

Clint Needham's *Sounds of Akron* to debut at E.J. Thomas this Saturday

by Mike Telin



What does Akron sound like to you? This is the question the Akron Symphony Orchestra and composer Clint Needham asked when they invited Akron area residents to download the iOS or Android apps and upload their recordings to the Sounds of Akron website from late last spring through the fall.

Those became the inspiration for his new collaborative work, *Sounds of Akron: City Meets Symphony*, which will be premiered by the Akron Symphony at E.J. Thomas Hall under the direction of Christopher Wilkins on April 16 at 8:00 pm. The program will also include Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 4* featuring soprano Christine Brandes. A pre-concert celebration will begin at 6:00 pm.

Although the official kick-off for the project was last spring, Clint Needham and Christopher Wilkins began preparing for the project by spending time with innovative composer and MIT Media Lab professor [Tod Machover](#), the father of the project, who had previously overseen similar collaborations in Edinburgh, Scotland; Perth, Australia; and Toronto. With funding from the Knight Foundation, Machover has taken the project to Detroit. Akron is the second U.S. city to be invited by the Foundation to participate. (Read the backstory [here](#).)

Recalling the visit to Machover's lab, Needham said, "I think Chris and I had our jaws on the floor the entire time. The technology was amazing and so easy to use. And Tod manipulated it to fit the needs of our project perfectly."

Although Needham received submitted sounds throughout the summer and fall, he said that he refrained from shaping his composition until all were in. "There was a cut-off date for submissions, and I decided that I shouldn't officially start the piece until then. I

would receive hundreds at a time, and I did listen to them,” he noted. “It was like Christmas morning every time a batch would arrive.”

When he began listening to the sound files, Needham said he was surprised by what he heard. “My perception of Akron was very much factories and industry, and the downtown sounds of traffic and people rushing by. I got a fair share of those, but I also got the sounds of people in their backyards playing with their kids, and recordings of squeaky swing sets. And there were a ton of nature sounds, like birds, water, and wind. Until spending time in Akron I didn’t really think about the National Park being so close by. It’s quite special.”

Another thing that surprised Needham was the number of people who submitted original compositions complete with melodic and harmonic material, two of which he has used in his piece. “I used one tune intact,” he pointed out, “and I took the other one to the Gospel Meets Symphony Choir and asked them to riff on it. That experience was awesome. I don’t know how to describe it because it was just so cool. I just wanted to jam with them for hours.”

Needham also received melodic submissions based on of the Akron Symphony. “There’s no doubt that to a lot of people the sounds of Akron are the Symphony. I used one cryptogram that was tonal, and one that was chromatic. I liked them so much that I used them intact, and then created material drawn from those sets of pitches.”

Needham said that he thinks of the Akron Symphony as having an American aesthetic and being committed to American music. It also has an American music director who understands the community. “I’ve heard them play a lot of American music, including my own. The way they play Copland is so fresh and exciting, so as a little nod to them and that sound, the piece has a lot of the open-fifth intervals which are associated with Copland. And it just so happened that the tonal melody based on the cryptogram is full of these open-spaced intervals, so I really lucked out.”

Sounds of Akron: City Meets Symphony is 30 minutes in duration and scored for full orchestra: triple winds; four horns, three trumpets and trombones, and tuba; a three-member percussion section which employs wine bottles and a drum set; an electric guitar; harp; piano; strings; and a steel drum ensemble. “Steel drums are such a big part of Akron, and the Miller South Middle School Steel Pan Ensemble will perform during the piece. I’ve never written for steel pan ensemble before, and when I heard them play it, I couldn’t believe that music I had written sounded like that — there’s such a character to the sound.”

The project also gave him an opportunity to further explore his recent interest in blending electronics with large ensembles. “I first did it three or four years ago with my *Concerto for Wind Ensemble*,” Needham said. His second electroacoustic composition was the result of a commission from the Albany Symphony. “I was really nervous to ask them if I could use electronics: typically when I get an orchestra commission the specifics are very much laid out for me. But this one was a little open-ended and I saw a window to take what I had done with the Concerto and apply it to the orchestral setting.”

For Needham, the Akron Symphony commission came at just the right time in his career. “If Christopher had called me a year or two prior, I would have been really nervous to the point where I might have said no to it because there are composers better-qualified. But by the time I was asked, I felt pretty comfortable saying yes, especially with the idea of telling a story through the lens of both the orchestra and the pre-recorded electronics. Orchestral music without words is pretty abstract, but with a recorded track you can clarify some things for the audience. That’s where I started with the project, but I didn’t know it would take on the beautiful human quality that it has.”

Needham predicts that Saturday’s premiere will be a spectacle in the greatest way. “I hope that ten minutes into the piece, people will be crying, then shortly after, tapping their feet and bobbing their heads. At the end I hope they’re just really excited and feel happy and hopeful about their city and their orchestra. It’s going to be wonderful.”

(Click [here](#) to view a promotional video.)

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 12, 2016.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)