

Delivering Sibelius on steroids

MUSIC

Adelaide Symphony
Orchestra

Violin: Natsuko

Yoshimoto. Conductor:
Arvo Volmer. Adelaide
Town Hall, February 3.

THE Adelaide Symphony Orchestra showed off what are arguably its two biggest strengths in its 2012 season opening concert. One is its concertmaster, Natsuko Yoshimoto, who is a soloist of outstanding calibre in her own right.

Since coming in to the position in 2009, she has not only brought stability to the string section and kudos to the orchestra, but has also shown herself to be a concerto soloist the equal of many of the fly-in, fly-out celebrities who otherwise front the orchestra.

In Sibelius's Violin Concerto, the smooth-toned bowing and agility that marks Yoshimoto's playing was in evidence, but so was an unusual vehemence. Not holding back at all, she gave this work an impressively gutsy, muscular performance that on occasion took one by surprise.

Certainly she ignited its passion. From the moment the violin part sails skyward over the shimmering tremolo of the upper strings, there was no holding back: here was a passionately charged interpretation that pushed ahead with forceful intensity, revealing a more emotionally driven Sibelius than often comes across in this work.

It needed a little more softening or yielding at times,

though. Where the main theme occurs, Sibelius marks it *largamente*, meaning broadly, and a touch more spaciousness would have helped.

Possibly Yoshimoto had concerns over balance: with 88 players crammed on to the Adelaide Town Hall stage behind her, she might have felt the need to push out her playing to be heard, although in fact she was perfectly audible.

Chief conductor Arvo Volmer is the ASO's other main strength. His pacing, attention to detail and ability to bring a narrative quality to the music proved perfectly suited to Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*.

Responding to his confident direction, an energised ASO turned in a performance of heightened colour, excitement and great story-telling power.

Cleverly, Volmer highlighted the *idée fixe* that serves as the autobiographical signpost through this work's five sections. He also created a palpable sense of theatrical drama in its unfolding narrative about an artist who, in an opium-induced hallucination, dreams he has killed his beloved.

The four timpani depicting distant rolling thunder, the fall of the guillotine blade as he meets his punishment and the weird grotesquerie of the witches' sabbath were all brilliantly conveyed.

With a rousing performance of the *Prelude* to Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* earlier in this concert, the ASO sounds a well-oiled machine and looks set for two more productive years before Volmer departs.

GRAHAM STRAHLE