

## Preview

### Gershwin & Bernstein at Akron Symphony this weekend: a conversation with Christopher Wilkins & Levi Hammer

by Mike Telin



“After the experience of *Porgy and Bess* and getting to work with the great Alvy Powell, who has performed the role of Porgy well over 1,000 times, my understanding of Gershwin has deepened,” says Akron Symphony Assistant Conductor and pianist Levi Hammer. “It can be very easy to play what’s only on the page, and play it well, but then to find what’s underneath the notes is what is very magical to me”.

On Saturday, October 13 at 8:00 pm in E.J.

Thomas Hall, Christopher Wilkins will lead the

Akron Symphony in a concert that celebrates the Golden Age in American Music. The program includes Bernstein's *Overture to Candide* and *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*, Barber's *Symphony No. 1* and Gershwin's *Variations on "I got rhythm" for Piano and Orchestra* and *Rhapsody in Blue* with Levi Hammer as soloist.

Knowing that Christopher Wilkins is a scholar of American music as well as having become aware of Levi Hammer's expanded knowledge of Gershwin, we couldn't let the opportunity to speak to both musicians via conference call go by. We began by discussing the fact that *Rhapsody in Blue* was originally written for jazz band accompaniment, but Ferde Grofé later orchestrated it for symphony orchestra. And the debate as to whether the piece is jazz, classical, or something else altogether?

Christopher Wilkins: I think the idea for a concerto for jazz band was innovative, but translating it into an orchestral setting was innovative too because there had never been an orchestral work that had gone that far in that direction. So in a way it made it doubly innovative. It's interesting that the never ending debate is the question of whether it should be considered a jazz composition.

Levi Hammer: That is the never-ending question. And it is interesting that Paul Whiteman titled the concert [on which it was premiered] *An Experiment in Modern Music*. I have a slightly different take on the piece than a lot of people. Marcus Roberts, the great jazz pianist, improvises throughout the piece and turns it into his own wonderful thing. But I come at Gershwin from a classical musician's perspective. [For example], when we

play Mozart we plan out the cadenzas where Mozart would have improvised them. So I approach Gershwin in the same calculated way, whereas Gershwin would have come at it more spontaneously.

I think Gershwin had a little bit of an inferiority complex: he was always going to the best musicians of his day asking for help in order to improve himself. He asked composers like Stravinsky, Ravel and many others for lessons and they all refused saying “why do you want lessons, you’re already great”. Gershwin, like Schubert, wrote melody after melody, and *Rhapsody in Blue* really was the beginning of his journey from being a Tin Pan Alley songster into a mature composer. And I do think he was an early modernist.

CW: Gershwin was a chameleon, and that is one aspect of why his music has survived so well. The fact that he could converse with Ravel on one day, the next improvise at a party, and the week following find himself at the Cotton Club in Harlem, was part of who he was, and hardly anybody else in American history has had that ability. The exception being Bernstein.

MT: *Levi, as a pianist, are Rhapsody in Blue and the I’ve Got Rhythm Variations written well for the piano?*

LH: They’re written very well for the piano. He was such a natural musician and although he was more or less a self taught pianist, his writing for the instrument is completely idiomatic. It fits the fingers perfectly, even if it’s not always easy. With *Rhapsody in Blue*, the question is, do I play it the way Gershwin did? Unlike Beethoven, we do have recordings of Gershwin playing the piece. But I have finally decided that only Gershwin can play it the way that he did, and the rest of us who don’t have the luxury of being George Gershwin have to find our own way of playing it. I do try to stay faithful to the spirit of Gershwin while still playing it freely with the panache that I feel.

MT: *All of the music on Saturday's program is composed by Americans; Christopher, what do you think makes American music American?*

CW: When I speak about the history of music I’ll often play examples of music from different years, and talk about whether it has specificity in place and time. It most often has it in time, until you get to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but you don’t always know the place. Place evokes the popular and folk music of a region, for example Czech folk music and Dvorak. In America we have the same situation; if you listen to the music of John Knowles Payne, (1839 – 1906) it doesn’t sound any different from European composers who were writing at the same time.

Although Aaron Copeland was a great champion for promoting Americanism in music, it wasn’t until composers began to adopt folk idioms, and especially the music of African Americans and jazz that the *American* sound developed. And Gershwin wasn’t the first, Louis Moreau Gottschalk [1829-1869] did the same thing. I think Gershwin was one of the few artists of his day who was so much a sponge that he was able to take what ever music he heard, soak it up, and make it his own.

*MT: All of the pieces on the program are great, but with so much to choose from, how did you decide on these selections?*

CW: I actually submitted an all-American program the year we did *Porgy and Bess*. It was not this program but it did have a couple of these pieces on it, so a version of this program has been circulating throughout the artistic planning offices for a few years. But I have to say that it was Levi's presence that made *Rhapsody in Blue* the perfect choice. Levi is a very gifted artist and he certainly has Gershwin in his bones. But all of the pieces are certainly some of the best that we have in America.

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