

Akron Symphony in Mahler 5 (Jan. 18)

by Peter Feher



There was an unspoken tension between the composers on the Akron Symphony's January 18 concert. Gustav Mahler's hour-plus Fifth Symphony dominated the one-night-only program at E.J. Thomas Hall, which also featured an uncharacteristically short work by Richard Wagner — no slouch when it comes to profundity and grand gestures in his own music. Yet Wagner's somewhat humble place on the program provided a conceptual key to Mahler's self-contained, sometimes overwhelming symphony.

Traditionally, the unspoken subject of Mahler's music is not Wagner but Beethoven. And Mahler's Fifth Symphony is no exception, retracing

the journey from minor-key tragedy to major-key triumph found in Beethoven's own Fifth. What's more, Mahler's attempts to outdo Beethoven's model only reinforced the latter's influence. With this symphony, Mahler formally abandoned programmatic elements — an explicit narrative, poetic movement headings, and so on — but clearly retained all of that extramusical inspiration. Beethoven, on the other hand, toggled between program music and absolute music with relative ease.

On Saturday, this cerebral struggle with Beethoven took a backseat to the compositional alternative embodied in Wagner. Music director Christopher Wilkins and the Akron

Symphony offered a new way into Mahler for veteran and first-time listeners alike. The change in perspective was subtle but revelatory.



Hearing it after the Wagner, the brief Adagietto, the most famous music from Mahler's Fifth Symphony, was transformed. It's one of the few movements of Mahler's symphonic music that can stand alone. In theory, Mahler-in-miniature is at odds with the composer's monumental aims. But in performance, Wilkins brought out the movement's serious passion and harmonic ebb-and-flow, musical ideas explored in the first half of Saturday's program with Wagner's Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*.

In fact, Mahler alludes to *Tristan and Isolde* in his Adagietto, but the implications of Wagner and Mahler side by side on the program went beyond mere quotes. Wagner is another composer making monumental claims, and with *Tristan and Isolde* he spun hours of opera out of a single idea: delayed resolution.

Yet the longing and desire of Wagner's opera can be effectively communicated by the twelve-minute Prelude — in fact, by the first phrase of the Prelude itself. Sure enough, the Akron Symphony musicians captured the romantic swell of Wagner's music after the hold-your-breath precision of its opening bars. Wagner and Mahler wrote on a huge scale, but four measures of music, or one movement of a symphony, can make a lasting impression.

The other movements of Mahler's Fifth Symphony fall into a pattern: strong opening, the occasional awkward transition, and a stick-it-or-miss ending. Wilkins and the orchestra navigated many a tricky transition well, though movements started stronger

than they ended. Two soloists tackled some of the most daunting brass writing in the repertoire. Principal trumpet Justin Kohan opened the first movement with conviction, and hornist Tom Park played with an admirably big and brassy sound in the third, though the solo demands on those two instruments never really let up, even outside of their featured movements.



Mozart's speedy Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* began the evening in a decidedly lighthearted fashion. The string sections kept a refined and transparent sound throughout, and quick bassoon passages added slight humor to the piece. Mozart's catchy overture almost seemed to float away, as if he could have written a hundred more of these.

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