

Preview

Akron Symphony to mount full production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on March 8

by Mike Telin



“It’s a big production with a lot of artistic components. And it’s unique in that the play is extremely famous and so is the orchestral score,” said Akron Symphony Music Director Christopher Wilkins. “Almost everybody in the world would recognize the Wedding March. They may not know where it comes from but it is universally recognized.”

On Saturday, March 8 beginning at 8:00 pm in EJ Thomas Hall, Christopher Wilkins will lead the Akron Symphony, Summit Children’s Choir, Cuyahoga Valley Youth Ballet and Akron Symphony Shakespeare Players in a fully-staged production of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with music by Felix Mendelssohn.

In a recent telephone conversation Wilkins said he finds Mendelssohn’s music to be awe-inspiring. He also pointed out that Mendelssohn knew every word of the play (in German). While he was growing up it was common for the Mendelssohn family to stage many plays at their home. “They would invite guests to what they called Tableaux Vivants during which they would reproduce a historical theme or painting and people would come dressed as characters. Members of the family would write poetry. They had a little orchestra and Felix would write music. So when he wrote the overture at the age of 17 in the family garden, it’s pretty clear he already knew the play inside and out. The overture contains all of the elements of the play: Theseus’ Court, the Lovers, the Tradesmen, Bottom and his donkey, and of course the fairy world.”

Although Mendelssohn wrote about 65 minutes of music for *Midsummer*, the vast majority of it is never played by orchestras. “They only play the suite, so it’s the dramatic context of a production like ours that makes it fun for the musicians — to be able to play the Scherzo or the Nocturne in their dramatic context and to be able to really understand what that music represents.”

Saturday’s performance will be Wilkins's sixth time of conducting a complete production of *Midsummer*. Previous performances have been presented in Colorado Springs, Vail,

Phoenix, San Antonio and most recently in Orlando. “We will play every note of Mendelssohn’s score and we’ll do about 60% of the Shakespeare’s play.” The performance will last roughly 2-½ hours.

Has a complete production of *Midsummer Night’s Dream* like this ever been done in Ohio? “That’s a really good question. I don’t know of any performance in Ohio like the one we are doing,” said Wilkins. “Many orchestras have done the music with selected readings from the play, which is not the same thing we are doing. When I was with the Cleveland Orchestra, Kurt Masur did a *Peer Gynt* with readings by Werner Klemperer. I know he also did *Midsummer*. Honestly I cannot name another American orchestra that has done this other than the orchestras I have done it with. I do know it has been done in England and Scotland. But the idea of a fully staged production is extremely rare.”

The idea for such a production came about when Wilkins, who was in Colorado Springs at the time, was asked by the San Antonio Symphony to participate in their music director search. “They assigned me the incidental music from *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I went back and said, what about the idea of including some readings to go along with the music, and they said fine.”



Wilkins called his “long time partner in crime,” Murray Ross, who teaches at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs and is the director of Theatreworks. “I asked him if he would walk me through the play. So we sat down in my living room and went through every note of it together and were so excited when we saw exactly how closely Mendelssohn had allied his music with the rhythm of the dialogue. I knew that the San Antonio production would only have only one or two actors but I thought that someday it would be great to see how it could all fit together.”

Musically speaking, the big question is: will Saturday's performance include an [ophicleide](#)? “That is such a very funny question and no, it won't. I've never done it with ophicleide and I've never heard it performed with ophicleide except on period instrument recordings. But there are so many funny things you can read on the internet about the instrument including a poem by Ogden Nash. Yes, the instrument does figure very prominently in Mendelssohn’s score. I’ve never approached a tuba player to see if they wanted to take it on. And of course it is not a tuba and you don’t play it anything like a tuba. But before the tuba, it was the bass instrument of choice for many composers, including Berlioz. But it is the greatest name of all musical instruments. That and the sackbut.”

Although Wilkins loves all of the music, he says there’s a magic to Mendelssohn’s musical representation of the fairy kingdom. “Puck says that '*while we slumber here its all been nothing but a dream,*' and that magical quality is always there. Where it shows up as a paragon of early German romanticism is in the Nocturne. Mendelssohn uses it to represent the falling-to-sleep of the lovers, and we use it to frame the intermission as well. It allows the audience to go into the intermission in a dream state. We want to give everybody a delightful dream about love which is ultimately what the play is about.”

Moving on to Shakespeare, why does Craig Joseph, director of the Akron Symphony Shakespeare Players, think *Midsummer Night's Dream* is so popular? "I think one of the reasons is that it is so accessible linguistically and the plot is less complex than other Shakespeare plays. And its comedy still plays well today because it's about how ridiculous people are when they fall in love. And we've all had experiences that relate to a character in the play. Whether we are loving someone who doesn't love us back or realizing that we are loving the wrong person. Or, doing something completely asinine for the person that we think we love.



"These are things in the play that allow us to laugh at ourselves a little bit and not feel so bad because we know that everybody else is in the same boat. It's very universal." Joseph adds that for this production they will perform about 60% of the Shakespeare's play "We have not removed any plot events and the play does have a lot of repetition so you can trim it down without doing any violence to Shakespeare's story."

Joseph notes that in popular culture, it's one of the Shakespeare plays that is most imitated. "There's Woody Allen's *Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*, and endless movie adaptations of the play. I think all of these things are why it is so popular."

The Akron Symphony Shakespeare players is made up of people from as far south as Ashland and north as Cleveland and includes both Equity and non-Equity actors. "There are folks who are veterans of the stage and at least one person who is in her first play ever. Mendelssohn has written some singing parts for two of the fairies so there are two women who are classical music performers but who have not acted before."

Joseph posted a call for auditions in local trade papers and websites. "We had about 70 people audition for 18 roles. I have only worked with a few of the actors in the past. I think that Shakespeare is a particular bird, so there are a lot of folks who have worked with the Ohio Shakespeare Festival and Cleveland Shakespeare Festival. Many of them have Shakespeare training in their backgrounds."

What about the accents? "We're not doing British accents. First of all, the play takes place in Greece so we thought that was a justifiable reason not to. But when it concerns the iambic pentameter and passages that are written in verse, I am more concerned with getting the meaning across. In this production we do have to match Shakespeare's verse with Mendelssohn's music. We are trying to highlight the music, so I would say that we have been appropriately respectful to the verse without being slavishly tied to it."

Jacob's and Wilkins's last collaboration was on the Akron Symphony production of *Titanic*. "With *Titanic* we were working together week in and week out and with this it was a lot at the beginning and now a lot at the end and in the middle we were running sepa-

rately. For *Midsummer* there was a lot of discussion between us at the beginning. We sat down before it was even cast and listened to all of the music. We talked through the roadmap of technical things that I would need to communicate to the actors.

“We’re working with a fantastic scene and lighting designer, Deb Malcom, who has built a set that is in front of and runs through and behind the orchestra. There’s a large space downstage with ramps and pathways through the orchestra that leads to a smaller upstage all on different levels. It makes for a lot of fun because it allows us to do lovers' chase scenes with fairies running through. It all very immersive.”

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