

Akron Symphony's *West Side Story*: O'Brien gets his shot at Tony

by Jarrett Hoffman



From the first time he saw *West Side Story*, Connor Bogart O'Brien knew that Tony was a role he was born to play.

So why did he pass on opportunities to do just that — not once, not twice, but three times?

“I didn't want my debut as Tony to be for anything less than the biggest, most stellar production,” the Ashtabula native said with a laugh during a recent phone call.

Then, about six years ago, O'Brien found himself right where he wanted to be: in Pearl Studios in Manhattan in the final callbacks for the musical's national tour. “I'm there with two other Tony's, and I'm thinking, this is it, now is my chance. And fifteen

minutes later, I'm on the street wondering what the heck just happened. I did *not* get it. So I thought, that's it, I'm going to get too old to play a teenager, and I'm just not going to be able to do it.”

But the universe — via Akron Symphony music director Christopher Wilkins — smiled on O'Brien. Wilkins brought up the possibility of the singer filling a certain role in a certain musical. “I said, oh my gosh, I think this is finally my time,” O'Brien said. “This is what I've been waiting my whole life for.”

Yes, O'Brien will at last play Tony, as part of the Akron Symphony's concert performance of *West Side Story* on Saturday, May 4 at 8:00 pm at E.J. Thomas Hall. Zulimar López-Hernández sings Maria — the Juliet to Tony's Romeo in this modern riff on that Shakespearean tragedy. Trinidad Snider takes on the role of Anita, and 28 other

performers fill out the ranks of the rival gangs of The Sharks and The Jets. Craig Joseph stage directs, and Ryan Bergeron directs the music.

Even if he hasn't played Tony before, O'Brien is plenty familiar with *singing* Tony. "I perform all the time with symphonies throughout the United States, and on half of my shows I'm singing 'Maria' for a Broadway night on a pops series," he said. "I've done 'One Hand, One Heart' at almost every wedding I've ever sung, because it's so popular." O'Brien said he sang through all of Tony's songs from memory a few weeks ago, at the first rehearsal for the Akron performance. "The music director, who is a friend of mine, said, 'Well that was easy.' I said, 'I've been singing these songs since I was fifteen!'"

Fans of classical music and fans of musical theater don't always overlap in their tastes, but *West Side Story* appeals to many people in both groups. "I never hear anyone say they don't like it," O'Brien said. "And I think it comes down to the fact that it's so simple and so complex at the same time. From a story standpoint, it's this classic tale of love, romance, and death. And when it comes to the music, several people I know say that it's the perfect musical. There are so many different elements of jazz, of Afro-Cuban, and even ballet mixed into the score. And then there's the powerhouse team of people who originally worked on it."

Speaking of that love and romance, O'Brien had some news to share from his personal life. "This is a big day for me because I'm doing marriage-type stuff," he said. "I proposed to my girlfriend a few days ago. We're just finishing up a trip, and I'm pulling into my driveway."

Not unlike his path to playing Tony, it's a happy ending after some bumps along the way. O'Brien had everything planned out for the big moment — a trip to New Orleans, a gondola ride, and a poem inside a bottle that would float up as a surprise. "But that's not how fate works," he said.

Storms got the couple stuck on their layover in Texas. "And so I'm Googling where to propose in Dallas while she's asleep at some airport motel," O'Brien said. "On a whim, I thought, let me just type in 'gondoliers Dallas' — and they had a company! So I ordered it last-minute, had the poem printed out in a bottle, took her out, and she said yes. So you know what, it all worked out. But man, we did not expect to be in Dallas, Texas."

Christopher Wilkins will give a pre-concert talk at 7:00 pm. Tickets are available [here](#).

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 27, 2019.

Click [here](#) for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)