

Review

Akron Symphony: Bernstein and Gershwin with pianist Levi Hammer (October 13)

by Daniel Hathaway



Christopher Wilkins devised a rare event for the Akron Symphony's second concert in E.J. Thomas Hall last Saturday night: an entire symphonic program devoted to American music. The evening featured works by one of this country's first internationally celebrated composers, Samuel Barber, and two of the twentieth century's original boundary-pushers, George Gershwin and Leonard Bernstein, who were merrily sneaking across the borders of musical genres long before others even thought of doing that. Barber's accomplished first symphony, two excerpts from Bernstein's brilliant Broadway shows (or are they operas?) and two dazzling works for piano and orchestra that document Gershwin's easy synthesis of the dialects of jazz and symphonic styles added up to a fresh-sounding and excitingly played program.

The Akron Symphony effortlessly tossed off a brisk, exhilarating performance of Bernstein's *Candide Overture* — with spectacular work from the horn section — to preface the rest of the program. Then Wilkins took up the microphone to quip that undoubtedly the large audience had come out to hear Barber's *Symphony No. 1*. Well they might have, for it's a fine piece of work from a 25-year old composer, so admired in its time that it was the first American work ever to be programmed at the 1936 Salzburg Festival. The Symphony's second performance was given locally by Artur Rodzinsky and The Cleveland Orchestra in January of 1937 (read Mike Telin's Cleveland Orchestra Archives [story](#) in this publication from December, 2011).

Barber's one-movement symphony, inspired in no small degree by Sibelius's seventh, opened with finely-blended lyrical lines shared by woodwinds and strings and developed a dramatic narrative that moved eventfully from scherzo to passacaglia, pausing along the way for a poignant oboe solo elegantly spun out by Terry Orcutt. Other fine solo work came from clarinetist Kristina Belisle Jones and bassoonist Todd Jelen (in delicious cahoots with the clarinets at the end of the Scherzo). Wilkinson kept the symphony moving along in fine order, finally presiding over a terrific accelerando and a conclusion that was both tragic and triumphant.

Bernstein's nine-movement *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story* gave the orchestra plenty of opportunities to show off its panache and versatility, and there were many

praiseworthy highlights, including fine work from the brass solo viola and horn (“There's a place for us”) and the whole percussion section — even if the latter got overly enthusiastic once or twice. Wilkins set idiomatic tempos for the dances, though two movements seemed a bit too pressed to let their Latin sensuality hang out. A little more rehearsal time would certainly have smoothed out some rough transitions.

There's a little joke making the rounds about Tuesday Musical's splendid new “Three Graces” Steinway grand piano that has been made available to the Akron Symphony. “First, they took an ax to it” (Emanuel Ax, who debuted the new instrument earlier in the month), “then they took a hammer to it” (Levi Hammer, the ASO's assistant conductor and featured piano soloist this evening). The instrument is a fine one that speaks into the hall with resonance and authority, and Hammer used it expertly in the two Gershwin works that ended the concert.

Gershwin wrote his “*I got rhythm*” *Variations* for a 1934 concert tour featuring himself at the keyboard. Under ten minutes long, they run through almost all of Gershwin's amazing range of musical styles, all of which Levi Hammer seems to have personally absorbed and plays with infectious style and enthusiasm.

The ultimate work, the famous *Rhapsody in Blue*, was born in the idiom of jazz in 1924 and only later, thanks to three successively larger reorchestrations by Ferde Grofé of *Grand Canyon Suite* fame, firmly entered the symphonic world. It's a piece most of us know in generic pops orchestra interpretations, so there were some nice surprises in store on Saturday evening. After an attention-getting clarinet solo by Kristina Belisle Jones (not a continuous glissando but one with landings like a staircase), Wilkins established a brisk and cheerful pace that seemed to hearken back to the *Rhapsody's* 1920s roots. Levi Hammer brought a well-conceived and highly individual approach to the solo part, which he dispatched brilliantly with the complicity of his attentive colleagues. Ruminative pauses in the cadenza contributed to the sense of immediacy and improvisation that Hammer seemed to be out to achieve.

Responding to a warm, standing ovation, Levi Hammer sent the audience away with a sultry solo piano encore on themes from *Porgy and Bess*.

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