

Akron Symphony Orchestra: 15 minutes with cellist Tony Rymer

by Jarrett Hoffman



“The purpose of art is expression, but I think it’s also about empathy,” cellist Tony Rymer said in a recent conversation. “When you’re studying a piece by a composer who died a couple hundred years ago, in the end, you’re trying to understand why they wrote it that way and what they wanted it to sound like. You have to connect with someone from a different time — you kind of become friends with dead people through the music.”

On Saturday, September 23 at 8:00 pm at E.J. Thomas Hall, Rymer will join the Akron Symphony Orchestra and Music Director Christopher Wilkins for the season opener, “Slavic Soul,” featuring Tchaikovsky’s *Marche Slave*, Shostakovich’s *Cello Concerto No. 1*, and Dvořák’s *Symphony No. 7*. Wilkins will lead a pre-concert discussion at 7:00 pm.

At the age of 25, cellist Tony Rymer has made solo appearances with some of America’s top orchestras, including Cleveland, Atlanta, and Pittsburgh. His resume includes winning the 2009 Sphinx Competition and finishing runner-up in the 2014 George Enescu Competition, and he’s been heard as a soloist on WGBH Boston, WCLV Cleveland, and NPR’s “From the Top” and “Performance Today.”

After earning his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at the New England Conservatory, Rymer made the jump from his hometown of Boston to Berlin, where he currently studies at the Hanns Eisler Hochschule für Musik. But when I caught up with him, he was temporarily back stateside, a day after playing Dvořák’s *Concerto* with the Avanti Orchestra in Washington, D.C. I began by asking him about his experience of moving to Berlin.

“It’s given me a lot of perspective. I see the U.S. in a different light now,” Rymer said, adding that his sense of what is normal has changed. “It can be anything from what people eat to how often people drive. In terms of music, most of the orchestras in Germany are sponsored by the government — they don’t have donors or anything. The administrators and the bigwigs in U.S. orchestras have to spend a lot of their time fundraising and trying to please the audience, while over there, people are more free to play how they want because their jobs are secure and they’re paid by the government. I think artistically it gives people more freedom.”

Rymer pointed out that Shostakovich’s First Concerto is a test of stamina. “There aren’t really any big pauses except after the first movement, so it’s quite difficult to keep going for basically half an hour without a break — and the soloist plays almost the entire time.”

Describing the Concerto, Rymer said, “The first movement is very driven, almost relentless. The tempo marking is just a tiny bit slower than a normal march, and you can take that as not being very meaningful, but I think it makes the whole thing kind of ominous in that there’s something that’s just a little bit off about it. The second movement is very lyrical and singing, but it’s dark.

“The third is a cadenza for cello. They say that Shostakovich lived many years of his life with a suitcase packed all the time in case he would have to leave in the middle of the night to escape the secret police. This movement shows an artist who is always being watched and criticized for what he writes. It’s depressing and bleak, and completely lost in a way. It builds up to a huge climax that starts the fourth movement, which is kind of a raucous romp but a little bit twisted all the way to the end.”

Rymer has played cello since he was 5, but there was a time when he wanted to quit. If he *had*, what would he have wanted to be? After a long pause to think, he said, “I love playing soccer, and I used to want to be a professional. I don’t know that I was ever any good, and I haven’t been in a real league since I was maybe 12 or 13, but I still play and still enjoy it. I think career-wise, it probably wasn’t the best choice for a relatively mediocre player in the U.S.”

Near the end of our conversation, Rymer weighed the pros and cons of social media in the world of music. “It’s good in that it gives people access to publicity. Anyone can post a recording of themselves playing and gain access to the entire world that way. I think it also gives people the opportunity to hear different kinds of playing and form their own opinions. There are so many more recordings available now, and you can just go on YouTube and listen to any piece.

“The flip side is that musicians can pick and choose what they like from many different recordings and end up with an amalgamation of interpretations without really focusing on building their own unique understanding. But it doesn’t have to be that way. There are definitely people who build their interpretations solely on the score — and those are best because they’re based on trying to understand what the composer wanted.”

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