

Akron Symphony: *Cirque de la Symphonie* at E.J. Thomas Hall (October 18)

by Jane Berkner



Symphony musicians know all too well the feeling of being terrified during a performance. On Saturday night, October 18, in EJ Thomas Hall, the audience had plenty of reasons to share that feeling with the Akron Symphony.

Aerial acrobats hung upside down above the orchestra during *Cirque de la Symphonie*, a pops concert featuring glorious feats of athleticism and agility performed without

a safety net and accompanied by an abundance of lighter, pleasing classical fare.

After opening the concert with Smetana's "Dance of the Comedians" from *The Bartered Bride*, music director Christopher Wilkins pointed out the thirty-foot truss that spanned the stage above the orchestra. He warned the audience sitting at the front of hall that they were in the equivalent of Sea World's "splash zone" before he was joined on stage by the first cirque performer, professional aerialist Christine Van Loo. She displayed a dazzling amount of physical dexterity, dangling from a rope attached to the overhead truss in a routine choreographed to Camille Saint-Saëns's *Danse Macabre*.

The audience reacted with hushed tension for this first routine, unsure of whether or when to applaud and holding their collective breath while observing Van Loo's aerial daring. Sporadic clapping eventually warmed to frequent bursts of delighted applause.

The Akron Symphony began the evening with a stiffness that mirrored the audience's misgivings, but they quickly found the excitement and musical personality needed to accompany the robust and vastly entertaining circus troop. They provided clean readings

of the lighter masterworks, a program that included Khachaturian's *Sabre Dance*, a Strauss polka and two Tchaikovsky waltzes.

The orchestra seemed to especially enjoy the arrangement of *Tico-Tico no Fubá* by Brazilian composer Zequinha de Abreu on the second half of the program. They weren't phased by the clapping interspersed throughout their performance, nor with the flying humans above them. At one point, a performer in a Cyr Wheel, a sort of giant metal hula-hoop held by hands and feet in a spread eagle position, rolled within inches of the cello section. They continued to bow away, a testament to their concentration.

Lots of laughter accompanied the acrobatics and gymnastics during the concert. In his sparkling harlequin outfit and painted white face, juggler Vladimir Tsarkov brought a smile to all, teasing orchestra, conductor and performers alike as a part of his mime act. At one point he gently tossed the objects he was juggling toward a few audience members, who graciously played along.

Some of the biggest laughs of the night came from Christopher Wilkins. Comparing his daring to that of the acrobats, the Maestro reminded us that he was conducting the concert from the top of a podium that was *at least* eight inches off the ground, and that he was standing on *only* two feet. He seemed genuinely engaged by the cirque performers.

The first half of the concert concluded with the excitement and musical majesty of John Williams's *Superman March* accompanying the aerial gymnastics of Vitalii Buza. Buza himself looked every inch the superhuman as he circled above the orchestra holding a strap first with both, then with only one hand. Maestro Wilkins clapped so enthusiastically for Buza that he almost forgot to motion for the orchestra to stand.

The evening also included performances by a contortionist and master quick-change artist, as well as a riveting spinning cube act.

It was a pleasure to hear so many of the lighter classics in one concert. This was a terrific family-oriented event with well-played orchestral music and enthralling physical feats from a roster of performers that boasts Olympic athletes, ballet dancers and winners of prestigious awards. The audience seemed enchanted with all elements of the program, giving a hearty standing ovation at the end.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 20, 2014.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)