

Akron Symphony: Mahler's emotional rollercoaster (March 1)

by Stephanie Manning



“Welcome to Mahler’s 2nd,” read the program leaflet I was handed while entering E.J. Thomas Hall on March 1. “You’re in for an emotional rollercoaster — big drama, quiet reflection, and an ending that will shake the walls (and maybe your soul).”

The Akron Symphony’s latest program certainly delivered on that promise. Most ensembles devote the entire evening to Mahler’s “Resurrection” Symphony, an almost 90-minute work, and Akron was no different. Conductor Christopher Wilkins led a stirring performance from the extra-large orchestra, together with the Akron Symphony Chorus, the Metropolitan Chorus of Summit Choral Society, soprano Sonya Headlam, and alto Amanda Lynn Bottoms.

The first movement is a microcosm of a typical Mahler symphony, with huge pendulum swings between eerily quiet moments and those bursting with power and presence. The tranquil sections, like the one announced with lovely solo playing from English horn, clarinet, and harp, cracked open like a sunrise. And in the stormy ones, the 18-piece cello and bass section added some ferocity and grittiness.

The next two movements are less tempestuous, although the jaunty scherzo of the third still brimmed with energy. In the second, the wheels of triplets in the string section kept on spinning while longer arcs from the winds and brass floated above.

The colored lights illuminating the walls behind the stage, which had been brightening and darkening almost imperceptibly throughout, sank into a burnished pink as alto Amanda Lynn Bottoms made her entrance. Her haunting, rich voice — supported sensitively by concertmaster Hadar Zaidel and principal oboe Terry Orcutt — transformed the fourth movement into a shimmering, suspended moment.

Most of the audience members around me weren't looking in their program at the lyric translations, words of despair and hope that are stirring in their own right. But it wasn't necessary to understand every word — the emotions in the alto's voice and face were clear as day.



The fifth movement, at more than 30 minutes long, is another pocket universe within the grander work. The offstage groups of horns and trumpets begin to come into play, which conductor Christopher Wilkins kept tightly coordinated despite the challenging distance. On stage, principal trombone John Gruber delivered some beautiful short solos before leading the rest of the low brass in an expressive chorale.

The tide continued to ebb and flow nicely, with huge timpani rolls marking the biggest waves crashing and receding. The offstage brass filled E.J. Thomas' high-ceilinged lobby with a glorious, echoing sound, eventually tethered down to earth by the flute and piccolo interjections from the stage.

The singers from the Akron Symphony Chorus (directed by Christopher Albanese) and the Metropolitan Chorus of Summit Choral Society (directed by Britt Cooper) waited patiently for their invaluable contribution, which started quietly and reverently before beginning the inevitable crescendo. Bottoms and the clear-voiced soprano Sonya Headlam once again joined in for the eventual climax — which, as promised, shook both the walls and likely more than a few souls.

Photos by Dale Dong

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