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Review

Akron Symphony anticipates Spring with Beethoven and Haydn (March 2)

by Daniel Hathaway

The *Times* of London has a long tradition of publishing letters from its readers claiming to have heard the first cuckoo of Spring. Though Delius's piece of the same name wasn't on the program at E.J. Thomas Hall on Saturday evening, the cuckoo did make an appearance as Christopher Wilkins and the Akron Symphony and Chorus might have been the first musical organization in Northeast Ohio to spread the message that balmy breezes will be blowing not *too* far in the future. The program brought together two Austrian works first performed in Vienna only seven years apart, each of which evokes the joys of nature in its own delightful way.

Beethoven's sixth symphony, subtitled “Pastorale,” paints vivid scenes of the countryside and its rustic inhabitants, whose peasant dance is interrupted by a thunderstorm and who return to sing a song of thanksgiving after the skies clear. One of Beethoven's only ventures into “program music”, the 1807 symphony begins with a depiction of cheerfulness on the part of an urban escapee arriving in the country, authentically incorporates the songs of a nightingale, dove and cuckoo in a scene by the brook, conjures up *Donner und Blitzen* with the help of thundering kettledrums and drama in the brass, and finally restores peace to the countryside with bucolic horn calls.

Wilkins, conducting from memory, led an assured performance. Tighter inner rhythms in the strings would have made it even finer. The excellent wind section seemed oddly distant throughout the work; perhaps the large screen suspended over the strings for the Haydn supertitles interfered with the projection of their sound. Too bad, because their playing was first class. The horns sounded particularly classy and flutist Barbara O'Brien, oboist Terry Orcutt and clarinetist Kristina Belisle Jones contributed lifelike bird calls to the soundscape.

One-quarter of Haydn's 1801 oratorio, *The Seasons,* followed intermission. Based on a prolix, epic poem by the Scot, James Thompson, later distilled and put into German by Baron Gottfried Bernhardt van Swieten, the piece was an attempt to capitalize on Haydn's earlier and wildly successful *The Creation,* but it never caught the public's attention in quite the same way. The story is charmingly told through three rural characters, Hannah (sung by soprano Linh Kauffman), Lucas (tenor Timothy Culver) and Simon (baritone Brian Keith Johnson), and a backup company of peasants (the Akron Symphony Chorus, thoroughly prepared by Maria Sensi Sellner).

"Spring" begins the whole oratorio with a dramatic, classical representation of the progress from Winter to Spring (Mahler took on the same subject later in his third symphony). The peasants sing a welcoming song and Simon lauds the return of the sun and the beginning of the ploughing season. A friendlier rainstorm than Beethoven's ensues, guaranteeing the success of the planting, and the peasants end with a chorus of thanksgiving to the creator for the vernal bounty.

All three of the soloists, who also joined in a trio, sounded splendid. Kauffman's pure soprano voice soared effortlessly, Culver shaped recitatives and arioso lines with poetry and nuance, and Johnson's focused tone and fine diction were predictably impressive. Wilkins paced the movements masterfully. The chorus, singing in mixed lineup, achieved a fine blend both among themselves and with the orchestra and articulated their German words with precision. The violins deserve a special nod for playing Haydn's complicated fiddle lines with verve and accuracy. Robert Mollard's harpsichord playing in the recitatives was fluent and stylish.

At the end, a very Spring-like bouquet was proffered to Linh Kauffman. She earned it, but a second set of flowers might have been bestowed on Maria Sellner, who has really transformed the Akron Symphony chorus.

Though it was snowing when the concert ended, the promise of Spring hung tantalizingly in the frosty air.

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