

Concert Review

Bay of Plenty Symphonia

11 May, 2025

The Bay of Plenty Symphonia are to be congratulated for an outstanding Mother's Day concert at Holy Trinity Church on Sunday the 11th of May.

Under the baton of conductor Michael Joel, the orchestra's playing was both inspired and transformative.

The concert opened with Büsser's colourful orchestration of Debussy's well-known *Petite Suite, Op. 2* (originally written for four-hand piano).

An impressionistic work through-and-through, the work began confidently with the opening strains of the two great French instruments - harp and flute - setting the scene on calm, sunlit waters. Wonderfully luscious and muted string playing only served to enhance the impeccably balanced reeds who featured prominently throughout.

The second movement, both lively and dance-like, felt much like an animated conversation between the strings and the winds of the Symphonia, eventually swelling and culminating into a thrilling and utterly satisfying forte at the end.

The *Menuet* was intimate, charming and appropriately reminiscent of a courtly dance. The orchestra captured magnificently the character of the movement, employing some terribly delicate, subtle, yet precise playing.

The final movement, appropriately entitled *Ballet* was fantastically lively and very tidily played. The Symphonia captured well the spirit of the dances which permeate this movement and Maestro Joel held the orchestra in great control as they masterfully navigated the often unexpected changes in rhythm.

To complete the first half of the programme, the Symphonia performed Aaron Copland's famous 1944 Pulitzer Prize-winning ballet, *Appalachian Spring*. An ambitious and challenging piece of programming for this orchestra, it soon became evident after only a few bars, however, that this music was in skilled and competent hands.

Aside from the musical and technical challenges the work poses - namely the endless and unrelenting changes of timing - there are also the dramatic challenges - the painting of scenes, development of characters, the tableaux and vignettes.

It is perhaps here that the Symphonia excelled the most in their delivery of this unforgiving work, becoming storytellers extraordinaire.

From the first unmistakable bars of music, the audience was transported to a cool spring morning as the sun's first rays bid the sleepy mists retreat over the Appalachian mountains. And there the audience was all too happy to remain through the joys of a wedding, and the obvious celebrations to follow; the spectre of the civil war and the anxiety over the fate of one's loved one; and the village voices raised in triumphant praise in the great Shaker hymn, *Simple Gifts*.

Never has this reviewer heard finer playing from the Symphonia and one couldn't help but feel the musicians on stage attained new musical heights. They played with expressive power and purpose and with an obvious convincing determination to do great justice to the music and its drama. Bravo!

The concert's second half was dominated by Beethoven's great *Concerto for Violin, Op. 61* which featured guest violinist Lara Hall - a work that languished in obscurity for considerable time after its initial composition until being rescued by the great revivalist - Mendelssohn.

The first movement began with some uncharacteristically uncertain tuning amongst the reeds in the opening bars, but the orchestra quickly recovered to deliver an electrifyingly powerful introduction to Hall's solo.

The Beethoven violin can oftentimes sound laboured and oppressive, but Hall's light touch and sweet tone which was evident right from her first notes, was both refreshing and satisfying.

The second movement, a highlight, was wonderfully buoyant and warmly affectionate. Hall played with immense ease and grace - her notes always honeyed and floating in the air, ghost-like in the auditorium of Holy Trinity. She was supported with a restrained confidence by Maestro Joel and the Symphonia with tremendous sensitivity and empathy.

The second movement flowed flawlessly into the rollicking joy and optimism of Beethoven's third movement, complete with the thrilling hunting horn theme convincingly delivered by the Symphonia horns. Hall's virtuosic mastery of her instrument, though never for a moment in doubt, shone through radiantly in this final movement. From the perfection of her smallest pianissimos effortlessly placed so precariously high on the finger board to the ridiculously exciting final cadenza, Hall was calmly in control. Behind her chugged the faithful engine of Joel and the Symphonia, never understated and ready to take a commanding and powerful control at all the right places.

Maestro Joel and the Bay of Plenty Symphonia are to be commended - heartily commended - for making a decisive and transformative step forward as they progress in their music making here in Tauranga. Bravo bravissimo.

Tauranga music-lovers are implored once more to get behind and support the local treasure which is the Bay of Plenty Symphonia as they undeniably and excitingly move from strength to strength. Be sure not to miss the Rising Stars Concerto Competition on Sunday, July 27th at Graham Young Theatre at Tauranga Boys College

Chalium Poppy
Tauranga, 2025