

Akron Symphony Orchestra: Levi Hammer to perform Ravel concerto

by Mike Telin



“I love this concerto so much, I almost don’t know what to say,” pianist and Akron Symphony Associate Conductor Levi Hammer told us during a recent conversation. “It’s one of those pieces that’s been with me for most of my life, and I’m so happy to be able to play it again.”

On Saturday, November 22 at 8:00 pm, in the University of Akron’s E.J. Thomas Hall, Levi Hammer will perform Ravel’s jazz-inspired *Piano Concerto in G major* with

the ASO under the direction of Christopher Wilkins. The concert will also include Fauré’s *Pavane*, Mozart’s *Symphony No. 34 in C* and his “*Coronation*” *Mass in C*, featuring the Akron Symphony Chorus.

Ravel composed the G-major concerto between 1929 and 1931 following a 1928 concert tour of the United States during which he met George Gershwin, who introduced him to Harlem jazz clubs. During the same tour, Ravel visited New Orleans, where he also took in that city’s vibrant jazz culture.

“For years American classical composers took their influences from Europe,” Hammer pointed out. “But as a lover of the golden era of American popular music, it is amazing to me that Gershwin and Porter could suddenly influence a composer from the other side of the pond.”

That fact did not go unnoticed by Ravel, who is quoted as saying, “The most captivating part of jazz is its rich and diverting rhythm...a vital source of inspiration for modern composers, and I am astonished that so few Americans are influenced by it.”

Hammer describes Ravel as a “quintessentially French composer,” but finds his music to be slightly different from that of Fauré, Debussy, Duparc and Poulenc, because of his ability to incorporate the music of different nationalities into his unique musical style.

“He wrote songs with Hebrew and Greek themes. There are Basque influences in his music, and of course he wrote Spanish music as well as any Spanish composer. He wrote in the style of the French baroque and has works with Arabic influences. And of course in *Tzigane* he is imitating gypsy music.” Hammer’s favorite example is *La Valse*. “How this composer managed to write a waltz that is so Viennese while remaining so totally French is incredible.”

Hammer, who is now in his fifth season with the ASO, looks forward to performing the concerto with what he calls his hometown orchestra. “This is a piano concerto, but it’s also a concerto for the orchestra. There are so many killer brass and woodwind lines. One passage is a mini harp concerto.”

He especially looks forward to the simple yet emotional slow movement, which features an extended solo for the English horn. “The interesting thing about this movement is that the opening is sight-readable — anyone could sit down and play it — but it is in fact the hardest. The voicing between the melody and the accompanying chords has to be perfect. I’m also imagining the beautiful tone of our English horn player, Cyn Warren. It will be fun to play that big duet with her.”

Saturday’s performance also has special meaning for Levi Hammer because this marks his final season with the Akron Symphony. “Usually the tenure of assistant or associate conductors tenure lasts for two, possibly three seasons, and this has been five wonderful years. The orchestra is full of amazing musicians and people. I could go on and on about them.”

Although Hammer said there are dozens of things he will be taking away from this experience, he is eternally grateful for the mentorship of Christopher Wilkins, who he calls the ideal American music director and consummate musician. “Watching how he interacts with the orchestra, the community, the administration, and the board has been a huge lesson for me. He is someone I can emulate, and because of that I feel more comfortable in my own abilities.”

Hammer also credits Wilkins for encouraging him to continue to perform as a pianist. “He’s asked me to play concertos with the orchestra so many times — in fact, this is our fifth concerto together. The first couple of times he asked me, I thought, ‘Why don’t you get one of the big boys like Bronfman whom you have worked with many times?’ I’m thankful that because of him, the piano is still a part of my life.”

Hammer is also deeply appreciative of the Akron Symphony musicians. You can hear that in his voice. “I’m thankful to have been able to work with these incredible players in my first professional job. I had previously worked with Ben Zander and the Boston Philharmonic, but that was a fellowship and not an artistic staff position. And I have to say, it was a rough transition. You want to do your best at all times, but you do make mistakes. And when you do, some people can be very unhappy, but others are very forgiving and take you aside to offer heartfelt advice. So the players have mentored me as well.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 17, 2014.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)