

## Preview

### **Akron Symphony: *Porgy and Bess*— A conversation with chorus master Levi Hammer**

by Mike Telin



Today we conclude our features with cast and members of the artistic team for this week's Akron Symphony productions of *Porgy and Bess* with a conversation with chorus master Levi Hammer. The chorus started rehearsing on the 10th of January and will log one-hundred and twenty hours of rehearsal time prior to the beginning of the production's final rehearsal week.

ClevelandClassical.com was able to observe a chorus rehearsal at the end of March, and it was the excitement that we witnessed and felt in that

room that caused us to completely revise our coverage plans.

Maestro Hammer, in his first season as the assistant conductor of the Akron Symphony says the opportunity to work on the production “was a dream of mine because I have been a big fan of Gershwin for as long as I can remember.” We began by asking him how everything was progressing since we observed.

Levi Hammer: Things are going very well. We just started staging, and so we're getting more into the production.

*Mike Telin: I understand that in addition to the on-stage chorus, there is also a chorus that will be in the balcony.*

LH: Yes, we have both a stage chorus but there is also a balcony chorus for several numbers, most notably the hurricane scene. For example, someone on stage will be singing a prayer; “Oh doctor Jesus, look down on me with pity”, and then it will be echoed from the balcony. It’s as if there were a spirit echoing it back, so it should be amazing.



*MT: Is this something that is more or less standard in productions, or is it an idea from the creative team?*

LH: It was from the creative team, and the reasons for it are multifold. There was a desire to get as many people involved as possible, and the balcony chorus is not just a pick-up chorus, it is made up of people from the Gospel Meets Symphony Chorus that does a concert with the symphony each year.

*MT: Yes, I know it well. It’s a great event.*

LH: I saw it for the first time this year; it’s quite an amazing thing. But the balcony chorus is also made of members from YEPAW, or Youth Excellence Performing Arts Workshops. It’s a really great group of people up there, so you don’t just have the forty people in the chorus on stage, but you have this giant group of about one hundred singers, I would estimate, in the balcony who will join in for I think, five moments.

*MT: It won’t be easy to keep everything together when people are so far apart.*

LH: I’m a little nervous about the logistical challenges, because they will be located in the third tier balcony, and will be right there with the audience. And the lights won’t go

on for them. They will be singing off-book. I will be conducting, and there will be a small light for me.

*MT: Regarding the on-stage chorus, of course we know that the chorus is portraying the townspeople of Catfish Row. Where there any challenges of turning the chorus into a village?*

LH: The simple answer is that in this situation, there were no challenges at all. And there are no challenges because of the particular nature of the community that is in the chorus. A lot of the members have known each other their entire lives. For example our Maria, Carla Davis, has been singing with several other members of the chorus in church since she was five years old. So you could say that we almost have a pre-formed Catfish Row. Of course they are not from Catfish Row, but they already are a community. So there has not been the challenge of forming that kind of camaraderie, because it was already there. I would say that the challenges have been strictly musical. We had our final musical rehearsal this past Thursday, and they will be going into staging rehearsals now, which will be fun. Some of the members have never been on stage before, so it will be an experience of a lifetime for them.



*MT: How did you go about preparing yourself to be chorus master?*

LH: I have to tell you that I have a mentor, Richard Bado, who is one of the great opera chorus masters in the US. He teaches at Rice University, which is where I got to know him. We had a long conference call about this, and I asked him; how do I prepare for this? He gave me a lot of great advice about the minutiae of the chorus part. For example, the pronunciation of the Gullah dialect, and do this here, do that there, and so on. But in the end he said, once you get in and know and experience *Porgy and Bess*, you will leave

that experience a better person. And I think that is true because of the characters, and the story. If you take it to heart, you can't help but walk away a more understanding and compassionate human being. I mean who are we to judge Bess?

*MT: I agree with you. But the chorus is the townspeople, and sometimes townspeople can be very judgmental.*

LH: Well I think they are judgmental, just like any human being. At first when Bess comes in, Maria calls her a liquor guzzling [slut]. I mean come on, that's the worst thing you can call a woman. But then Bess kind of changes her ways, and the community begins to accept her. Of course in the end after Bess has run off, someone tells Porgy, "we always told you she was no good for you."

*Coming on Tuesday: Porgy and Bess today.*

*CC.com staff photos by DH.*

*Published on clevelandclassical.com April 11, 2011*