

The Akron Symphony sparkles in works by Mozart, Bologna, Montgomery, and Beethoven (Mar. 29)

by Kevin McLaughlin



For his final appearance with the Akron Symphony on Saturday, March 29 at E.J. Thomas Hall, Amer Hasan went out in style. He was the agile and honey-toned soloist in the Mozart Clarinet Concerto, and for good measure, he occupied his soon-to-be vacant principal chair to play the works on the second half.

Employing the A-clarinet rather than basset horn — as the composer intended — Hasan chose deftness rather than force in the concerto. His frolics up and down the instrument was enough to make any singer jealous. The Adagio

was a serene balm of peace, and in the finale Hasan turned playful, goading the orchestra into sassy ripostes.

Wilkins and the orchestra were sensitive and generous collaborators throughout, underscoring and confirming the soloist's interpretations like an ideal dance partner. Hassan offered up no extended cadenzas (Mozart wrote none) or encores for that matter, presumably saving his energy for the works on the second half.

The concert began with Joseph Bologna's Overture to *L'amant anonyme* (The Anonymous Lover). Premiered in 1780, this was the most successful of Bologna's six operas, and if the overture is any indication you can understand why. The music, presented in three short movements, is ebullient and graceful and makes an appealing short symphony all its own. Wilkins was conservative in his tempos and movements on the podium, but the charm of the music was undiminished.

For her *Five Freedom Songs* (2017–18), Jessie Montgomery drew on an anthology of spirituals collected just after the American Civil War, when enslavement was fresh in the mind and on the body. Expressions of yearning, joy and expectation were eloquently channeled by soprano Sirgourney Cook, who was a wise and gracious presence.



The spiritual texts and melodies were largely left intact in Montgomery’s setting, but their power was intensified by the orchestra. Montgomery, a former Catalyst Quartet violinist, knows how to write for strings, and here had them often mimicking percussion instruments. The opening, “My Lord, What a Morning,” is a jazz-inflected hymn of hope: strings stir and twinkling stars (glockenspiel)

slowly fade. In “Lay dis Body Down,” a funeral song is accompanied by the sound of scraping chains and the striking of a brake drum, while the strings, playing their tune at different rates of speed, create a swirling backdrop. “The Day of Judgment” is an up-tempo *tour de force* description of the last days. Sirgourney Cook projected fire and brimstone while string players slapped their soundboards and percussionists added an ominous cadence.

The concert concluded with Beethoven’s bracing First Symphony, famous for its “wrong chords” in the opening bars (implying F major), and for finding its way back to its home key of C. Wilkins lifted this symphony, and this performance, not by casting Beethoven as a proto-romantic — announcing each shocking episode and looking for others besides — but by proceeding as if unaware, uncovering surprises as a first-time listener might.

Beethoven seemed less a rebel, at least at this stage in his career, than a restless soul, indebted to, though perhaps growing bored by his inheritance. Chamber orchestra proportions — just twenty string players were onstage — soft accents, and conservative tempos helped to cement this impression. The first movement was fluid and communicative, emphasizing the lyrical over the dramatic.

The second movement’s slightly slower-than-usual tempo made sense, giving it the character of a minuet and treating the third as a scherzo. The finale was rich with detail and witty, reminding us that Beethoven can be just as humorous as Haydn when he wants to be.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 9, 2025

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