

Gospel Meets Symphony in Akron: talking to new choirmaster Jonathon Turner

by Jarrett Hoffman



If you heard about someone sneaking *into* a rehearsal, you might be forgiven for asking, “Don’t you mean *out*?” But twelve years ago, a program called Gospel Meets Symphony came across the radar of 16-year-old Jonathon Turner, and he was curious. He asked his uncle to drive him and a friend, Dinareo Hill, to a church on the west side of Akron.

“We kind of snuck in the back, sat in the last row of the sanctuary, and just listened,” Turner, 28, said during a recent phone call. “It was like, oh my God. We had never heard a sound like that, with both gospel music and classical music.”

It turned out to be a crystal-ball type of moment for both of them. Hill is now a drummer in the annual Gospel Meets Symphony concert — that large-scale, genre-mixing tradition of the Akron Symphony that dates back to 1994. And Turner is now Choirmaster of the Gospel Meets Symphony Choir, this year made up of 190 singers from 77 area churches. He will make his debut in that role when the Choir joins Christopher Wilkins and the ASO on Saturday, February 8 at 7:30 pm at E.J. Thomas Hall. Tickets are available [online](#).

Turner has been part of Gospel Meets Symphony for a decade, including experience as keyboardist, as a vocal soloist, and in last year’s concert as a guest conductor. Hill came on board a few years after Turner, and the two talked fondly about that encounter they shared as teenagers.

“We were kids sitting in the back of the sanctuary feeling like this was way out of our league,” Turner said. “And now we’re in a place where we’re giving other young musicians a shot at what we were in awe of.”

A big part of that has been the addition of Gospel Meets Symphony 2.0 to Saturday’s program. It’s the organization’s first junior gospel choir, giving young people the opportunity to sing with the Akron Symphony, and allowing Gospel Meets Symphony to reach a new demographic.

“It’s turned out to be this magnificent experience with these incredible young people from different churches,” Turner said. “And they’re not all African American. It’s just an amazing, miniature hodgepodge of what Gospel Meets Symphony is.”

The junior choir could eventually feed into the main choir. “Our people are getting older and older,” Turner said. “They’re still committed and still love being a part of it. We still love having them, and they will always have a place within Gospel Meets Symphony. But if we intend to be around as an organization for 27 more years and even beyond that, it’s certainly going to require the mentorship of young people so that they will have the same buy-in that we have for this organization.”



In addition to being a conductor, tenor, and music educator, Turner is the senior pastor of The Israelite Missionary Baptist Church in Akron. That arena of his life, like his musical pursuits, has played a part in his approach to being choirmaster.

“For these few months when everybody comes together, it becomes this huge community,” he said. “And these people really do look to the leaders for guidance in a lot more ways than music. We find ourselves praying for them, connecting them with resources, loving on them, hugging them, and hearing about their joys and their sorrows on a weekly basis — and they look forward to sharing them with us. It really is like pastoring another church, but with a lot more singing.”

To close our conversation, I asked Turner whether gospel music has taken on any extra significance for him amidst the tension and division within the country.

“Oh gosh, yes,” he said. “Music, period, is a world-uniting tool. It crosses language and cultural barriers, and it’s just something that can bring anybody and everybody together. And I think gospel music has an extra way of doing that. It’s such a magical thing whereby you really feel the presence of God, even if it’s not something that you’re accustomed to, or something that you even welcome. It’s just kind of there, and it’s warm and inviting and loving.

“I do believe that’s because of the rich heritage of gospel — how it’s progressed through the history of African Americans in this country — but additionally I believe that the focus stops being about us and becomes on God. So everything that could divide us, we cease to acknowledge because our focus is not on that. It’s not even on us.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 4, 2019.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)