

Concert Review: Beyond the Infinite

The Hiroshima Symphony Orchestra plays for peace.

by Paul J. Pelkonen

Since the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, this city has returned from its ashes as a symbol of international peace. On Thursday, February 16, the Hiroshima Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Kazuyoshi Akiyama offered this season's inaugural Concert For Peace, an evening of works by Beethoven, Chopin and Osaka native Dai Fujikura.

As a symbol of international cooperation, the orchestra was joined by guest musicians from The Sinfonia Varsovia in Poland and the Orchestre Symphonique de Montreal in Canada. In addition to the Montreal-born piano soloist Charles Richard-Hamelin, these musicians joined the brass, wind and string sections of the HSO, making key contributions to the evening's overall result.

The results were initially good. Dai Fujikura's one-movement Infinite String is a series of rolling, shuddering Doppler effects moving and metamorphosing across five sections of strings. A steady shiver amps up into a shattering roar, engulfing the listener before dwindling again. New pulses developed in the cellos and basses, adding rhythmic ideas and bringing weight to the rolling waves of sound. The playing was taut and precise.

Mr Hamelin ambled onstage, settling at the Steinway for the Chopin Piano Concerto No. 2. Following the opening tutti, he entered. All of his notes were in place, but more interesting playing was coming from the orchestral accompaniment. Mr. Akiyama explored the rich colors of the first movement with oboe and horn contributions from the out-of-town guests.

The next two movements were muddled and blurred. The slow movement meandered, and was followed by a mannered and somewhat cautious finale. An encore by Mr. Hamelin was Bach, again polite and precisely played.

Thus workaday approach continued in the second half of the concert, Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. This can be the Murphy's Law of classical music works where anything can go wrong and often does. To start with, a mis-step in the strings resulted in the famed opening chords echoing for half a beat, producing an unwelcome ricochet effect. From this awkward start, the famous movement developed dully and reluctantly, with interjections from the solo horn, bassoon and oboe failing to set matters right.

The middle movements were better, with the dragging Andante followed by a determined sounding march. However, blurry rhythms from Mr. Akiyama marred matters, despite crisp playing of the low strings. The orchestra charged into the final movement and its tutti brass fanfare. However, this energetic statement of purpose never managed to achieve liftoff.