

Neos Dance Meets Symphony in Akron: a conversation with Robert Wesner

by Mike Telin



If you're looking for a different way to celebrate St. Patrick's Day, the [Akron Symphony](#) has the answer. On Friday, March 17 at 8:00 pm at E.J. Thomas Hall, Christopher Wilkins will lead the Orchestra in a program titled "Dance Meets Symphony." The first half of the program will

include Irish-themed works by Leroy Anderson as well as Manuel de Falla's *The Three-Cornered Hat*.

The second half of the evening will mark the first mainstage collaboration between the ASO and [Neos Dance Theatre](#). "Neos has been involved with some of the ASO's outreach activities like the pop-up events that we've done as part of the Downtown Akron Partnership," the company's Co-founder and Artistic Director Robert Wesner said during a recent telephone conversation. "But this was the first time I was able to sit down with Christopher and the Orchestra's artistic team to see what an evening with dance might look like."

Wesner said that what they've created for the second half of the concert is essentially a repertory show that features three very different works choreographed to music by Jean Sibelius, Georges Enesco, and Clint Needham. "We'll start classically, then move into contemporary, and finally to the more risky, wild dance theater," Wesner said. "These are the types of programs I enjoy curating the most because they push the dancers to be more full-bodied than they would be if the show was dedicated to one particular style. This show also speaks to the diverse community that we serve."

As a choreographer, Wesner finds that the three movements of Sibelius's *Karelia Suite* are perfect for ballet. "The pastoral phrases that he weaves in and out of the orchestral score are so intricate. There's this constant underscoring of what's coming next, and I hope the dance reflects that. I'm really happy with how it turned out."

Defined by swift, changing tempos and musical themes, Georges Enesco's *Romanian Rhapsody No. 1* presented Wesner with a completely different set of choreographic challenges. "I had to figure out how to quickly switch gears. But it's a wild piece so I've created a wild dance."

The dance portion of the evening will conclude with an inventive take on Needham's *Urban Sprawl* as classical, hip hop, and a DJ all share the Thomas Hall stage. "We have a local composer and five different organizations and artists who are all a part of this ten-minute wonder," Wesner said. "The DJ sent us some samples of how he could gradually take over the soundscape, then cross back into Needham's music."

Choreographer Mary Elizabeth Fenn worked with the Neos dancers and hip hop dancers who are part of the company's Oberlin residency, while Kara Stewart and Erica Piper prepared student dancers from the Cuyahoga Falls-based [ArtSparks](#). "It's been fascinating to watch it all come together," Wesner said.

With Neos Dance based in Mansfield and satellite posts in Akron and Oberlin, Robert Wesner said that managing all of the company's moving parts requires strong administration. "It's figuring out how to move everyone around and still produce something that we can be proud of. We're on a stage somewhere in Northern Ohio on an average of every other weekend, so it's a lot of work for the dancers. But we're having a great time and really enjoying it."

Wesner said that it's wonderful to meet so many people who have a hunger for dance and who are willing to help see the company's projects come to fruition. "This project in particular has been a lot of fun to work on. It was the ASO's vision to bring in a collaborator like Neos, and to give us the capability to curate a show. It's had many challenges, but these challenges are welcome, and we're so grateful to have been asked."

Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 13, 2017.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)