

## Akron Symphony: “Four Rivers” at E.J. Thomas Hall (March 14)

by Daniel Hathaway



Themed symphony orchestra programs — often cooked up by marketing departments — can be gimmicky. But Akron Symphony music director Christopher Wilkins’s “Four Rivers” program at E.J. Thomas Hall on Saturday, March 14 took three European rivers and one American one that lives only in the realm of metaphor, and made them tributaries that flowed beautifully together into a larger stream.

Concerts often end with Strauss waltzes, but this one began with one. Johann Jr.’s *The Beautiful, Blue Danube*, is a piece, Wilkins noted, that Stanley Kubrick had used so effectively in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Its lilts, hesitations and special little *rubatos* are tricky to pull off unless you’ve been lapped by the waters of the Danube since infancy, but Wilkins and the orchestra did a very creditable job of posing as a Viennese orchestra.

After making some pithy and quite funny remarks about the program, Wilkins led the orchestra in Bedřich Smetana’s *The Moldau*. Beginning with drops of water in the flutes and violins, the river turns into a great flow as it washes through the valleys of Bohemia past hunting parties, a wedding feast, the St. John Rapids, and the castle of Vyšehrad, finally vanishing from sight.

Inner wind details trickled along merrily while the strings dug their bows into Smetana’s big tunes, and climaxes were crowned by noble playing from horns, trumpets and trombones.

Among the large scores Edward “Duke” Ellington wrote for symphonic forces later in his career was a single ballet, *The River*, composed in 1970 and choreographed by Alvin

Ailey for the American Ballet Theatre. Ellington's river is a metaphor for the cycle of birth and rebirth. The Spring, The Meander, The Giggling Rapids, The Lake, The Falls, The River, and The Twin Cities — each movement represents a stage in the human life cycle.

The music is an artful synthesis of Ellington's many jazz voices and the modernist style he adopted for his symphonic and sacred works. Reflecting that jazz background — and the fact that jazz musicians write stand-alone pieces rather than large, continuous works linked by transitions — the movements are separated by silence (or in this case some vigorous page turning). Here the ASO, whose trombones were splendid at creating a big band sound, was supplemented by a trap set that supplied a big dollop of character to the mix. The orchestra gave *The River* a rousing, characterful performance.

The horn section had been busy all evening, but it got a workout — with splendid results — in Robert Schumann's *Rhenish Symphony*. It's a compact, evocative piece with references to life on the Rhine River in every movement. Peasant dances, a ritual in Cologne Cathedral, and a folk festival all play a role. Conducting from memory, Wilkins drew a vigorous, expressive performance from the Akron Symphony that brought a well-conceived thematic evening to a satisfying conclusion.

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