

Akron Symphony & Neos Dance stage Stravinsky's *Petrushka* (Feb. 9)

by Daniel Hathaway



Anticipating Fat Tuesday, Mardi Gras, Carnival, or however you refer to the blowout before the beginning of Lent, the Akron Symphony joined forces with Neos Dance Theater on Friday, February 8 in E.J. Thomas Hall to produce its latest community extravaganza: a fully choreographed performance of the ballet score to Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. Set during a Shrovetide fair, it's a tragic tale acted out by puppets, but revelry was also in the air: at the end, the stage was filled with balloons that the cast were happy to share with the audience.

Friday's performance of *Petrushka* completed the Akron Symphony's triptych of Stravinsky ballets, which has already seen performances of *Firebird* and *The Rite of Spring*. *Petrushka* marked the second collaboration between the ASO and Robert Wesner's company, and the complement of dancers included the University of Akron's Dance Institute, Christina Foisie, director.

Stravinsky's score was presented in its 1947 version (the ballet premiered in 1911 by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes), the Akron Symphony occupying the back half of the stage, leaving abundant room for dancers at the front.

The addition of choreography is a boon to the audience — who hasn't sat through concert performances of *Petrushka* wondering what sight gag inspired a particularly colorful bit of music? The Orchestra gets wonderfully evocative material to play, and Christopher Wilkins and the ASO musicians had great fun with it. Gary Davis, playing principal trumpet for the evening, was a standout among the soloists.

Wesner's choreography was finely tuned to the events in the score and drew from a catalogue of angular, stylized movements. He filled the stage with eye-catching action. Costumes were mostly stark white and simple, and some of the principal dancers resembled speed skaters in their tight body suits. The curtain call was fun, turning into a cheerful melee of balloons (watch videos [here](#) and [here](#)).



In keeping with the Carnival theme, the evening opened with an animated performance of Berlioz' *Roman Carnival Overture* distinguished by Cynthia Warren's English horn solos, and continued with Nino Rota's Ballet Suite *La Strada*, from the score to the 1954 Fellini film, which takes place at a circus. Yes, it sounds like a cousin to *The Godfather* — same composer — and yes, it made an interesting companion piece to *Petrushka*. The ASO musicians gave it a colorful reading.

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