

Guest essay

A Summer in Ohio (and a Thank You to Akron)

by Levi Hammer

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“Why, oh why, oh why, oh — why did I ever leave Ohio?” So goes Bernstein's Broadway hit. In moments of discouragement in Berlin over the last year, my thoughts drifted to that tune. This summer brought me back to Ohio for my third season at Cincinnati Opera, where I worked on the Barrie Kosky production of *The Magic Flute* on loan from the Komische Oper Berlin. Spending a summer in my beloved Ohio has given me cause to reflect on my time there.

I first traveled to Ohio assisting Benjamin Zander when he was conducting Mahler's Ninth Symphony with the Akron Symphony. I had never heard of this orchestra, let alone of the city of Akron, and I was unaware of the

musical riches of Northeast Ohio, extending back to industrialization, and the two world-class orchestras in the region (The Cleveland Orchestra and the Pittsburgh Symphony). Many musicians in the area started their orchestral careers in the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony, run with iron will by Lorin Maazel's mother. During that week in Akron with Ben, I fell in love with the orchestra, its community, and its music director, and I was shortly thereafter fortunate to get hired as its assistant (and later associate) conductor.

I conducted the Akron Symphony in over 100 concerts, and I prepared all of its theatrical and operatic productions. It was a personal and artistic journey for which I will always be thankful. I had been in and in front of orchestras my whole life, but it was in Akron that I learned how an orchestra really works. Scores are a conductor's holy books, but the conductor is mute, and it is the musicians of the orchestra who actually make the music. The Akron Symphony is full of proud orchestral citizens like bassoonist Renee Dee, who taught me the intricacies of the musicians union

agreement, and oboist Terry Orcutt, who commands the respect of all his colleagues. (Once, when playing the Poulenc *Trio for Oboe, Bassoon and Piano*, Terry sternly informed me that I was rushing. Needless to say, I went home and practiced with a metronome.)

I worked closely with the staff, board, and education committee. President of the Board Renee Pipitone guided me in designing concerts for young children with her knowledge of early childhood education. Staff member Brenda Justice inspired me with her wholehearted willingness to help anyone at any time. Veteran Akron Public Schools arts administrator Sally Childs always made me laugh while we sifted through education committee documents, and Cory Smith — Akron Symphony violinist and librarian, and devoted educator — never failed to share his insight into working with a young string section.

Community outreach was an integral part of my job. Our education committee designed a program for elementary school teachers to prepare their classes for our children's concerts, and I conducted (I use that term loosely) these teachers in little compositions of their own invention, using self-made instruments that would demonstrate how an orchestra makes sounds — drawing a bow across or plucking a string, hitting a drum, or blowing into an approximation of a double reed made out of a drinking straw. For our production of *Porgy and Bess*, we gave presentations about the opera at many schools and libraries. (This was such a hit that iconic local educator and community activist Ann Lane Gates pronounced me an honorary member of the African American community, which makes me very proud.) And in my role as the music director of our affiliated youth orchestra, I visited area schools, frequently conducting their school orchestras, and I was a regular guest at Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts.

The Akron Symphony also tolerated the inevitable rookie mistakes that we young conductors make. As embarrassing as it sometimes was, I'm thankful for the lessons learned from generous colleagues. Like when, during the intermission of an outdoor summer concert that I was conducting, horn player Cindy Wulff observed that I was uptight with the orchestra and in my audience interactions, and asked if I ever felt that with my youth orchestra. I was taken aback. "Of course not! With a youth orchestra I just chill out and have fun...they're just kids passionate about music and having a good time." Cindy's response was a life lesson: she said that adults feel exactly the same way. "We're just a youth orchestra plus a couple of decades!"

Akron Symphony Music Director Christopher Wilkins was (and still is) a mentor who encouraged me, challenged me, and wasn't afraid to tell me a hard truth just because it was hard. He's the ideal music director in his artistry and his balancing all

the constituencies in an organization and community. His musicianship is vast: he conducts the entire core repertoire from memory. And like Zinman and Spano, he's an encyclopedic authority on American music. He has exceptionally masterly hearing. I was once preparing to play a Mozart piano concerto for which I had invented what I thought was a very clever cadenza. Thinking he would be impressed, I played it for Christopher. He regretfully broke the news to me that I had written several blatant parallel fifths, which in traditional counterpoint is like walking into a swank cocktail party with your fly open. And despite his intellectual brilliance (belying his New England heritage, he can even quote the existentialists), he's a super great companion for a martini or two.



