

Christchurch Symphony at Town Hall Sept 3, 2005 8pm. Conductor Sir William Southgate with solo pianist Roger Woodward. Reviewed by Ian Dando.

New Zealand has been reticent in joining the post-war revival of Danish composer Carl Nielsen. All his six symphonies are strong. Yet the NZSO has strangely snubbed them. But Sir William Southgate is clearly aware of their quality. He is leading the way in espousing them here with the launch of *The Inextinguishable* in Auckland recently and now No 5 written in 1920-2, the greatest of all Nielsen's works, with the Christchurch Symphony.

Nielsen's broad conceptual genesis of the progressive victory symphony is Beethoven. Although their styles are poles apart, not so their similar dramatic view of symphony. The triumph of positive over negative in Nielsen's No 5 is analogous to Beethoven's fifth where the finale emerges from the pianissimo C minor murk of the preceding bridge into a blinding C major victory.

Southgate is the ideal man to lead the renaissance of Nielsen's symphonies here. His acute understanding of the structural minutiae in Nielsen's diffuse intricacy was the very thing that enabled him to achieve a spectacular end result of an unusually strong audience response to a complex work. Nielsen manipulates changes of key centres, subtle morphing of themes and destructive use of that dominating snare drum rhythm (take a bow drummer Rosanna Cooper) to express symphonic struggle from negative to positive, destructive to constructive.

Nielsen's mind is purely musical, not programmatic in No 5. Only about one per cent of the audience would understand Nielsen's progressive tonality and thematic subtlety. No matter. That's Southgate's job to marshal all these intricacies into a clear sense of its broad dramatic argument. He did stunningly well. To the audience the sense of terror as the semi-improvised snare drum playing leads the destructive forces of the first movement, is perfectly palpable, as is the feel of inexorable regeneration in the final movement.

Nielsen's cussed awkwardness doesn't lie easily for players but they handled the technical problems well, especially the tricky fast fugue in the second movement. This and the powerful shaping towards climaxes showed Southgate's mastery of both the technical and dramatic. A great work received an ideal launch.

Australian pianist Roger Woodward gave us a very different view of Rachmaninov's Concerto No 3. His massive power and suavely neat control of thick chordal bravura in the first movement cadenza and parts of the finale enabled him the luxury of focusing more on the work's quieter poetry, not unlike the composer's own recorded version. The unified rubatos between Woodward and orchestra in the slow movement typified the close sync between the two. Southgate "voiced" the orchestra with a lovely rich sound filtering up from a deep and secure harmonic base.