

Tuesday Musical celebrates 130th Anniversary: a conversation with composer James Wilding

by Mike Telin



During the year 1887, detective Sherlock Holmes made his first appearance in a novel, Emile Berliner was granted a patent for his Gramophone, Giuseppe Verdi's *Otello* premiered at La Scala, and Dvořák wrote his Second Piano Quintet. The year also included the births of Nadia Boulanger, Arthur Rubinstein, and Heitor Villa-Lobos — and marked the birth of Akron's Tuesday Musical Association.

On Saturday, September 16 at E.J. Thomas Hall, Tuesday Musical will celebrate 130 years as an anchor arts organization in Northeast Ohio in style with “Prelude Party, Concert and Extraordinary Experiences.” The Party, which begins at 5:30, will be followed by a 7:30 concert that will showcase Tuesday Musical's programs and collaborations. The concert will include performances by the Escher String Quartet, violinist Grace Brown of the Brahms Allegro Junior Music Club, soprano and 2017 Scholarship Competition winner Olivia Boen, and the 2016 Cleveland International Piano Competition Gold Medalist Nikita Mndoyants. Tickets may be purchased for the entire evening or for the concert only. Click [here](#) for more information.

The evening will also feature the world premiere of James Wilding's *Homeland Portraits* performed by the Escher String Quartet, TMA's Quartet-in-Residence. Wilding, who teaches composition and theory at the University of Akron, said that when he was asked to compose a string quartet for Saturday's celebration, he jumped at the opportunity and immediately began making sketches for the work. “Whenever I had an idea, I wrote it down,” the composer said during a recent telephone conversation. “I had to get a sense of where I was going, because I hadn't written a string quartet for ten years, and those were mostly student compositions.”

Wilding said that *Homeland Portraits* celebrates the passing of time. “This is a celebratory event for them — it’s their 130th anniversary — so I wanted to write something that showed all of the time that had gone by. That’s when I came up with this idea of home. And if you look back at a home from a long time ago, there are memories.”

The composer said that it’s difficult to say how much his memories of growing up in South Africa played out musically in his new work. “We are all a product of our backgrounds. I listened to everything from classical music to popular music of the ‘80s to ‘township music’ and things like that which were on the periphery of my life in South Africa. All of that is very much a part of me.” Wilding said that he now considers United States to be his home, having lived here for eighteen years. “But I go back to South Africa every year and I always feel a sense of coming to my *other* home. When you compose something, you are expressing the deepest part of yourself, so I was thinking back to those memories and my own aural history.”

When it came to writing *Homeland Portraits*, Wilding first composed what became the middle movement, ‘Open Plain.’ “It started out with a very simple melodic line, almost a folksong,” he said. From there, the music evolved into a movement that has everything in it from darkness to light. “When I started writing it I thought it was going to be the whole piece, but towards the end, I got the idea that it needed bookends.”

Wilding described ‘People Gathering,’ the first movement of his 22-minute quartet, as jolly and in celebration of Tuesday Musical’s 130-year history. He said the third, ‘Fire,’ contains the darkest-sounding music. “We’re watching fires on the TV on the West Coast right now, and at the time I was writing the piece, there were fires in South Africa. I was thinking about that as well as the spiritual side of fire — the creative fire. That’s what the movement is really about.”

During his ten-year hiatus from writing string quartets, Wilding devoted much of his time to composing music for winds and piano. He noted that returning to the genre has made him aware of how much his musical style has developed during the intervening years, as has his ability to write idiomatically for strings. “In the past I tended to write more cerebrally — if I had an idea in my head, and could play it on the piano, that was fine. It was hit and miss, and although I did write some good string music, I also wrote some that was totally impossible. But this time I wanted to make it something that was tactile for the instruments, so I spent a lot of time fine-tuning my ideas.”

When asked about the challenges a composer is faced with when writing for strings, he answered, “There are tons, but string crossings are the first thing that comes to my mind. To go from the low g string to the high e string, you have to pick up the bow and put it down again. Being aware of tiny, practical aspects like that can make a big difference.”

Because Wilding wanted *Homeland Portraits* to have a particular sonority, the piece doesn’t often venture into the highest ranges of the instruments. He has also shied away from the use of extended techniques. “It’s not that kind of piece, although during the months that I was thinking about where I would go with it, I went through all of those possibilities. There is some *ponticello* — playing with the bow near the bridge, which produces a weird sound — but everyone from Beethoven on has used that.”

Turning our conversation to the subject of teaching, Wilding said that he finds the best way to help his students develop their own musical voices is to let them go with what they want to do. “I can give a student all sorts of suggestions when they bring something and ask, ‘What should I do with it?’ But in the end, I have to encourage them to have the confidence to do what they want. As a teacher, I need to remain as open as possible. I have to encourage them to follow their artistic instincts.”

Wilding’s interest in composing can be traced back to his high school days, when he was writing songs for his rock band. “I haven’t done that since,” he said. “In fact, I’m not interested in rock music at all. I got bitten by the classical bug with a few pieces of music — one was the *Afternoon of a Faun*. When I was sixteen I thought there was nothing better in the whole world. Then of course I wanted to imitate it. But it’s like I tell my students, there’s an inner urge to compose, and that is the bottom line. Composing feels right to me. It’s not just that I enjoy it — I also enjoy a hamburger — but there’s something more than that when I compose. I really feel that it is the thing that is the deepest part of myself.”

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