

## Akron Symphony & Chorus in Beethoven's "Eroica" & *Mass in C* (Apr. 6)

by Nicholas Stevens



Most musicians and music history buffs recount Beethoven's life as a three-part story of artistic progress, from early indebtedness to precedent, through the heroic rupturing of tradition, then on to strange yet sublime experiments. However, smart concert programming can remind us that this central figure of the classical pantheon, like most artists, tended to zigzag.

When the Akron Symphony and Chorus performed two pieces from that middle "heroic" period on Saturday, April 6 at E.J. Thomas Hall, the pairing called attention to the fact that the chronologically later piece *sounds* early compared to the daring symphony that occupied the second half.

Music director Christopher Wilkins, the Orchestra, and a fresh-sounding mass of choristers prepared by Marie Bucoy-Calavan opened the concert with Beethoven's 45-minute *Mass in C* of 1807. As program annotators Joseph and Elizabeth Kahn pointed out, the still-young composer wrote this work in the shadow of the still-living Haydn.

Wilkins made the most of the opening measures, typically Beethovenian in their sudden rise from quiet to grandeur. The tenors sounded vigorous in the Kyrie, and mezzo-soprano Kim Lauritsen lent a lovely crystalline ring to her solo part. From the strong orchestral and choral entrance at the beginning to the subtle dynamic shadings of the Chorus later on, the Gloria delivered many delights.

Baritone soloist Brian Keith Johnson brought gravity and grace to his role as the foundation of the solo quartet. Soprano Angela Mortellaro and tenor Timothy Culver took leadership roles at the end of the Credo, by far the longest movement of the Mass. The Sanctus, however, felt longer still. Beethoven's repetitions of the final lines, compounded with the least distinctive of the piece's many fugues, made for a taxing listening experience despite the performers' energy and expertise. Lauritsen showed off another side of her voice — velvety low tones — in the Agnus Dei.

Wilkins chose a brisk tempo and violin-dominated sound at the beginning of the Third Symphony, "Eroica," opting for elegance over bombast in a piece that can tend to the latter. A sense of relentless forward drive pervaded this first movement, even as the group explored contrasts between rhythmic fluidity and choppiness. The arrival of the development felt like a true event, as the tempo slackened for the first time. Here and throughout the symphony, the bass section played with an expansive sound and personality all its own.

In the second-movement funeral march, Wilkins let pauses linger — fitting, as even the steadiest marchers in a cortège might falter in grief. The third movement remained quietly mischievous, the players cruising through challenging cross-rhythms with the confidence and steadiness of a pivoting ski racer. This insistence on the off-kilter as correct, even natural, made this movement a highlight. Opening with a matter-of-fact sequence of plucked notes, the finale featured a measured, rewarding build toward the climactic string scales near the end, a fitting conclusion for the "hero's journey" that so many have taken the symphony to represent.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 26, 2019.*

*Click here for a printable copy of this article*

[Return to the Front Page.](#)