

HIROSHIMA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Hiroshima Bunka Gakuen HBG Hall 16.2.17

This year's Music for Peace Flagship concert was a heartening example of this wonderful city's mission of bringing together nations in friendship, with musicians from Poland and Canada joining the home Japanese orchestra for a programme involving all three countries.

Dai Fujikura's "infinite string" is a celebration of the range of timbres and attacks available to the armoury of a string orchestra, and occasionally highlights a solo quartet (much in the manner of Elgar and Vaughan Williams, to cite Western examples) against the tutti. Meticulously and enthusiastically rehearsed under conductor Kazuyoshi Akiyama, the piece was persuasively delivered.

The Canadian Charles Richard-Hamelin was soloist in Chopin's Second Piano Concerto. This was a smiling, rippling account, complemented by a delicate orchestral collaboration, but the whole performance needed much more personality projected from all involved.

And the same was true of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Technically its delivery was well-nigh impeccable, despite some fuzziness at the opening, and there were some praiseworthy highlights, such as the plaintive oboe solo in the first movement's recapitulation, the appropriately military-sounding horns and trumpets in the second movement, and the sturdy trombones (what a joy to hear the alto trombone here) in the finale.

But this performance remained earthbound by the text. This talented orchestra could surely have been persuaded to rise above merely playing the notes and inject some personality into what should be a shattering score.

It has to be said, however, that audience response was prolonged and enthusiastic. Perhaps the simple listener is less jaded than a critic who has heard this masterpiece countless times, and who expects something extra-special every time he hears it.

A few weeks ago I heard this symphony performed in Symphony Hall Birmingham by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra under their new music director, Mirga Grazinyte-Tyla, and that certainly was a galvanising account. One could almost touch the sense of enthusiasm from the players in the air. I'm sorry to say that compared with that, this was a mere runthrough.

Christopher Morley