

## Preview

**“Gershwin and the Great Tradition” at Akron-Summit County Library:  
a conversation with pianist and conductor Levi Hammer**

by Mike Telin



Akron Symphony assistant conductor **Levi Hammer**, who is in his first season with the orchestra, has already proven himself to be a multi-talented person through his excellent work with the ensemble, as well as the Akron Youth Symphony, and most recently in the role of chorus-master during the orchestra’s production of *Porgy & Bess*. In the review by this publication, Daniel Hathaway writes, “But then there’s the chorus, which is onstage more or less continuously for the duration. If there’s ever been a finer *Porgy and Bess* ensemble than the Akron Symphony auditioned and trained, we’d like to hear it.”

On Saturday, May 7, Maestro Hammer reveals another side of his musical personality, the solo pianist, when he presents a program titled “Gershwin and the Great Tradition” at the Akron-Summit County Library. The program includes Gershwin’s *Three Preludes* and *George Gershwin’s Songbook* (1932), Brahms’ *Six Pieces, op. 118*, Berg’s *Piano Sonata, op. 1* & Schoenberg’s *Three Piano Pieces, op. 11*.

We spoke with Mr. Hammer by phone at his home, and asked him how he came to choose the title for this recital.

Levi Hammer: Actually I stole that title from a chapter in Howard Pollack’s book. He is a friend of mine so I think it’s OK. Basically it’s paring Gershwin’s piano music with the “modernists” that he knew and admired, and some from the classical tradition. This led me to one of my new favorite personalities, Oscar Levant, who has the most delicious things to say about Gershwin. Gershwin was a life-long student of the great classical tradition, and apparently he and Gershwin would sit around in Hollywood and play through Mozart and Brahms string quartets on the piano. To be a fly on that wall, I’m

sure it was amazing. In Gershwin's 2<sup>nd</sup> Rhapsody, he called the big A major slow theme his Brahms theme.

*Mike Telin: Yes, I like the program very much. You once told me that we respect Gershwin and Schoenberg for different reasons, but I think we can also respect them for similar reasons as well, and I am wondering if you could expand on that a little bit?*

LH: You know Gershwin went out of his way his entire life to seek instruction. I think he probably had an inferiority complex in a certain sense, because he didn't have a rigorous classical education, because he was always seeking that. He wanted to study with Nadia Boulanger, Berg, Ravel, Schoenberg, and I think he even asked Stravinsky, so this is a pretty amazing list of musicians and all of them rejected him as a student. They either said, "I wouldn't want to ruin you", which is what Boulanger told him, or they said "why would you want to study with me, you're already a richer than I will ever be".

*MT: Very interesting.*

LH: So Gershwin was trying to discover those things that make the early twentieth century modernist so great. And it shows up in his music, in *Porgy and Bess* it is all over the place. In the opera he is using a Stravinskian method of creating harmonies, and melody and vertical structures as well. And if Gershwin hadn't studied Stravinsky, then *Porgy and Bess* wouldn't exist as it does. There is also a place in *American in Paris* where everybody drops out except for a string quartet, and it suddenly sounds like we are in the first string quartet of Schoenberg. [This is just one example]. But the second Viennese school does show up in Gershwin. It would be stretching it to say that Gershwin shows up in Schoenberg, but he is a multifaceted composer. He had so much angst, anger and aggression in his music. That is one side and that is the side that most people know. But he also has moments of humor and lightness.

*MT: I know that the music of Gershwin and the Second Viennese school are passions of yours; when did you first realize this?*

LH: I really don't remember not liking Gershwin. And I remember when I played the *Rhapsody in Blue* the first time with an orchestra, I was maybe fifteen or sixteen, I thought, that's it, I have now done everything that there is to do in music.

*MT: And the Second Viennese School?*

LH: Oh that wasn't until college, in fact I had never heard of the Second Viennese School until I was in college. And I think it was in the classroom that I heard Schoenberg, Berg and Webern for the first time. Fortunately I had a teacher who described the esthetic of expressionism, which I found so appealing. Most people learn about this music in theory

class, and it feels like a very complicated math equation. So I guess I got hooked on expressionism in all of the arts, not just music. I have to say that I have a little obsession with Viennese expressionism.

*MT: So how do you divide your time between developing as a conductor and keeping up your work as a pianist?*

LH: Well it's not easy, I have to consciously make sure that I keep it up as a pianist, and it has become important to me. Actually I always wanted to be a conductor, and the piano was always a way of getting to the podium. So as a teenager I was always doing really ridiculous things like playing the Liszt transcription of Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*, which in the end is a complete waste of time and I had to practice so much for it. Of course I played the piano literature too. I also did all of the exercises that conductors do where we read Bach Chorals and from open score. I can't speak for anybody else, but it took me a number of years to become comfortable reading a score with all of the transpositions and clefs. And I can't imagine how one would learn to do that without knowing the piano. So the piano is also a tool for me, but what is interesting, is that the more I conduct, the more the piano is to me. Because it is such a difficult profession and as a conductor we don't actually make any music ourselves, it does become important for me to be able to make music in some way, on my own. So I always make sure I have something in the works. Usually it is chamber music, as I rarely play solo music anymore, just because I love the collaborative nature of chamber music. And, I always make sure that I do one concerto a year.

*MT: When it comes to chamber music, do you have a preferred configuration?*

LH: No, I'll play what ever is out there, although I do have a penchant for the duo literature of Brahms. But when I am collaborating with other people, for me music making doesn't get any better than that.

Levi Hammer discusses "Gershwin and the Great Tradition" on YouTube. Click [here](#).

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