

Soloists sustain riveting performance

BY RUTH O. BINGHAM
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Music began with the beating of a heart; those rhythms are linked inextricably to the emotions of living. Percussion remains the most elemental of musical expressions, eliciting a subconscious, often visceral response.

This was demonstrated with rare clarity on Friday night at the Honolulu Symphony's world premiere of Zhou Long's *Concerto for Taiko and Timpani*, featuring Kenny Endo on taiko and the Symphony's Stuart Chafetz on timpani.

Arranged across the front of the stage, five solo timpani with a full two-octave range on the left were balanced by five solo taiko drums; from the high, variable-pitch kotsuzumi to the deep o-daiko on the right. At the back of the stage, the orchestra's percussion section was stocked with timpani and taiko, as well as various Chinese and Japanese percussion instruments, so that the strings and winds were sandwiched between.

East-West stylistic blends and percussion concertos tend to highlight contrasts — between styles, between rhythm and melody — but, as Maestro Samuel Wong pointed out, in Zhou's piece, "It's not the contrasts, but the similarities that surprise."

The concerto began symbolically, with the focus on the solo drums, and with Chafetz echoing Endo, which elicited a ripple of laughter. Their dialogue quickly engulfed the entire ensemble, the drums' nature seemingly permeating the orchestra, as the strings and winds contributed percussive splashes of color.

Dynamic first and third sections framed a more contemplative middle based on temple music from Beijing. The sections built slowly to a huge climax before ending with a surprise *pianissimo* codetta by the soloists.



Taiko drum soloist Kenny Endo performs during the premiere of Zhou Long's *Concerto for Taiko and Timpani* at the Blaisdell Concert Hall.

The second section seemed less tightly woven than the first and third, although that might have been because it was more exposed. As Zhou admitted after the concert, the piece demands much from an orchestra. There were technically rough passages, but they were of a type that settles with familiarity, and in general, the Symphony performed impressively.

Soloists Endo and Chafetz were riveting throughout, most especially in their shared cadenzas. Borrowing techniques, echoing, challenging, sharing, the two generated tangible excitement. Shared cadenzas are both rare and difficult, requiring a tricky balance between playing freely and collaborating, all the while adhering to a very flexible tempo.

Endo and Chafetz began col-

laborating at the end of January, when they received their parts, but not their definitive parts. Their music has continued to evolve. One of the joys and challenges of premiering a concerto is working with the composer to create a part. While talking to the audience just before the concert, Zhou said, "Ten minutes ago, I was working on a timpani part."

Last-minute, even post-premiere changes have always been part and parcel of new music, and frequently it is the collaboration between composer and musician that creates masterworks, stretching the expertise of each. Chafetz described innovative timpani techniques he is using in the concerto, and Endo commented: "These pieces (with the symphony) are always a great challenge for me. The tradition I was

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trained in was an oral tradition. This really pushes me, and I like that." Both were outstanding, as much a joy to watch as to listen to.

The centerpiece of the second half, Bartok's lesser-known "The Miraculous Mandarin," was introduced by Borodin's "In the Steppes of Central Asia," with its long-held high note signifying the steppe's open horizons, its low-string pizzicati painting the caravan, and its melodies representing the Far East and Russian peoples.

The Bartok, also a demanding work fairly well-played, was interesting, admirably composed, and at times thrilling, but nonetheless disjunct.

Like the story, the music is disturbingly explicit, its unmistakably sexual brass glissandi and stunning "miraculous" music eliciting equal parts revulsion and admiration.

Fortunately, Bartok ended the suite with a high-tension, powerful climax that was by far the strongest section of the suite and that won the audience over, proving the adage that a strong ending tends to obscure earlier shortcomings.