It was Christopher Wilkins who gave me a new lease on my pianistic life. Good pianists are a dime a dozen, and I had begun to doubt my worth because of all the pianists who can play faster and louder than I. Christopher liked my playing enough to engage me for a series of concertos, and I played loads of chamber music with Ohio musicians. I even challenged myself to play some solo recitals. I maintain that a conductor should keep a connection to an instrument, both to play with orchestral musicians or singers, and as a physical reminder of how humbling it can be to play an instrument well.

The University of Akron was an important part of my life in Ohio. I had a small roster of talented student singers with whom I worked on art song literature, their aria repertoire, and the operatic languages — Italian, French, and German. And when the Department of Modern Languages had a faculty vacancy for a semester, I took over teaching Italian 101, which was immensely satisfying. But the bulk of my work there was with the youth orchestra, which is a collaboration between the Akron Symphony, Akron Public Schools, and the University of Akron. I had taught in some capacity or another since I was a kid, but it was with the Akron Youth Symphony that my teaching spirit matured.

A youth orchestra is a powerful but delicate thing. The musicians in it have both unbridled enthusiasm and sometimes crippling insecurity. I gradually developed a demanding but encouraging approach. And if ever I was harsh or impatient, I immediately regretted it because it was destructive to our work. There's nothing more powerful than saying (and meaning), "That was good, but it can be better, and this is how," or "I know that can be more beautiful, and here is how to do it..." Above all I insisted that hard work should go hand in hand with expressive freedom and joy and fun.

If I was able to share just one point about orchestral playing with them, I hope it was the Chamber Music Concept. I don't know if I coined that term, but I referred to it so frequently that I hope it is seared into the souls of those musicians. The Chamber Music Concept states that orchestral music is just large-scale chamber music, and orchestral playing employs the same skills as in a string quartet or other chamber group. Of course a conductor should facilitate orchestral technique, but without self-sufficient players using their artistry to play autonomously, the conductor is rendered worthless, an impotent figure, furiously beating upstream but nevertheless drifting away. The Chamber Music Concept is a vast skill set (and the sense of sight — to watch both one's colleagues and the conductor — is crucial), but its main component is listening: listening and reacting to one's colleagues across the orchestra, taking and giving cues as the music demands, and listening for when one plays a main tune or an accompaniment and reacting accordingly. The conductor is a silent partner in the Chamber Music Concept, and indeed the best conducting isn't flashy choreography, but intense, directed listening.

Conducting is an elusive craft, and there are basically two ways to learn how to do it. You can conduct an illustrious orchestra (James Gaffigan said he only really learned how to conduct by driving the Ferrari that is The Cleveland Orchestra), or you can conduct a youth orchestra and learn orchestral technique from scratch. I have the Akron Youth Symphony to thank for helping me learn skills that are transferable to any ensemble that I work with. We traversed a lot of repertoire together, including

complete symphonies of Beethoven, Brahms, Dvořák, Haydn, Mozart, Shostakovich, Schubert, and Tchaikovsky, and we even played a rock concert with Todd Rundgren. The artistic standards were amazingly high, and we strove to capture the core spirit of the music, so that the passion of our performances sometimes even exceeded that of our adult professional counterparts. I marvel that these musicians, most of whom won't continue professionally, have known the profundity, camaraderie, and discipline of the orchestral experience.



As the music director of a youth orchestra, I often spoke at community events, and my central message was that the purpose of music education is not to breed future professional musicians, nor is it — as the thinking sometimes goes — to cultivate the highest GPA and get you into the “best” college, and land you the highest earning job, et cetera ad nauseam. Rather, it is to experience beauty, to express ideas that are inexpressible through mere words, to feel more deeply than we can in our everyday existence, to communicate with others in a way that’s not possible outside of the realm of music. In this way, the Chamber Music Concept isn’t only a way of making music, it’s a way to live. How much better off would we be as a community, a

society, a species, if we looked deeply into each other's eyes and listened? This is why music education is imperative to humanity.

This summer in Ohio has been a gratifying reminder that living there afforded me unprecedented personal growth and ample opportunity to share my love of music. So it was fitting that my final performance with the Akron Symphony was a concert for young children and their parents. That final audience was my idea of an ideal audience because there was such unrestrained reaction to the music that some of those diminutive listeners were literally dancing on their feet.

And now the summer's drawing to a close, as are these thoughts. Now back to work, and back to Germany.

TAGS

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