

### Akron Symphony's looks forward to 2026 with composers new and old (Jan. 17)

by Stephanie Manning



The musical journey of a concert can't always be summed up by its title. The Akron Symphony's January 17 performance certainly delivered on its promise of "Beethoven's Seventh" with a dignified reading of that famous work. But the headline did not hint at the more intriguing pieces on offer — nor the idea that this program aimed to spark enthusiasm about the year ahead.

"Hope and optimism" were the words that conductor Christopher Wilkins used to describe the musical choices to the audience in E.J. Thomas Hall on Saturday.

This idea of looking toward the future appeared right away with a piece by Sarah Hegenderfer, a composition student at The University of Akron. Her lovely little gem of a piece, *Clearing of Snow*, paints a winter scene at sunset in lush textures.

Quaint solos were passed between English horn, flute, and clarinet above a landscape of strings and harp. A triumphant brass chorale section — the first signs of spring appearing — eventually calmed to a gentle ending, the sparkles of the chime tree like the last rays of sunlight on the snow.

Wilkins and the musicians gave a beautiful, convincing performance of the six-minute piece, and many audience members turned to acknowledge Hegenderfer in the upper balcony during the healthy round of applause.

Another short piece on the program got the audience to think about the upcoming Martin Luther King Jr. holiday which was first observed in 1986. Although Duke Ellington did not live to see the holiday officially recognized, he highly revered the civil rights leader, memorializing him in the piece *Three Black Kings*.

Tenor saxophonist Christopher Coles and bassist Jordan McBride joined the orchestra for the movement titled “Martin Luther King Jr.,” where the swinging rhythms and muted trumpets created an atmosphere of big band jazz. Starting mellow, Coles’ sound eventually soared above the orchestra as the musicians found their groove.

For an encore, Coles brought out a surprise guest: pianist Theron Brown, who sheepishly appeared from backstage in a winter coat and beanie. But he gamely sat down at the keys to join Coles and McBride in Billy Drewes’ melancholic “For Those We’ve Known.”

Sandwiched between those two pieces, Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 7* felt unexpected, although not unwelcome. Wilkins’ stately, middling tempo evolved into a more flowing one during the second movement, where the violins brought out their nicely-paced arpeggios under the melody. A strong, healthy sound from the low strings and an increase in dynamic contrast capped off the finale.

Connected to the jazzy vein of the Ellington, Leonard Bernstein’s Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*, augments the orchestra with an alto saxophone. A few stumbles involving French horn and harp during “Somewhere” were smoothed over by the light and bouncy “Scherzo” and especially the high-energy “Mambo,” which featured the percussion section.

Adriana Harrison brought extra precision and focus to her drumset work both here and in the “Rumble” before the sentimental “Finale,” where Wilkins let the silence after the final notes really ring.

*Published on [ClevelandClassical.com](https://ClevelandClassical.com) January 29, 2026*

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