

Akron Symphony opens season with “The Slavic Soul” (September 23)

by Daniel Hathaway



Music by Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich, and Dvořák gave the Akron Symphony audience a window into “The Slavic Soul” in both its Russian and Czech manifestations on Saturday evening, September 23 in E.J. Thomas Hall. At the center of the program was a brilliant performance of Shostakovich’s First Cello Concerto led by Music Director Christopher Wilkins and featuring the young Boston cellist Tony Rymer — although the composer might well have named the work “Concerto for Cello, Horn, and Orchestra,” so

prominent a role that brass instrument plays in the piece.

Rymer was in full possession of the solo part, written originally for the great Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who played it from memory for Shostakovich only four days after receiving the score. Rymer’s tone was handsome whether he was playing in the instrument’s top, middle, or bottom range, and his intonation never failed him.

The wind section played splendidly in dialogue with the soloist in the first movement, tossing its insistent theme back and forth over the agreeable growl of the contrabassoon (Mark DeMio). Rymer played the denouement of the second movement affectingly in another conversation, this time with the celesta (Robert Mollard), and he completely held the audience in thrall during the cadenza that constitutes the whole of the third movement.

Principal horn Meghan Guegold played glowingly throughout the Concerto, finally bringing the first movement theme around again midway through the finale, now in long notes, to cap off a thrilling performance.

The evening began with Tchaikovsky's *Marche Slave*, which captured both the moody and joyful extremes of the Slavic psyche, beginning mournfully, but turning festive midway through, crowned by a pair of piccolos. Wilkins spurred his players on to stentorian levels of sound at the end, and brass and percussion were happy to oblige.

Dvořák's Seventh Symphony, which ended the evening, began with a lovely dialogue between horn and oboe solos (Guegold and Terry Orcutt) and sonorous if not always crisp responses from the orchestra. Inspired by Orcutt's elegant phrasing, the second-movement wind chorales made a fine impression, as did the sudden entrance of the entire horn section.

Catchy dotted rhythms propelled the scherzo. Unlike some of Dvořák's finales, *Symphony No. 7* ends not in Bohemian ebullience but in a relatively somber mood. Wilkins, conducting from memory, milked the movement for all the sonic splendor the orchestra had to give.

With this opening concert, the Akron Symphony welcomed a new concertmaster — Tallie Brunfelt — and said *adieu* to two longtime members. Former principal clarinet Kristina Belisle Jones has moved to Florida after sixteen years in the ensemble, and Renee Dee has decided to hang up her bocal after serving many years as second bassoon and several seasons as artistic administrator.

Even small personnel changes can have a discernible effect on musical ensembles. There was a new sense of cohesion in the strings as well as a slight sense of unsettledness in the winds on Saturday. Here's hoping that the former continues to increase and the latter adjusts itself as the season continues.

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