

**Review: Akron Symphony Orchestra  
and Chorus in 9/11 Opener (September 11)**

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by Daniel Hathaway

The same creative programming that produced last season's riveting John Brown-themed concert was at work for the Akron Symphony's season opener at E.J. Thomas Hall on Saturday evening (September 11). Music Director Christopher Wilkins made the most of the calendar date fate handed him and took the calculated risk of scheduling two admittedly dark and history-laden pieces — Benjamin Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* and Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5* -- to mark what would normally be a festive evening.

The gamble worked beautifully, especially as Wilkins orchestrated and executed it. Rather than opening the concert with the triumphant strains of the National Anthem, Wilkins hid the Akron Symphony Chorus (prepared by its new director, Maria Sensi Sellner) in the upper balcony of the hall, where they hummed invisibly and introspectively through "The Star-Spangled Banner" before the Orchestra and audience joined in. Wilkins and the Orchestra plunged immediately into the Britten, then without pause into Mozart's perfect and same-keyed little motet, *Ave verum Corpus* -- with the chorus once again hidden in the clouds, singing *sotto voce* with the strings as Mozart indicated in the score. Shostakovich completed an evening full of musical metaphor redolent with meaning but ultimately uplifting.

The *Sinfonia da Requiem*, written in 1940, was commissioned (along with pieces by other compos-

ers, including Richard Strauss) somewhat surreptitiously by the Japanese government to mark the 2,600th anniversary of its dynasty. Britten decided to give its three movements titles from the Catholic Mass, leading the Japanese authorities to decommission the work entirely -- on the eve of plunging themselves into World War II. The work became instead a memorial to Britten's parents. *Lacrymosa* begins with Taiko drum-like outbursts, then low murmurs from strings and winds which creep upwards into the violas and upper strings. A saxophone lends its unusual voice to the texture and the music vacillates between minor and major. *Dies Irae* begins nervously, then enroute to cataclysmic outbursts, introduces a tuba solo, horns and muted trumpets. *Requiem Aeternam* (*Andante molto tranquillo*) is cathartic and calm, adorned with sweetly elegiac woodwinds. Britten might have thought up the segue into *Ave verum* himself, so seamless was the transition.

After intermission, Wilkins lead a strong and thrilling reading of Shostakovich's 1937 symphony from memory. Written to answer official Soviet complaints about his opera, *Lady Macbeth of Minsk*, and the fourth symphony, the composer managed to camouflage his intentions in the fifth so that the piece seemed ideologically acceptable, yet bore underlying, coded streams of personal protest.

The opening *Moderato* took a few moments to settle in, but was eventually graced by exquisite

flute, horn, harp, clarinet, oboe, piccolo and violin solos, ending with touching scales from the celesta. The demonic Scherzo, nicely reigned in and graced with fine rubatos, featured concertmaster Alan Bodman in a splendid cadenza, showed off the fine horn and bassoon sections (including one remarkable moment scored for first bassoon and contra bassoon), and ended with a luminous oboe solo.

Intense string playing in the wistful Largo set up more lovely solos. And then came the famous Finale, (*Allegro non troppo*, but really quite fast tonight) in which Christopher Wilkins pressed his forces forward through blazes of brass and swirls of winds and strings to a triumphant conclusion, interrupted by a dark and searching middle section.

Aside from an instant or two when sections of the orchestra weren't perfectly aligned, the ensemble playing of the Akron Symphony was admirable throughout this demanding program, and its forceful tutti's roiled up the vast quantities of air inside E. J. Thomas. But the depth of its solo resources was even more remarkable. Maestro Wilkins raised nearly half of the orchestra to its feet, individually or section-wise, after both Britten and Shostakovich, and the applause was richly deserved. Hats off especially to the horn section, who covered six parts with four players in the Britten, as well as to the trumpets, trombones and tuba -- twelve brass players in all -- who sounded magnificent from beginning to end.