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New music director is off to scintillating start

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The sun appears to be breaking through the clouds at the Akron Symphony Orchestra. After several years of unhappiness with its artistic leadership, the orchestra welcomed a new music director, Christopher Wilkins, to the podium Sunday at E.J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall, where ear-filling symbolism rubbed shoulders with absorbing music-making.

The symbolism arrived with help from the U.S. Army Herald Trumpets, who were invited to take part in the Triumphal March from Verdi's "Aida." Wilkins appeared to be very much in his element alternately conducting the orchestra and turning to the audience to cue the 14 trumpeters arrayed on either side of the auditorium. The sounds from every direction, to say the least, were beguiling.

Wilkins, who served as assistant conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra in the mid-1980s, hinted at a fine future for the Akron ensemble by devising a canny inaugural program and leading each piece with cohesive urgency. The works embraced many styles and nations, including the United States, while providing ample opportunities for the new boss to show off the orchestra and a gifted guest.

The night's soloist was pianist Orion Weiss, a Lyndhurst native and winner of an Avery Fisher Career Grant. He teamed with Wilkins and company in Schumann's Piano Concerto, which more than a few pianists treat as a display of fingers and fire.

Weiss had other, more musical, things in mind. His playing was fluent, graceful and almost ethereally poetic. Every note was in place, but the significant aspect of the performance was the pianist's ability to shape phrases into seamless statements. Weiss favored subtlety over flash, inner tension over theatrics.

The first-movement cadenza had plenty of drama, but the pianist mostly was interested in blending architecture with feeling. The finale was effortlessly lilting. Wilkins and the orchestra provided a trim, balanced collaboration. Let's hear more from this sensitive young artist, whose rapt encore was a Brahms waltz.

Wilkins paid heed to the United States with Irving Fine's Toccata concertante, a buoyant 1948 score whose rhythmic and textural roots lie in Stravinskian neo-classicism. The piece percolates and sings, and the performance went far in revealing the music's bountiful charms.

But the wisdom of hiring Wilkins was most evident in Rimsky-Korsakov's "Sheherazade," that rapturous tone poem of Arabian nights and orchestral luxuriance. Conducting from memory, the new music director was as scrupulous in the swashbuckling passages as he was in the moments of intimate seduction.

The orchestra played its collective heart out for Wilkins, sounding alert, vibrant and eager to paint the score's colors in a panoply of shades. Rimsky-Korsakov depicts the events in his exotic tale partly by enlisting a desertful of soloists, among whom Todd Jelen (bassoon), Cynthia Watson (oboe), Kristina Belisle (clarinet), Marie-Thais Levesque (cello) and William Hoyt (horn) were the chief champions.

Onward and upward, Akron Symphony.

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