

## Akron Symphony revisits 1814 at E.J. Thomas Hall (September 13)



by Daniel Hathaway

Akron Symphony music director Christopher Wilkins enjoys putting together themed programs that go well beyond what other orchestras put out to the public. On Saturday evening in E.J. Thomas Hall, with the help of Francis Scott Key, Dudley Buck, Ludwig van Beethoven, Charles Ives (via William Schuman), Michael Gandolfi, the Akron Symphony Chorus, One City Choir and Miller South Choir, Wilkins and the orchestra brought the spirit of 1814 vividly back to life through a canny choice of repertory.

The central inspiration for the program was the crafting of a poem by Baltimore lawyer Francis Scott Key, who witnessed the bombardment of Fort McHenry as prisoner on a British warship during a pivotal battle in the War of 1812 two centuries ago to the day. *The Star-Spangled Banner*, set to the tune of a British gentlemen's dining club song, eventually became the official national anthem of the United States.

Before that, the song was known as “The American National Air,” as Dudley Buck characterized it in his *Festival Overture*. Its melody appears as a secondary theme in a stirring work written for the 1879 Music Teachers’ National Association convention in Indianapolis. Ending with a setting of the whole tune, the piece automatically inspires a standing ovation (in this case, the audience happily assumed the role of the “optional” chorus).

Meanwhile, back in Vienna, perhaps oblivious to the events of 1814 but rejoicing in Napoleon’s abdication and working in parallel with the prime directives of the young American nation, Beethoven revised and remounted his opera, *Leonore*, providing it with a new overture and renaming the work *Fidelio*. Its inclusion on the Akron program — along with Beethoven’s eighth symphony — gave both weight and a sense of high spirits to the program on Saturday.

The Akron Symphony delivered finely-etched readings of both works. Wilkins’s brisk tempos may have seemed a bit hurried in the symphony — notably in the second movement and the Minuet — but the orchestra handled the pace with grace and efficiency. Clarinetist Kristina Belisle Jones and hornists Meghan Guegold and Cynthia Wulff garnered a special bow for their stellar playing in the Trio of the Minuet.

Charles Ives’s *Variations on America* dates from the same era as Dudley Buck’s overture, having been written during the composer’s late teens as an organ piece for an Independence Day celebration. Full of adolescent playfulness (including interludes that clash two distant keys together and a cheeky *Polonaise* in a minor key), the work gained new adherents when it was translated from a virtuoso organ piece into a colorful orchestral work in an arrangement by former Juilliard School president William Schuman. The orchestra played it with style and appropriately irreverent panache on Saturday.

The big production number of the evening — which brought the program back to its original topic — was Michael Gandolfi’s cinematic score, *Chesapeake: Summer of 1814*, composed for an earlier celebration of the bicentenary of the Battle of Fort McHenry. Based on *The Star-Spangled Banner*, the work comprises eight evocative vignettes that paint episodes in the War of 1812 interspersed with narration skillfully delivered by David Lieberth. Gandolfi’s music may not live on as a standard piece in the orchestral repertory, but it more than filled the bill for its place on this program. As the four verses (there are four!) of the National Anthem accumulated throughout the piece, more and more singers were added until the stage was full of voices, including a flag-waving corps of young vocalists from Miller South School. And for the second time, the audience rose to its feet to join in the festivities.

*Rehearsal photo: Akron Symphony Orchestra (via Facebook).*

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