

Akron Symphony to kick off season

Assistant conductor Levi Hammer will play Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 25 in C major

By Kerry Clawson
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Akron Symphony Assistant Conductor Levi Hammer will play Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 25 in C major in concert for the first time Sunday for the orchestra's opening night.

The event, which also will feature Ron Nelson's

Savannah River Holiday and Brahms' Symphony No. 1 in C minor, will be at 7:30 p.m. at the University of Akron's E.J. Thomas Hall.

"It's a big deal for me because I'm not so much a pianist anymore," said Hammer, who has focused on conducting in recent years. "Nowadays, when I do Mozart, it's almost always in the form of his operatic or symphonic output. But it's especially nice to have the opportunity to return to my pianistic roots and play this concerto that I've always dreamed of performing with such a great conductor, a wonderful orchestra, and paired with Brahms!"

Hammer studied conducting, piano, composition and languages at the University Mozarteum Salzburg, Rice University

and Arizona State University. He came to the Akron Symphony after working with Benjamin Zander at the Boston Philharmonic, accompanying Zander in 2010 on his last trip to the Akron Symphony. Hammer was a Zander Conducting Fellow, as was his ASO predecessor, Christopher Lees, and current Akron Symphony Music Director Christopher Wilkins.

This will be the fourth concerto Hammer will perform under Wilkins' baton with the Akron Symphony, following Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No. 2 and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *I Got Rhythm Variations*.

As an ASO assistant conductor as well as music director of the Akron Youth Symphony, Hammer is at the piano nearly every day studying symphonic and operatic scores, working with singers or on chamber music for his own engagements. He performs in solo recital about once a year.

Hammer said coming into conducting as a pianist is an unusual path for Americans these days: Being a pianist



Akron Symphony Orchestra

Levi Hammer will be the soloist for Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 25 for the Akron Symphony Orchestra's opening-night concert.

who works with singers and learning the operatic repertoire as a pianist is a 19th century German tradition.

Pianist/conductor Leonard Bernstein was Hammer's hero when he was a teenager. Now, he looks to pianists/conductors such as Robert Spano, music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra who previously was a conducting professor at Oberlin.

"His and my pianism informs all that we do as musicians," Hammer said of himself and Spano, who has a huge international career and remains active as a pianist.

As a young conductor, Hammer is constantly studying the classical repertoire, which he describes as a lifetime's work: "If you really want to become a great conductor, you have to systematically learn the entire repertoire."

In Hammer's outreach talks in the community about the orchestra's opening night concert, he asks school children basic questions such as "What is a concerto?" and answers, "It's a soloist

performing a solo with the orchestra."

He talks about the rising drama of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 25, with the soloist playing in opposition to the orchestra.

"It's a perfect piece of music, just so expressive," he said of the concerto, which possesses a symphonic quality with a larger orchestra than most concertos have.

"All Mozart is opera. Even his non-opera music is opera, so it's full of drama and theatricality and contrast," Hammer said.

The piece begins with the grandeur of the *Allegro maestoso* and moves into the tranquil *Andante* movement, which Hammer thinks of as an aria.

"I play it like a great soprano would sing," he said.

Hammer, who was associate conductor this summer at Central City Opera in Colorado, is also looking forward to a repertoire full of Puccini, Verdi, Rossini, Ravel, Beethoven, Faure, Barber, Mozart, Dvorak and more with the Akron Youth Symphony this season.

Cost for the Akron Symphony's opening concert Sunday is \$25. Call 330-535-8131 or see www.akronsymphony.org.