

Concert Review

Bay of Plenty Symphonia

16 November, 2025

The Bay of Plenty Symphonia are to be heartily congratulated for a spectacular concert delivered at Baycourt's Addison Theatre on Sunday, November 16th.

Under the accomplished baton of newly-appointed conductor, Michael Joel, the orchestra reached new musical heights as they led a large, appreciative audience through a concert of landscapes.

Rather appropriately, the journey began right here at home with Douglas Lilburn's 1940 composition written to celebrate New Zealand's centenary, *Aotearoa Overture*.

Lilburn's gentle beginning, beautifully introduced by the synchronous Symphonia flutes of Pauline Logger and Adele Dixon, feels something akin to the warmth of the sun rising, as its long rays stretching out, touching field and valley.

From there, the work quickly began to build, despite some early tentative and disconnected playing from the violins. The firsts and seconds soon found their footing though and were very shortly delivering Lilburn's vast sweeping themes with confidence and power, illuminating New Zealand's wild and at times solitary landscape.

The centre of the *Overture* featured some exquisitely attractive playing from the Symphonia winds and some warm, rich Vaughan Williams-inspired pastoral moments for the strings.

One writer likened the impact of this work to "viewing New Zealand for the first time, as early settlers might have done when approaching its coastline after several months at sea".

If this is true, then under his masterful and indefatigable baton, Maestro Joel, as ship's captain, slowly and deliberately navigated the Symphonia to a safe harbour and a happy homecoming - Lilburn's utterly satisfying climactic ending.

The first half of the concert was dominated by Saint-Saëns' *Fifth Piano Concerto, Op. 103*, and featured one of New Zealand's brightest musical stars, pianist, Shan Liu.

Nicknamed "The Egyptian", the *Fifth Piano Concerto* was written some twenty years after his *Fourth Piano Concerto* and would be his last. Saint-Saëns, a frequent traveller to the north of Africa, composed the work while holidaying in the ancient city of Luxor, and thus, the work is rich with exotic influence.

With no real introduction from the Symphonia, Liu immediately set about introducing a simple and optimistic theme which quickly increased in vitality and perplexity with each new variation.

Liu's mastery over his instrument was instantaneous and indisputable from his first measured arpeggios - never-showy, despite their difficulty - always maintaining restraint and control.

Technically challenging, and first performed by the composer, himself, Liu made effortless work of the first movement. Captivated by his cheerful demeanour and understated virtuosity at the piano, Liu held his audience in thrall.

Throughout the first movement, Liu was ably supported by Maestro Joel and the Symphonia which accompanied with broad expression, deep passion, and fantastic determination - all of which culminated in the most sublimely perfect final two staccati chords!

The second movement, traditionally the softer and more reflective movement of a concerto, began quite literally with a bang from the Symphonia timpani and was soon punctuated by some strikingly aggressive

and robust string playing. The orchestra, never wanting to feel understated, featured fantastically crisp syncopated rhythms. Perhaps the most “Egyptian” of all the movements, Liu’s piano part captured succinctly the drama and the mystery of this land of hidden secrets. Some rather terrifying yet magnificent tremolo diminuendos at the end are said to be representative of the Nile crickets, chirping. What a magnificently inspired pianistic and orchestral effect this was!

In an interview with the Symphonia in preparation for this concert, the young Lui was asked why he selected Saint-Saëns’ *Fifth Piano Concerto*, to which he replied, “What I love is its vibrant energy...”. Apt words to describe his own subsequent performance of the third and final movement which displayed truly dizzying and virtuosic playing from the young pianist.

The Symphonia, not to be outshone, accompanied Liu with tremendous sensitivity, matching his energy and fortitude. At times, taking the reins to deliver some truly epic and soaring themes of their own before both soloist and orchestra met for one of the most thrilling climaxes in Saint-Saëns’ oeuvre.

Unable to escape his well-deserved rapturous applause from a highly-enthusiastic audience, Liu returned to the stage to deliver a gentler, but nonetheless dazzling, rendition of Erroll Garner’s 1954 hit, *Misty*.

Liu is truly one of the brightest stars in this country’s musical firmament, and his is one career worth watching with eager anticipation.

The second half of the concert featured Finnish composer, Jean Sibelius’ *Symphony No. 1, Op. 39*; a work, which like much of his music, takes its inspiration from the vast, wild, and lonesome Nordic landscape, and the oft-tempestuous and unforgiving Baltic Sea.

The symphony opened with a haunting and unearthly theme introduced by clarinetist, Kimberly Jones; who so skilfully captured Sibelius’ remoteness and desolation that one momentarily forgot they were sat in a concert hall, surrounded by others.

Shortly thereafter, the full weight of the Symphonia was swirling and brooding, not unlike the North Atlantic, in Sibelius’ heroic and torrential themes, as if searching for some place to rest before erupting magnificently in the climax of the first movement which lead to a dramatic conclusion.

The second movement was introduced by an elegant, if not slightly subdued, chorus of horns, which was followed by an intrepid theme delivered by the muted strings of the Symphonia. After which, the winds took over for a conversation of luscious beauty amongst themselves before the brass interjected and delivered a number of Sibelius’ telltale crescendos of splendid grandeur. The orchestra captured well the tempestuous nature of the music here, and overall, made great sense of this rather fragmentary movement.

The initial celli captured perfectly the Scandinavian feel of the *Scherzo*; a movement dominated by a thousand conversations which eventually converge in a rather unsettled and incomplete ending.

The Symphonia performed the fourth and final movement with immense passion and accuracy. In a exhausting, unrelenting movement which heaps tension upon tension, the orchestra built and climbed creating all sorts of edge-sitting suspense, until the theme finally found its home in the glory of the Symphonia’s unison strings. Sibelius’ final movements are as much about endurance as they are about the construction of anticipation and suspense and the Symphonia more than accomplished this with the guiding and encouraging hand of the unflagging Maestro Joel on his podium.

Much like the opening strains of Lilburn’s beloved Aotearoa Overture, one can’t help but feel that a bright new day is dawning for this dedicated group of musicians that are our own Bay of Plenty Symphonia as they begin their journey with their esteemed and passionate new conductor. Oh, what delicious musical delights await us all? Only time will tell.

But, for now, I’m sure I speak for all Tauranga concert-goers in expressing my sincerest gratitude to this devoted group of musicians for their outstanding 2025 season. And we wish you all the best for a restful and rejuvenating holiday season as we eagerly look forward to another exciting and inspired season in 2026.

Chalium Poppy
Tauranga, 2025