

Akron Symphony Orchestra with guests Benjamin Zander & Jonah Ellsworth (January 10)

by Daniel Hathaway



Visitors from Boston were the headliners for the Akron Symphony concert at E.J. Thomas hall on Saturday evening. Guest conductor Benjamin Zander and 20-year-old cellist Jonah Ellsworth brought along major works by Antonin Dvořák and Dmitri Shostakovich and gave them compelling performances.

Zander, who has conducted the Boston Philharmonic since its creation in 1978, served as a mentor to Akron's music director, Christopher Wilkins, who played oboe in Zander's orchestra. Zander, in turn, has marshaled Ellsworth through his formative years at the New England Conservatory Preparatory School as he successively studied with Natasha Brofsky and Andrew Mark and now with Laurence Lesser at NEC itself. That mentorship system is the way classical musicians are raised and cultivated, and it works very well.

Dvořák's *Cello Concerto, op. 104*, dates from the composer's sojourn in the United States between 1892-1895. It seems odd to us now that late nineteenth-century composers regarded the cello as an unlikely solo instrument — as did Dvořák himself, until he heard the New York Philharmonic perform Victor Herbert's concerto in 1894.

Jonah Ellsworth looked both relaxed and eager as he took the stage for what has become one of the most important solo cello works in the repertoire. His winning tone and excellent intonation were fine vehicles for Dvořák's lyrical solo lines, and he projected well over the orchestra even when textures grew thicker and the emotional temperature rose. As Ellsworth amasses experience with concerto playing, his talents will surely allow him to develop additional personality and presence. He's definitely a player to watch.

Zander kept the proceedings on a short but flexible leash, drawing both mellifluous and urgent playing from the Akron Symphony. Cynthia Wulff presaged excellent section playing by the horns with a gorgeous solo near the beginning, and brass and winds maintained a lovely blend throughout the concerto. Winds and brass were elevated on risers for this performance, which greatly improved their projection into the hall and their balance with the strings.

Shostakovich's well-known fifth symphony — the one that re-ingratiated the composer with the Politburo after his condemnation by Stalin over the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk* — filled the second half of the concert with powerful music of delicious ambiguity. (In a charming, Yo Yo Ma-like gesture, the evening's concerto soloist showed up in the back of the cello section for the symphony.)

Benjamin Zander read his own commentary before playing the work. Expanding on Richard Rodda's excellent program notes, he made much of the composer's controversial metronome marking at the end of the work, a tempo indication so slow that conductors (including Leonard Bernstein, who played the symphony in Moscow with the composer in the audience) have regarded it as a mistake and sped up the tempo at the symphony's apparently triumphant conclusion. Not so, said Zander. It's meant to be a secret jab at the Russian authorities, a denial of victory through a pull-back in tempo.

Strong and ominous (and played at a very deliberate tempo), the opening *Moderato* movement led on to a sardonic waltz. The strings played with fearsome intensity in the *Largo*, where oboist Terry Orcutt and clarinetist Kristina Jones spun out solos beautiful for their utter bleakness.

The finale was sonically magnificent, reinforced by flawless brass playing. Zander carefully respected Shostakovich's tempo indications, which ramp up the speed of the music by increments, and made good on his promise to play the final section dead slow, and with emphasis on its incessantly repeated A's — 252 of them.

Did that work? Not entirely. What might once have had historic resonance doesn't translate so well to contemporary performances. This approach to the ending just seemed stodgy. But even then, Zander and the Akron Symphony constructed wonderful sounds and timbres that filled the whole concert hall.

Photo: Zander and Ellsworth after a concert last May with the Boston Philharmonic Youth Orchestra at Harvard's Sanders Theater.

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