

## Akron Symphony celebrates milestones for itself, and for E.J. Thomas Hall (Sept. 29)

by Peter Feher



The Akron Symphony fully embraced tradition with its opening-night concert this season. In an all-out performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony on September 29 at E.J. Thomas Hall, the Orchestra was recreating a major moment from its history. And at the end of the evening, as the finale of the "Ode to Joy" resounded throughout the hall, the program transformed into a complete celebration.

The choice of music had everything to do with the special occasion. E.J. Thomas turns 50 this year, and to mark that anniversary (and kick off its own 70th

season), the Akron Symphony reprised the same piece it played for the hall's inaugural concert in October 1973.

Certainly, music doesn't get more classical or commemorative than Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The huge choral movement, with its famous 24-bar tune, that concludes this monumental work has come to represent classical composition itself, though this wasn't always the case. Like many of Beethoven's pieces, the Ninth Symphony upended certain conventions of its day, from its inclusion of a chorus and a quartet of vocal soloists to the ordering and proportions of its four movements.

Those features that proved divisive at the work's 1824 premiere still require reining in today. On Friday, music director Christopher Wilkins paced the long arc of the symphony's first three movements skillfully, knowing just where to push ahead and where to linger over a detail. Wilkins and the Orchestra generated genuine excitement as they raced through the trio section of the scherzo, and the woodwinds played out with a wonderful sound in the Adagio (in a way that they didn't quite at the piece's start).

The stage was set for the finale, which, in size and scope, seems to rival all the music that has come before. With a voice that projected marvelously over the ensemble, tenor John Pickle was the standout soloist in a solid quartet that also included soprano Sirgourney Cook, mezzo-soprano Leah Heater, and bass-baritone Frank Ward. And the sound swelled splendidly with the addition of the Akron Symphony Chorus, directed by Chris Albanese, and the Symphonic Choir from the Akron School of the Arts at Firestone Community Learning Center, directed by Megan Meyer.

Beethoven's call to universal brotherhood in this movement, adapted from lines by the German poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller, has shown itself to be endlessly malleable after 200 years of performances. But the fact that musicians and audiences keep connecting with the Ninth Symphony suggests that some messages are truly all-embracing.

The evening began with the theatrical exploration of another tradition, though one seldom seen in the concert hall. Composer Jerod Impichchachaaha' Tate led the Orchestra and a bevy of guest artists in a movement from his 2009 opus *Lowak Shoppala' (Fire and Light)*. The 15-minute "Clans" is a dramatic depiction of some of the tribal rites and rituals from Tate's own Chickasaw culture — or "an ancient fashion runway show," as the composer put it before taking the podium.

That approachable gesture turned out to capture something of the spirit of the piece. "Clans" may stage a scenario somewhat unfamiliar to classical concertgoers — the concept, costuming, and text by poet Linda Hogan are all rooted in specific Native American heritage — but Tate's music is entirely at home in the orchestra, resembling an epic movie soundtrack more than anything. The score puts the brass to heroic use and often has the strings playing in unison to heighten the emotion or build the suspense.

The Akron Symphony pulled off the production elements seamlessly, and when it came to the music, the ensemble could trust in a certain tradition.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 7, 2023.*

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