

The Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra ends its 2007/08 season with one of Beethoven's most magnificent works.

BEETHOVEN'S SYMPHONIES NO.8 & 9

Dewan Filharmonik Petronas
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Review by **CHRISTY YOONG**

It has been called one of the highest achievements of man, to be ranked alongside the greatest works of William Shakespeare. Far more than any of his other works, it established Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) as, in the words of music writer Richard Osborne, the cultural colossus he is today.

Yet, despite its epic scale, worldly consciousness and lofty ideals, Beethoven's *Symphony No.9 in D minor Op.125* has an intimacy that captures everyone who hears it.

The *Choral*, as it is called, had a profound impact on the then fledgling Romantic period. Not least, its use of a chorus in the fourth and final movement – the setting for the composer's adaptation of poet Friedrich Schiller's *Ode to Joy* – helped break the Classical symphonic mould of pure music.

Despite its ubiquitousness – it has featured widely in movies, books, and was even, for a time, a popular mobile phone ring tone – its popularity has endured since its premiere in 1824, and it has never failed to thrill, especially at the anticipatory introduction of the *Ode to Joy* theme in the final movement.

Its very conception of being more than just music, that it should also seek to inspire, coupled with its sheer spectacle and exhilaration,



Matthias Bamert led the MPO for the last time last weekend, and ended his three seasons as principal conductor with a bang. – Photos from Dewan Filharmonik Petronas

makes the *Choral* an inspired choice as the finale to the 2007/2008 season at the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas.

The *Choral* was part of an all Beethoven programme last Saturday and was preceded by the *Eighth Symphony in F Op.93*. About a dozen years separate the two works, and the contrasts could not be made more obvious in this pairing.

The *Eighth* is pure musical joy, full of witty and jaunty passages. This is music with a smile and it has, interestingly enough, no slow movement.

Under the direction of principal conductor Matthias Bamert, the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra dove right into the core of the work, producing a performance that was taut and thrusting.

Bamert took delight in highlighting the work's pleasurable details, as even he was caught up in the symphony's infectious rhythms. It was, in all, a thrilling performance that, despite the unhurried unfolding of the music, seemed to end all too soon.

The MPO was joined after the interval by soprano Indra Thomas, mezzo soprano Natascha Petrinsky,

tenor Paul Austin Kelly, baritone Pauls Putnins, and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Chorus under the direction of chorus master Jonathan Grieves-Smith.

The *Choral* is, in a sense, a more serious work than its predecessor. Its organic, almost protean, opening gives no indication of what is to come: the gradually building up tensions and plunging dissolutions, the contrasting bright and dark passages, and the pervading sense that something is always waiting around the corner.

Credit to Bamert for capturing the essence of the symphony's opening.

Again, the MPO's playing was alert and tight, although I was not always convinced by some of the wind instruments.

The second movement, much easier on the ears than the first, was a charged affair. The orchestra, finding its rhythmic feet, was full of flair, while Bamert was all extravagant flourishes.

I did not, however, always find the third movement convincing. The tempo seemed indistinct and the music, at times, meandered aimlessly.



Soprano Indra Thomas (left), and mezzo Natascha Petrinsky, together with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Chorus (not pictured), accompanied the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (partially pictured, background) for a rousing season finale last Saturday.

There was, though, sweet lyricism in much of the playing, although, again, the winds sometimes sounded vulnerable on their own.

There were no doubts, however, about the finale, as Bamert and the orchestra sounded their intentions with an impassioned opening.

I thrilled at the stately build up and, by the time the soloists and chorus joined in, I was captive to

the music right to the tumultuous climax.

Last weekend also saw Bamert conduct his final shows as the MPO's principal conductor (he led the orchestra for three seasons, beginning 2005/06).

Although, it must be said, the shows were far from flawless, he certainly left with a resounding bang.