

## Review

**Pianist Levi Hammer at Akron-Summit Public Library (May 7)**

by Mike Telin



On Saturday May 7, pianist Levi Hammer presented a recital at the Akron-Summit County Library that he called *Gershwin and the Great Tradition*. Catchy title, but what does it mean? Mr. Hammer explained in a recent interview with this publication that; “[I’m] pairing Gershwin’s piano music with the *modernists* that he knew and admired, and some from the classical tradition.” Mr. Hammer also told CC.com that Gershwin was a great admirer of Berg, Ravel, and Schoenberg. OK, Mr. Hammer has done his homework, but how will Gershwin’s *Three Preludes* and eighteen selections from the *Gershwin Songbook* work in concert with the *Six Piano Pieces, Op. 118* of Brahms, the *Piano Sonata, Op. 1* of Berg and the *Three Piano Pieces, Op. 11* of Schoenberg? Three

words: like a glove. This was inspired programming that realized the curatorial intentions of the artist as well in performance as it did on paper. Of course, this could only work if the artist has the ability, technically and musically, to pull it off. So how was Mr. Hammer’s performance? One word: Magnificent.

Mr. Hammer began with an explosive performance of Gershwin’s *Three Preludes*, including a couple of foot stomps (a little less left hand in places could have worked too). The Brahms Opus 118 contains some of the most beautiful music the composer wrote, was nicely paced, and the lyrical passages were gorgeous. Mr. Hammer performed all six pieces in a “Salon Style” which worked to his advantage. Berg’s *Piano Sonata Op. 1* brought the first half to a dramatic and emotional end.

Following intermission we were treated to a flawless performance of the *Three Piano Pieces, Op. 11* of Schoenberg. What a complete pleasure to hear these pieces in the hands of someone who is obviously passionate about expressionism.

The eighteen selections from *Gershwin's Songbook* brought the printed program portion of the afternoon to a rousing conclusion. Here Mr. Hammer chose to perform them in a more "line them up and shoot them down" fashion. Perhaps a little massaging here and there would have been nice, but nonetheless, these are great arrangements that were well performed.

As an encore, the large audience was treated to the music of Act I, Scene II from *Porgy and Bess*. Mr. Hammer, when not concertizing at the piano is the Assistant Conductor of the Akron Symphony and served as Chorus Master during their recent production of *Porgy*. In a true testament to Mr. Hammer, there were a number of chorus members in attendance who, upon hearing the music, jumped right in as if on cue, with their opening lines. Bravo!! A fun way to close out a great afternoon of music making.

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