

Akron Symphony tours Planet Earth (March 23)

by Daniel Hathaway



Hearing the Akron Symphony's "Planet Earth" program on Friday evening, March 23 in E.J. Thomas Hall was like playing around with Google Earth — the fascinating app that lets you zoom around between completely unrelated global destinations from the comfort of your laptop. Music Director Christopher Wilkins

crafted an itinerary that visited both poles — Antarctica and the Finnish Arctic — tucking in trips to Rome and the Scottish Hebrides as well.

Musically, the North Pole was represented by Einojuhani Rautavaara's *Cantus arcticus*, the South Pole by Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Sinfonia antartica*. Mendelssohn's *The Hebrides* captures the relentless motion of the waves in Fingal's Cave, and Ottorino Respighi's *The Pines of Rome* takes snapshots of the Eternal City's famous trees from four angles.



Wilkins was both conductor and docent, leading the audience on a guided tour of the four works with verbal program notes and projections, but happily for those of us who have trouble paying equal attention to visuals and music, he let the music speak for itself during the performance of the first three works.

The ASO allowed Mendelssohn's evocative music to flow and ebb realistically in *The Hebrides*, making smooth transitions into the overture's scherzo-like moments.

The Rautavaara piece is subtitled "Concerto for Birds and Orchestra," and recordings provide the avian elements in its three movements — The Bog, Melancholy, and Swans Migrating. Composed for the first doctorate degree ceremony of the Arctic University of Oulu, the 20-minute piece wondrously brings the wild indoors. The orchestra mainly provides background for what is sometimes a riot of twittering.



Moving on to warmer climes, Wilkins and the Akron Symphony gave vivid readings of the four movements of Respighi's *The Pines of Rome*, in which the composer said he "uses nature as a point of departure, in order to recall memories and visions." Those include children at play under the canopy of the grove of the Villa Borghese, funeral chants issuing from the entrance to a catacomb, moonlight over the Janiculum — with a recorded nightingale for extra effect — and the conjuring of ancient Roman legions marching to the Capitoline Hill via the Appian Way.

The last scene never fails to thrill even the most jaded concertgoer, especially if the composer's *ad libitum* brass are deployed out in the hall to surround the audience with martial sounds, as they were on Friday. Other thrills were provided by organist Robert Mollard, who drew deep tones out of the Rodgers organ borrowed from Faith Lutheran Church.

After intermission, Wilkins and the Orchestra took the audience as far south as possible with music Vaughan Williams originally wrote for the 1948 feature film *Scott of the Antarctic*, chronicling Robert Falcon Scott's disastrous expedition to the South Pole in 1911.



Not all of the music Vaughan Williams crafted was used in the film, and the composer eventually refashioned the score into his five-movement *Sinfonia Antartica*, completed in 1951. That piece ended Friday evening's travelogue, accompanied throughout by footage supplied by Natural History New Zealand Moving Images, and with special choral effects provided by soprano Katherine Swift and the women of the Akron Symphony Chorus. They sang wordlessly from the balcony (an idea Vaughan Williams cribbed from his friend Gustav Holst's *The Planets*), and downstairs, Mollard and the Rodgers digital organ again supplied earth-quivering bass effects.

Well-played as Vaughan Williams' Seventh Symphony was, the experience of hearing forty-some minutes of panoramic music cued to shifting images of snow and ice added up to a magnificent monotony, even with the visual antics of penguins for comic relief. Or was it just a case of late winter fatigue at the end of March?

Photos by Dale Dong.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 27, 2018.

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