

MASTERFUL MOTOKI

Dr Patricia Groves on the infusions of drama by the acclaimed Japanese pianist **Motoki Hirai** at Sultan Qaboos Cultural Centre



As HE George Hisaeda, the Japanese Ambassador rose to speak, a buzz of expectation rippled through the audience at SQU's Sultan Qaboos Cultural Centre. Everyone knew the piano recital would be by a world-class pianist.

The Ambassador began by mentioning the importance of the cultural dimension in his Embassy's mission. He reminded us that outstanding Japanese musicians such as Seiji Ozawa and Midori Gotoh perform in the great venues of the world. The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra is currently conducted by a thirty-three year Japanese violinist, Daishin Kashimoto.

A most brilliant & sensitive talent

Ambassador Hisaeda introduced acclaimed Japanese pianist, Motoki Hirai, by quoting from the critical press, with the UK Guardian hailing him as 'a most brilliant and sensitive talent with incomparable musicality'. This high praise is echoed by critics in New York and other world capitals. In Japan his music is recognised as having 'the sparks of genius'.

This exceptional artist was merely thirteen years of age when he composed his first work, and Ambassador Hisaeda announced that Oman was chosen for the premiere of three newly composed works set within a program of popular piano classics from JS Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and Mendelssohn.

Maestro Motoki Hirai has mastered the art of giving well-known works a fresh interpretation that endows the music with new life, yet maintains its traditional appeal. This was evident in



his approach to JS Bach's Organ Concerto in D Minor with a new arrangement after Vivaldi's *L'estro Armonico* No 11, Op 3.

Sophisticated dramatic expression

To Chopin's lyrical melodiousness, Hirai adds subtle tonal contrasts and sudden, yet understated, infusions of drama that magically blend into the natural flow of the music. With an amazing affinity for sophisticated dramatic expression, Motoki seemed born to play Beethoven, sending shivers down the spine of each listener as he articulated the magnificence and lyrical depth of the famous Moonlight Sonata. Motoki was equally brilliant with Mendelssohn's lively and complex Rondo Capriccioso.

But the *magnus opus* of the concert

was Motoki Hirai's grand composition – *Scenes from a Native Land – Fantasia Japonaise*. The piece commences with deep piano drumming evocative of powerful periods in the long history of the nation and its noble origins. Then Hirai's thunder-and-lightening fingers enact the dramas of time, place and human action characteristic of the nation.

As the complex piece unfolded I could see landscapes, war, peace and the construct of civilization – and I could feel the composer's deep empathy with the struggles and achievements of his homeland. Motoki Hirai now lives in London and has acquired an outside perspective that has augmented his understanding of Japan and fired his imagination. He was greatly affected by the tragic

earthquake and Tsunami and gave a number of free concerts to raise funds for the victims. The composer works for world peace through UNESCO, the Red Cross and other charitable organizations.

Musical families

I got to know Motoki at a private concert and dinner at the Japanese Residence and he kindly accepted my invitation to attend the Dr L Subramaniam concert at the Royal Opera House. Apart from the absolutely stunning performance by the Subramaniam family, Hirai was greatly impressed with the beauty of the concert hall and the quality of the Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra.

Born into a highly gifted musical family, Motoki studied piano and composition with his grandfather, the eminent composer Kozaburo Hirai. Motoki's award-winning father, Takeichiro Hirai, is acclaimed as one of the most distinguished cellists of his generation. Takeichiro worked with luminaries such as Villa-Lobos, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, Britten and Segovia – and studied for several years with Pablo Casals. Motoki and his father have performed together at prestigious venues, including London's Wigmore Hall.

As noble and impressive as he is in concert, Maestro Motoki is charming, warm-hearted and insightful in conversational interaction – a delight to know. As Motoki has just celebrated his fortieth birthday, the world has much more to gain both artistically and philanthropically from this exceptionally talented and generous musician.