

## Akron Symphony: “American Journey” at E.J. Thomas Hall (September 19)

by Daniel Hathaway



Pianist Philip Thomson joined music director Christopher Wilkins and the Akron Symphony Orchestra in a spirited concert on Saturday, September 19 at E.J. Thomas Hall. The “American Journey” began in Mexico with Aaron Copland’s *El Salón México*, stopped in Texarkana, Texas for Clint Needham’s *Southern Air*, and traveled to somewhere in the Wild West for Copland’s *Rodeo* before meeting up with George Gershwin in New York.

Gershwin followed his 1924 *Rhapsody in Blue* a year later with a true concerto for piano and orchestra — the *Concerto in F* — which paid closer homage to classical forms while taking its melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic cues from American music of the 1920s. Writing in the *New York Tribune*, the composer noted that the opening

movement is based on a Charleston rhythm, the slow movement is “a purer form” of the American blues, and the finale is “an orgy of rhythms, starting violently, and keeping the same pace throughout.”

Longtime University of Akron piano professor Philip Thomson embraced the classical and contemporary elements of the concerto with equal enthusiasm, contributing technically brilliant and soulful playing throughout the engaging work.

Wilkins and the orchestra wrapped colorful orchestral textures around Thomson’s fine fingerwork. The string section sounded full and vibrant, and soloists — especially principal trumpet Scott Johnston, English hornist Mary Kausek, and concertmaster Alan Bodman — added lusciously to the piano-orchestral conversation. The perpetual motion finale was as precise as it was thrilling.

Copland's *El Salón México* was inspired by his visit to a seedy, south-of-the-border nightclub in 1932, his 1942 *Rodeo* by the success of a previous "cowboy ballet," *Billy the Kid*, in 1938.

While *Salón* synthesizes rather than directly quotes Mexican popular music, the piece seems perfectly evocative of the sketchy venue Copland tried to capture in sound. *Rodeo* is a better-developed piece of music. It was fun to hear the whole ballet score rather than a suite of excerpts, even if you longed to see some of the choreographic sight gags that some of the halting bits of music were meant to accompany.



Distinguished solo work from principal clarinet Kristina Jones, acting principal oboe Cynthia Warren, and principal trombone Thomas Pylinski, as well as brilliant playing from the brass section, further enhanced Copland's vivid writing. Less happily, some percussion passages were a nanosecond behind.

The two Copland works were separated by the piece Clint Needham wrote in 2014 for the fifth anniversary of his hometown orchestra, the Texarkana Symphony. Wilkins introduced the composer with the promise that the Akron audience would be hearing more from Needham soon: he's in charge of a mobile app-based initiative to catch the sounds of Akron, to be wrapped into a Knight Foundation-funded "Community Interactive Symphony." That piece will be premiered in April, 2016.

The recorded sounds of Texarkana's crickets, katydids, and a freight train introduced Needham's *Southern Air*, a colorfully-scored, expertly layered soundscape that played with two senses of the word "air." Needham incorporates the first, meaning a lyrical instrumental work, via a nostalgic-sounding "folk music" motif. For the second, meaning "atmosphere," he suggests the viscosity of the air of the South in the summertime.

Toward the end, a marching band walks through, completing a vivid sonic memory from childhood.

Throughout the evening, the Akron Symphony, tiered on risers, played with presence, excellent blend, and richness of tone. Whatever Wilkins and the orchestra did to achieve that kind of sound in E.J. Thomas on Saturday, they should keep doing it.

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