

MIDLANDS

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Team's A-game? It's in B flat

His team's colors are black and white, but its performances give color to Omaha nights. On a recent one, the coach stepped out of his dressing room and praised his players.

"They brought their A-game tonight," he said. "We live from fleeting moment to fleeting moment in this business, and many moments are like tonight."

When an athletic team is in "the zone," with everything clicking, a coach must feel like he's conducting a well-rehearsed symphony orchestra. Thomas Wilkins knows the feeling for real — he conducts the Omaha Symphony.



Michael Kelly

We spoke backstage after last month's masterworks concert, which drew a standing ovation. It takes a while for Wilkins to come down from the exhilaration of leading a concert.

"There's a lot of adrenaline," he said as well-wishers stopped by. "I go out to dinner afterward with my family, and when we get home, they dismiss me because they know I can't go to sleep. Before the night is over, I'll replay the concert in my head."

Wilkins was named music director of the Omaha Symphony in 2005, just as the orchestra was moving into the \$100 million-plus Holland Performing Arts Center downtown.

Despite his impressive musical pedigree — education at the New England Conservatory, guest-conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra, the National Symphony and others, principal guest conductor of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra — Wilkins



Wilkins

doesn't come off as a stuffy highbrow. Symphonic music, he maintains, is for anyone.

"You don't need a prerequisite set of knowledge," he said. "You just need a

heart and a pair of ears."

Wilkins grew up in a Norfolk, Va., housing project known for drug deals and robberies. His single mother, a licensed practical nurse, at times supported her family with welfare checks.

When Thomas was 8, he discovered music on a class field trip to the Norfolk Symphony. He took violin lessons in public school, and played cello and tuba in high school.

Before each concert, Wilkins has a routine — he eats a banana and a Snickers bar, and he prays. Sometimes, he gets butterflies.

"I like to be a little bit nervous — it makes you pay attention," he said. "But I don't want to be nervous after the first minute."

The symphony ends its season Friday and Saturday, performing Mahler's Fifth, with guest soloist Alisa Weilerstein on cello.

The great violinist Itzhak Perlman plays with the Omaha Symphony on Nov. 7. But the orchestra is about more than masterworks.

Next season, for example, "symphony pops" includes a Motown tribute and "symphony rocks" features ABBA-mania and a Rolling Stones tribute.

Wilkins often speaks to school and community groups.

"I just talked to some high school students," he said, "and told them that composers don't write music to demonstrate their knowledge of music theory. They write to come alongside us as human beings on this thing we call a human journey."

Among those congratulating him backstage last month was Hal France, former artistic director of Opera Omaha: "That was a beautiful, elegant evening."

Wilkins was thrilled not just with his musicians, but also with the reaction of the folks in the seats.

"This audience was fired up," he said. "I was thinking, 'These guys came to party.'"

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