sprendimai, kurie sukrečia klausytoją kaip netikėti (vadinasi, intuityvūs), nebūtinai neturi racionalaus paaiškinimo, net jei kompozitoriai negali iškart įvardyti už jų slypinčios tam tikros logikos. Hamelino *Toccatos* pavyzdys rodo glaudų *ratio* ir *intuitio* susipynimą ir byloja apie šio abipusio santykio svarbą gvildenant platesnius estetinius klausimus. Per daug racionali eiga be netikėtumo momento galiausiai kelia nuobodulį; pernelyg intuityvus procesas be jokio racionalaus pagrindo sukelia frustraciją. Klausytojai gali skirtis nevienodu šių aspektų proporcijų poreikiu, bet tam tikras balansas yra muzikos, kaip vertybės, kertinė sąlyga.