

## Review

**Akron Symphony with Olivier Brault  
and Todd Jelen (January 11)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Scaled down for a Mozart symphony and concerto and Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, the Akron Symphony was lean and anything but mean on Saturday evening. The thirty-one players on the stage of E.J. Thomas Hall formed a tight, vibrant ensemble that responded like a high-performance sports car under the baton of Christopher Wilkins and the bow of Olivier Brault, and held bassoon soloist Todd Jelen in a warm embrace.

The highlight was a sensational performance of Vivaldi's vividly pictorial quartet of violin concertos, for which, in a very smart and gracious move, Wilkins handed the conducting duties over to Brault. The Montréal violinist has dazzled Northeast Ohio audiences as concertmaster of Apollo's Fire, but has rarely found himself in the position of having complete control over a performance.

Positioned in the middle of the string ensemble, Olivier Brault — always dashing and stylish — turned into a blur of kinetic energy, playing like a rock guitarist to his violin colleagues one moment, now swiveling around to communicate with the cellos and basses, then drawing himself in for intimate conversations with solo cellist Miles Richardson and harpsichordist Robert Mollard. It's difficult enough to play the solo part just standing still, but Brault managed flights of breathtaking virtuosity while constantly in motion, and the orchestra was completely at his service.

Rarely have the birds twittered so charmingly as Brault and violinists Justine Lamb-Budge and Linda Nagy Johnston did in "Spring." Emotions changed on a dime as insects attacked and thunderstorms suddenly blew up in "Summer." And in "Winter," the strings provided icy textures and crystalline pizzicatos under Brault's lyrical solo line.

Vivaldi's concertos, published as part a collection entitled *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'inventione*, still sound fresh and experimental nearly three hundred years later. Heard on a recording, this still would have been a stunning and revelatory performance, but you had to be there to experience all the excitement onstage.

The concert began with Mozart's sole surviving bassoon concerto (others may have existed but are now lost) with principal bassoonist Todd Jelen enjoying a rare appearance in front of the orchestra. Jelen, who possesses both complete technical command and sensitive musicianship, made a fine impression with his warm, woody tone and his easy transitions between lyrical and athletic passages. He personalized the piece with his own cadenzas, the second of which was particularly inventive. Wilkins and the orchestra stayed closely in touch throughout and the horns (Meghan Guegold and Cynthia Wulff) dispatched their high parts with accuracy and style. Though the final *Rondo* seemed a bit breathless (it's a minuet), Jelen adjusted admirably to the quick tempo and played flawlessly.

Both winds and strings shone brilliantly in Mozart's *Symphony No. 29* in A. Oboists Terry Orcutt and Renate Sakins, who had more to do here than in the concerto, sang out lusciously over the strings and, together with the horns, synthesized a whole wind section at several points. The strings, who had warmly and lyrically introduced the odd, octave-leaping theme of the first movement, dashed off perfectly coordinated scales in the finale every time that often raggedly-played passage came around. Once again, a minuet seemed paced too quickly, but the ensemble remained clear and precise.

In short, an amazing evening in Akron, full of energy, spirit and precision that even the demoralizing acoustics of E.J. Thomas Hall couldn't dampen.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 13, 2014*