

Meet Levi Hammer

The New Akron Youth Symphony Music Director

MS: How did you end up in Akron?

LH: I had the privilege of accompanying Ben Zander on his last trip to the Akron Symphony, in which he conducted a devastatingly powerful account of Mahler 9. During this trip, I fell in love with the orchestra, its music director, and its amazing community. And since my pal Christopher Lees was leaving the post, I thought I would try my hand at it.

MS: You are a Zander Fellow, as Christopher Wilkins and your predecessor Christopher Lees both were. What did you learn most from Maestro Zander?

LH: Ben is a man of many talents, but I think what makes him most special is his uncanny ability to always find the *heart of the matter*, be it the innermost depths of Mahler 9, or Figaro's aria, or sharing the exhilaration of music with his students. For a professional musician, it's sadly easy to get caught up in the periphery—a clear down-beat, perfect diction, finally mastering that nasty passage in the Revolutionary Etude—all important! But that indefinable *heart of the matter* is what we must aim for; it's what caught our hearts in the first place, and it's what Ben always so masterfully finds. I think that's what I took most from my time with Ben and the Boston Philharmonic.

MS: Who/what influenced you most as a musician? Tell us about growing up, and why the conducting bug?

LH: Well, I certainly don't have an aristocratic musical pedigree...I'm the proud grandson of farmers and carpenters. I was constantly surrounded by music of all kinds, so I always played classic Broadway hits at the same time that I practiced Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. I was (and still am!) fortunate to have wonderful teachers who shared the depths and joys of music with me. Throughout my teenage years I worshiped at the altar of that American musical deity, Leonard Bernstein, and I strove in my pianism, repertoire and conducting aspirations to live up to his example. Now, having spent a summer at Lorin Maazel's side, I'm supremely inspired by his consummate mastery of the craft of music. These men are just two mountains of the profession who serve as my role models. I don't remember a time when I didn't want to be a



musician...but I'm not sure when the conducting bug bit. I suppose it gradually occurred to me that I had the passion and more importantly, the discipline, to attempt such an insane undertaking!

MS: Despite the gloom and doom that often surrounds the performing arts and the orchestra business, what still excites you about its future?

LH: I don't participate in gloom and doom, unless a composer like Mahler wrote it into his music. What excites me is when music—well-executed and passionately played!—speaks for itself, so I'm only interested in sharing my own infectious love of the art.

MS: How do you see the role of a youth orchestra in the lives of students who may not grow up to be professionals?

LH: I love this question! It is those students that I'm most interested in, and not for the usual list of reasons: "kids who study music have higher GPAs," "they get into 'better' colleges," "they develop discipline," "they will donate to the local symphony when they land their first big job and start the ascent up the corporate ladder"...NO! The real reason to study music is to palpably experience beauty, to share love in its most pure form and to delve into life's most transformative depths.

MS: What kind of effect do you hope to have on the kids in the Akron Youth Symphony?

LH: Quite simply, I want to create an environment where beauty is fostered through music. That may sound a bit lofty, but we won't aim for anything less! Not to worry though, that craft of music consists of just a handful of basic principles...like listening, phrasing, pitch, rhythm, and so on... It's through these elementary concepts that we'll experience the joys of music.

MS: Outside of making music, what do you like to do? Any favorite movies or television shows?

LH: Is there an "outside of music"? I'm afraid I'm somewhat of a nerd. I haven't owned a television in about a decade, so I'm terribly out of the pop culture loop. I'm a voracious reader and love opera. And whenever I'm working on an opera, it's so all-consuming that there isn't really room for anything else.

MS: If I picked up your ipod now and pressed play, what would I hear?

LH: Perhaps a Rufus Wainwright song, or maybe an excerpt from Alban Berg's opera, *Wozzeck*. I'm obsessed with the music of *fin de siècle* Vienna, which is like a drug...once you try it, you always come back to its gruesome beauty!

AKRON YOUTH SYMPHONY SCHEDULE

November 7, 2010

Fall Concert

3:00 p.m.

Carol Cartwright Hall

Kent State University

February 6, 2011

Winter Concert

3:00 p.m.

E.J. Thomas Hall

The University of Akron

May 22, 2011

Spring Concert

3:00 p.m.

E.J. Thomas Hall

The University of Akron