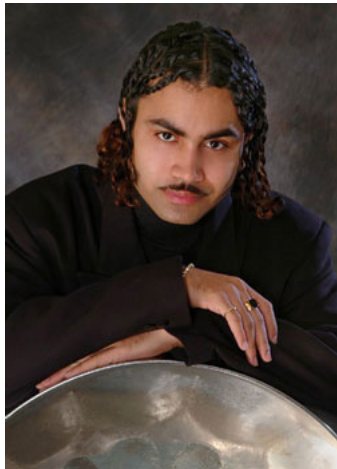


**Concert Report: Akron Symphony: 'Schubert & Steel'
with Liam Teague (February 20)**

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When we first saw the Akron Symphony's program for 'Schubert and Steel', we thought that the third Brandenburg Concerto, the Schubert ninth symphony and a concerto for steel pan and orchestra might make for unlikely bedfellows. Perhaps some subscribers thought

so too, as the crowd in E.J. Thomas Hall seemed a bit sparse last Saturday night (February 20). If so, they opted out of a really interesting evening which definitely provided something for everyone.

Though the stage was full of musicians warming up twenty minutes before curtain time, there was no one to be seen as the clock struck eight and executive director Phil Walz presented a certificate of appreciation to Madeline Bozzelli, president of the Akron Symphony Guild, who sponsored this event. Instead, the Brandenburg 3 orchestra was offstage tuning up and all came onstage together (in neat lines) to take places near the front edge of the stage. Six cellos surrounded Christopher Wilkins on the podium, and the rest of the slightly reduced string section stood to perform.

This clever bit of stagecraft helped send the sound out into the auditorium as well as making it very clear which instruments were playing which lines. Brandenburg 3 splits violins, violas and cellos into three groups each, and as motives were tossed back and forth among the nine separate lines (the basses have a tenth to themselves), it was as though something like 'The Wave' went back and forth through the ensemble. The performance was quick-paced and full of vitality that never flagged yet never felt pressed or hurried. Maestro Wilkins solved the eternal problem of what to do with the second 'movement' (two chords) by giving concert-

master Alan Bodman a little cadenza before ripping into the finale. No harpsichord here, and none needed.

During the stage resetting, Wilkins brought steel pan virtuoso Liam Teague out for a little demonstration and interview. "Are you a classical guy?" Wilkins asked. Teague started out playing recorder in high school, took up the steel pan and later learned to play violin. He demonstrated his soprano steel pan with a little Trinidadian calypso. "Makes me want to take off my shoes", Wilkins said.

In Jan Bach's Concerto for Steelpan and Orchestra that followed, Liam Teague showed himself to be a first-class musician. Not only is he in complete control of his instrument and its many possible effects, but he has a quietly elegant way of playing it that belies the obvious difficulty of the concerto's solo line. The piece begins with a little dialogue between glockenspiel and steel pan in which the soloist gradually breaks out of an increasingly colorful orchestral texture and begins to dominate the proceedings. As the first movement ('Reflections') moves along, the music becomes more agitated and restless amid brass chorales and glockenspiel and chime peals. Finally the soloist breaks free entirely with a stunning cadenza. Here, Liam Teague produced a dizzying array of effects from the pan (made out of a 55-gallon steel drum), sometimes reversing his sticks for echo effects and alternating between two and three sticks for more involved chords, before finally rejoining the orchestra.

The second section ('Toccata') was, as the name implies, a non-stop essay in perpetual motion that had Teague's sticks flying through complex and jazzy syncopated rhythms. The concerto is an admirable piece, full of color and incident, richly scored and highly sensitive to the possibilities of the steel pan as a solo instrument. In one hilarious episode, Liam Teague played little riffs on the steel pan, daring principal percussionist Larry Snider to imitate him on that bizarre instrument called the flexitone. As an encore, the mesmerized crowd got to hear an unnamed piece dedicated to Teague's new agent, Pamela Parsons, who had driven six hours to hear

him play. Then as a second encore, Maestro Wilkins brought Teague back to play an arrangement of Schubert's 'Ave Maria' as a prayer for Haiti. So Schubert and Steel came together in yet another fascinating way that evening.

After intermission, the full orchestra came to the stage for an elegant performance of Schubert's 'Great' C Major Symphony, conducted by Wilkins from memory. Though as a song composer, Schubert was capable of creating whole little worlds in the space of a few minutes, as a symphonist -- at least in this case -- he sometimes had difficulty knowing when to wrap a movement up. Thus

Wilkins' brisk tempos and his ability to keep things in motion were valuable traits in tonight's performance. The horns (only two of them tonight) did themselves proud from the opening notes, and all the wind soloists made lovely contributions to the lyrical sections. Cellos bloomed in the slow movement, which Wilkins also kept in motion, though flexibly. The Scherzo was fast and light, though not at the expense of rich string sound, and the transition from a slightly slower middle section to the reprise was flawless. And the finale, where Schubert the melodist seemingly can't let go of a good tune, went by at an admirable clip.