

Akron Symphony celebrates the organ with Robert Mollard (Oct. 21)

by Kevin McLaughlin



The sound of an organ in orchestral settings is always an aural thrill. A cornucopia of colors and sonorities on its own, the organ, when mixed with strings, winds, brass, and percussion, more than doubles the pleasure and the fun.

In his welcoming remarks, music director Christopher Wilkins drew attention to the evening's sonic star and focus — a digital impersonator of sounds, painstakingly prepared by Robert Mollard to sound just like a pipe organ. Putting out fullness and variety, if not always the seismic events associated with cathedral organs, Mollard nevertheless created

excitement and beauty in his appearance with the Akron Symphony at E.J. Thomas Hall on Saturday, October 21.

Since the first official work on the program, Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson's *Worship: A Concert Overture*, takes as its basis the hymn tune *Old 100th* ("Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow"), two bonuses were in store to orient us. Principal flute Barbara O'Brien played the unadorned tune in gorgeous, silvery tones, and Mollard let loose with Robert Hebble's *Toccata on Old Hundredth*, a festival of organ prowess.

The Perkinson was a joyful way to begin. Thanks to the bonus preamble, the hymn tune was by now an earworm whose appearances in bits and pieces were easy to follow. The winds and percussion helped keep the odd meter signatures in line — think Stravinsky in a jazz mood.

In Respighi's *Church Windows* the organ seemed to take its place as a co-worker, content to add color while giving off occasional whiffs of the sacred and ancient. Subtitled "Four Impressions for Orchestra," the work began its life as an essay for piano in three movements, subsequently orchestrated and given fanciful titles ("The Flight into Egypt," "St. Michael the Archangel," and "The Matins of St. Clara," adding later "St. Gregory the Great"). These stained-glass pictures suggested chant settings to Respighi, who was, according to the fine program notes, always looking for an excuse to integrate such ancient melodies into his music.

The strings, ASO's glory, blended in a rich, ochre core of timbre throughout, the ideal sonority for conveying Respighi's Gregorian vocalism. Some well-played wind and brass solos from oboist Terry Orcutt, clarinetist Amer Hasan, piccolo trumpeter Gary Davis (off-stage), and English hornist Cynthia Warren also impressed. Low brass and horns, appointed heralds of angelic arrival (maybe donning their Valkyrian hats?), were glorious in the finale.

Despite its nickname ("Organ Symphony") Saint-Saëns' *Symphony No. 3* is mostly governed by orchestra and conductor. Dedicated to Liszt — who seemed to have a silver-maned doppelganger in the second violins — the symphony has a few Lisztian quirks. There's the structure (two large movements), reiterative motives, and the presence of some atypical instruments — in addition to the organ, there's the piano (four hands), adding decoration and color for eight bars. The last movement, with its startling organ fanfare and recognizable tune (some remember it as the basis for a 1970s pop hit), is what everyone waits for. Wilkins and troupe let out every stop — the strings were nimble, the solo woodwinds eloquent, and the brass raised the roof.

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