

Akron Symphony: “Verdi & Valkyries” (Nov. 16)

by Nicholas Stevens



E.J. Thomas Hall looms and soars, cradling audiences in a colossal yet cozy acoustic shell. The mechanism that allows for adjustments in the ceiling height — a system of suspended counterweights — dominates one lobby like a giant’s carillon. The hall hosts performances of all sizes, but truly comes

alive when a given theatrical or musical production offers art of comparable scale, scope, and solidity, spanning the spectrum from soft speech to symphonic swells. The Akron Symphony offered just such a program earlier this month.

Titled “Verdi and Valkyries,” the concert on Friday, November 16 drew from operas by composers who defined that genre in their shared heyday. Born months apart in 1813, Wagner and Verdi pair well. However, they also pose similar logistical challenges: it remains difficult to give fair representations of their voice-heavy, expansive works on the orchestral stage and within the timeframe of a concert. Results aside for a moment, music director Christopher Wilkins and chorus director Marie Bucoy-Calavan deserve praise for making the program happen at all.

How fortunate, then, that the Symphony and its Chorus gave this music such thrilling renditions. Sharp brass chords rent open the Overture to *La forza del destino* in Wilkins’ reading. In a shared melody, flutist Barbara O’Brien, oboist Terry Orcutt, and clarinetist Emily Cook created a composite sound of uncanny blend and coherence.

Bucoy-Calavan took the podium for the remaining Verdi selections. Gesturing with both fluidity and snap, she gave each excerpt a clear shape: the Overture and “Va, Pensiero”

from *Nabucco* both rose from tension to triumph. The former caught fire in its final two minutes, and the chorus roared to life as it split into harmony in the latter. The Anvil Chorus from *Il Trovatore* found the tenors sounding prominent and strong, and the basses and cellos similarly powerful. The trumpet section stole the show in the Ballet and Triumphal March from *Aida*.

After intermission came a sweeping series of selections [curated by Wilkins](#) from Wagner's opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. This immersive suite started at the beginning, the Prelude to *Das Rheingold*, with the eight-member horn section sounding rock-solid. Tasked with playing the finicky Wagner tuba, the lower four nailed their parts. Offstage anvils brought dark magic to the "Journey to Nibelheim" passage, in which Wagner satirizes the factories of his day as noisy hellscape. The final moments of the *Rheingold* section gave the low brass, including bass trumpet and especially contrabass trombone, room to deliver visceral thrills (the gorgeous program books sadly did not list these players' names). The trombones continued to shine in the "Ride of the Valkyries" from *Die Walküre*.

Principal horn Meghan Guegold, a consummate leader, signaled the onset of *Götterdämmerung* by playing the hero Siegfried's call offstage. Past this point, the orchestra remained tight even as individuals — in particular the contrabass trombonist, and guest soprano Elisabeth Rosenberg — stood out. The concert ended with the cycle's literal blaze of glory, the immolation scene from *Götterdämmerung*. Looking appropriately grave and heroic as Brünnhilde, Rosenberg held her own even without the aid of the covered orchestra pit that Wagner devised for the piece. Spanning from a resonant low register to commanding high notes, she carried the concert home as the Symphony smoldered, blazed, and rose from the ashes in tandem.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 3, 2018.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)