

Review

Akron Youth Orchestras at E. J. Thomas Hall (February 12)

By Mike Telin



When Debussy's groundbreaking score, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, was premiered in Paris in December of 1894, it caused shock waves to be felt throughout the musical world. The work's place in musical history is considered by many to be revolutionary: composer and conductor Pierre Boulez writes, "The flute of the Faun brought new breath to the art of music; what was overthrown was not so much the art of development as the very concept of

form itself." Indeed, Debussy's music marked the beginning of a new era in western classical music. On Sunday, February 12 at E.J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall, The Akron Youth Symphony, under the direction of Levi Hammer gave a performance of *Afternoon of a Faun* that was completely riveting; this young ensemble has indeed reached a new level of musical maturity.

An impressionistic work based on a poem of Stephane Mallarmé of the same name, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, lasts no longer than ten minutes and is scored for three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, antique cymbals, two harps and strings. And as Debussy explained, the music depicts "the successive scenes in which the longings and desires of the faun pass in the heat of the afternoon." The work also requires every player in the orchestra to not only play collectively, but to gently pass solo lines from one instrument to another without breaking Debussy's extended lyrical lines: this the AYS did with aplomb! Vincenzo Volpe's flute solos were exquisitely played, and Mr. Hammer enthusiastically acknowledged all of the fine soloists from within the orchestra.

The youthful *Piano Concerto No. 2* of Dmitri Shostakovich opened the Akron Youth Symphony's portion of the program, with Levi Hammer as soloist and Akron Symphony music director Christopher Wilkins making his AYS conducting debut. Written in 1957 for the nineteenth birthday of his son, Maxim, the 2nd piano concerto is, unlike many of Shostakovich's compositions, playfully cheerful. Once again, Levi Hammer proved himself to be a pianist of commanding technique, with a keen sense of color and texture. The opening bassoon line that is quickly joined by the clarinets and oboes set the perfect mood for the solo piano to join the musical conversation. The slow, nocturne-like second movement was passionately played and moved seamlessly into the final dancing allegro beginning in duple time before moving into 7/8. The final coda brings the concerto to a rousing conclusion. Wilkins and the members of the AYS were brilliant collaborators, and

any slight misalignments were quickly adjusted. This is a fun piece to play as well as to listen to, and a good time was most certainly had by all.

To conclude the concert, Hammer chose three selections from Aaron Copland's ballet score, *Rodeo*. Again the orchestra showed its musical depth as wind players changed positions from first to second chairs and additional brass and percussion were added, and many fine solos were played throughout. Hammer led a calm *Corral Nocturne* and the *Saturday Night Waltz* flowed beautifully. But it was the rhythmically tricky *Hoedown* that brought the concert to a rousing conclusion. But, what could be better than one *Hoedown*? Well two *Hoedowns*, as Levi Hammer jumped back on the podium and led an encore performance, sending the audience merrily on their way.

The first half of Sunday's concert featured the 80-plus member Greater Akron Youth Philharmonic. A collaboration between the Akron Public Schools and the Great Akron Musical Association, the AYP "is dedicated to building the technical and musical skills that are needed to become successful members of the Akron Youth Symphony." Having not heard this ensemble for nearly two years, I need to give hearty congratulations to the ensemble's directors, Damon Conn and Thomas Resnick, who are doing remarkable things with these very young players. Following the National Anthem, Mr. Conn led fun performances of the *Hungarian March* of Hector Berlioz and the *Allegretto from the 7th symphony* of Beethoven. Mr. Resnick returned for *Capriccio Italien*, by Tchaikovsky (great job to all the brass here), and Mr. Conn resumed his duties with an interesting arrangement of Prokofiev's *The Wedding of Lt. Kije*. Mr. Resnick returned for the AYP's final selection, *Gershwin in Concert*. Beginning with a portion of *Rhapsody in Blue*, the medley of tunes included *I've Got Rhythm*, *Someone to Watch Over Me*, *S' Wonderful* and returned to *Rhapsody in Blue* to bring everything to a tidy musical conclusion. Congratulation to concertmaster Sunhyeok Kim for his well played solos.

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