

Kudos for taiko and symphony

REVIEW

Taiko Drums and Symphony Fantastique: Halekulani Classical Masterworks series presents "Let Freedom Ring," with guest Kenny Endo. At 4 p.m. Repeats at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Blaisdell Concert Hall. Tickets are \$15-\$50. Call 538-8863.

BY RUTH O. BINGHAM
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QUICK now, how many symphonic concertos do you know that were written for Japanese taiko, or drums?

The Honolulu Symphony's performance of composer Takeo Kudo's *Let Freedom Ring* featuring well-known taiko artist Kenny Endo was not only a world premiere, but also probably the first in a new subgenre. It was an excellent and enjoyable first.

Inspired by the internment of Japanese during World War II, Kudo composed a work about "the indomitable human spirit ... that perseveres through adversity."

The result was an extended crescendo in three sections that explores the conflict of being Japanese-American in a time when Japan and America were at war. Kudo represented that conflict through contrasting themes ("My Country 'Tis of Thee" and "Kimigayo," the Japanese national anthem), scales (diatonic and pentatonic), keys (through bitonality), and moods (reflection vs. agitation).

Kudo delineated his three sections by changing instruments. The *ko-tsuzumi*, a small hand-held drum, introduced the "peaceful and orderly arrivals" of internees into a "stark, lonely desert."

It makes an effective dramatic opening for the piece, but one that speaks more to an

emotional arrival than to reality. By all accounts, internees' arrivals were neither peaceful nor orderly, but the camps, whatever their setting, must surely have felt like desolate and lonely deserts.

Like the internees and their camps, the *ko-tsuzumi* and orchestra were juxtaposed rather than integrated, which helped portray the internees' feelings of displacement.

In the second section, the *shime-daiko*, a medium-sized drum, marked the irregular ticking of time distorted by captivity. Internees, work-oriented people forced into idleness, alternated between quiet reflection and aggressive agitation.

The drum beats evoked an image I could not shake, of birds' wings fluttering futilely against the bars of cages.

Finally, the *odaiko*, a huge, 350-pound drum carved from a single, ca. 300-year-old tree trunk, represented the human spirit's yearning for freedom.

The *odaiko* elicited powerful physical reactions, its raw, primal force reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*; in fact, it occasionally drowned out the orchestra.

This third section, in which the disparate elements meshed, seemed particularly difficult to hold together. But conductor Samuel Wong prevailed, bringing the piece to an exciting climax.

Endo's performance was outstanding and contributed much to the work's success. His vocalizing, an integral part of playing taiko, was well placed and carried clearly no mean feat with an orchestra in accompaniment.

Although Kudo composed the piece, Endo worked with him from its conception and his investment was audible. His final cadenza the only extemporaneous

part was remarkable: innovative, well-paced, effective. His technique and interpretation were likewise extraordinary.

Kudos to Endo for his performance and especially kudos to Kudo for an inspiring work!

FOR the second half, Wong chose *Symphonie Fantastique* by Berlioz. Wong's strong sense of dramatic musical gesture delivered several memorable passages: the reverie's fog dissolving into a ball scene, the delicate, eerie echoing between English Horn and offstage oboe, the tuba's opening *dies irae* ...

The March, the most effective and successful of movements, contained excellent solos too numerous to mention and left an indelible memory of timpanist Stuart Chafetz having a ball bouncing around in the back.

Unfortunately, the performance was marred by sloppy transitions and entrances and, most frustratingly, by a lack of overall coherence.

While each moment revealed specific gems, the whole became episodic in its specificity. The result was a squirming audience that fell to coughing so excessively after the longish third movement that Wong offered to meet them in the emergency room following the concert.

In an unusual turn of events, Wong presented an encore, "The Fairy Garden" from Ravel's *Mother Goose* orchestral suite. After deferring to brass, winds, and especially percussion all afternoon, the strings finally had a chance to shine and shine they did, in a beautiful and beautifully performed piece.

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