The sixtieth anniversary for a human being means that the AARP has already been reminding you of your impending mortality for a while. But for a symphony orchestra, it's a sign that you've passed some important milestones and are still young and energetically contemplating the future.

The Akron Symphony chose to mark its sixtieth season with concerts by the Orchestra on April 21 and by the Akron Symphony Chorus plus members of the orchestra the next day (close on the heels of its production of Titanic, the musical, the previous weekend). The Saturday evening concert in E.J. Thomas Hall conducted by music director Christopher Wilkins was titled American Visions and included two works with projected visuals — one a premiere commissioned by the orchestra — and ended with an old chestnut by America's favorite adopted composer, Antonin Dvořák.

Saturday's performance opened on an elegiac note as a floral arrangement in front of an empty chair in the first violin section was spotlighted and the orchestra played Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings in memory of Ping Yu, who passed away in March. That mood was held for a transitional moment as the unseen Akron Symphony Chorus solemnly began American the Beautiful from the upper balcony.

The photography of Ansel Adams inspired Dave (the father) and Chris (the son) Brubeck to collaborate in writing Ansel Adams: America, the concert's opening work. Straightforward projections of Adam's striking photos of Yosemite and of everyday people (including Adams at work with his camera), selected by Chris Brubeck and his wife, were perfectly matched with mood changes in the evocative and compelling score. The music was as sweeping and descriptive as the photography.

For projection purposes, the orchestra and audience remained in the dark for Akron Chronogram, a work commissioned by the orchestra from Akron native Roger Zahab (above), who now lives and works in Pittsburgh. Not intended to be a representational timeline of the city or its orchestra, Zahab wrote that he wished

“to capture sensations of being both inside the music — as it is happening now, pulling you along — and outside — as if hearing it from various dis-
tances in time and space, a structure composed of many sound-streams superimposed and flowing through each other to evoke some of the peoples and musics that have lived through the Akron area, its Symphony, and in the memories of its people”.

_Akron Chronogram_ was accompanied by engaging video created by Laura Ruth Bidwell, whose work is supported by the Akron Art Museum. On first hearing, the score delivered a fascinating web of musical textures — a kind of highly tuneful concerto for orchestra with fluent and confident orchestration — out of which fully-formed (or hints of) themes from the symphonic literature suddenly emerged like fish jumping above the surface of a pond. It kept my attention for all of its twenty-two minutes, then ended with a flourish accompanied by a sudden blur of video activity involving scrolling musical scores and birds, both live and mechanical. Let's hope the Akron Symphony will play the work again soon. The video probably added a whole new dimension for many listeners, but the work seems quite capable of standing on its own.

Keeping with the American theme, the concert ended with Dvořák's _Symphony No. 9, “From the New World”_. One of the perennial favorites of the orchestral canon, the symphony was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic during the composer's three year sojourn in the United States and premiered in 1893. The ASO musicians, who must have played the piece on numerous occasions, gave a fresh and vibrant performance under Maestro Wilkins, who conducted from memory. Fine solo work abounded — English hornist Cynthia Warren, hornist Ken Wadenpfuhl, the flutes, oboes and bassoons all distinguished themselves. A fine way to wrap up the Orchestra's sixtieth anniversary season.

*Published on clevelandclassical.com April 26, 2012*