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## Review: Asia America Symphony tackles Beethoven's Ninth

2:34 PM, July 12, 2009



By my count (from the listing in the program book), 382 choristers filled the seats right up to the top balcony behind the stage of Walt Disney Concert Hall on Friday night for a performance of Beethoven Ninth Symphony by the [Asia America Symphony](#). That's a lot of singers to come by, and at least one was an admitted amateur.

Writing in the program book, he owned up to being "triple challenged: I don't understand German, I can't correctly read sheet music, and I can't sing very high." But Junichi Ihara, who happens to be the consul general of Japan in Los Angeles, said he spent eight months weekly rehearsing with the chorus in preparation to sing Schiller's "Ode to Joy." One couldn't possibly tell how Ihara faired Friday, but the forthright mega-chorus was exceedingly well drilled and exciting to hear. Would that the world had more such culturally committed diplomats.

Ihara wasn't this quixotic concert's only Beethovenian interloper. [David Benoit](#), who has been music director of the Asia America since 2001, is well known as a smooth jazz pianist and composer. His conducting experience is pretty much limited to the Asia America's four or five concerts a season, and the programs are usually a mix of light classics, pop numbers and his own compositions.

A performance of Beethoven's grandest symphony is, for this organization, unquestionably a stretch. Friday's event was a special event, sponsored by the [Japanese Business Association of Southern California](#) and given a grand theme: "Bridging USA & Japan Concert."



Philharmonic Orchestra of Los Angeles and a likably ragtag community ensemble. Benoit has clearly given it polish.

He is no fancy interpreter as either a jazz musician or a classical conductor. He keeps his head in the score, beats time and otherwise stays out of the way (and trouble) trusting the

For a short, strangely lightweight first half of the program, Benoit conducted the orchestra in overtures to Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" and Bernstein's "Candide" along with Fauré's Pavane and a short Gershwin piano work, "Japanese," in an uncredited arrangement (there were no program notes).

These openers were given generally proficient performances. The last time I had heard this orchestra it was still called the Japanese

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music and the musicians. To some extent this may be lack of conducting confidence, but he is hardly without musical expertise.

Still, the difference between performing a Gershwin tune and Beethoven's Ninth is like that between a brisk Sunday club bike ride and completing the Tour de France. The symphony is a beloved monument in Japan. New Year's performances are a tradition. Sony Corporation created the CD in the 1980s to hold 80 minutes of music, because that was the length of a recording of the symphony by Herbert von Karajan.

So it was with a genuine sense of occasion that the Asia America Symphony rented Disney Hall for this Ninth. Ticket prices were substantial, ranging from \$25 to \$100, and that was a mistake, given that the cheaper seats were all filled, but seats in front of the ensemble were not.

Another peculiarity was amplification, which perhaps makes more sense in the orchestra's usual venues in Torrance and Little Tokyo. The sound enhancement wasn't strident, although it did produce an unnatural metallic sheen and reverberation. Sometimes an instrument got bizarre prominence. Timpani sounded undersized in the Scherzo, while a blaring piccolo added a Souza-like character to the Finale.

Nor was amplification kind to the wholehearted soloists (soprano Keiko Takeshita, mezzo-soprano Silvia Vasquez, tenor Katsumi Narita and bass Jinyoung Jang). But if Benoit didn't take advantage of Disney's natural acoustic, he didn't pass up a chance to employ the hall's organ, which was weirdly added to the end of the Ninth.

The performance, which here lasted a mere 65 minutes, had its high points and low ones. The orchestra, smallish (especially compared with the chorus), had its good moments and those when pressure dropped precipitously. But somehow the ship always righted itself, and I appreciated a general singing tone as well as Benoit's gentle rhythmic élan.

And then there was this marvelous monster chorus, which revived everyone's energy in the Finale. It sounded the fervid, disciplined voice of a community. The consul general has reason to feel proud.

-- Mark Swed

*Photo: (Top) The Asia America Symphony with a chorus of nearly 400 performing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at Walt Disney Concert Hall on Friday night. (Below) Conductor David Benoit. Ken Hively / Los Angeles Times*

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