

Review**Pink Martini returns to Severance Hall for joy-filled evening with The Cleveland Orchestra (December 18)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Portland's "Little Orchestra," Pink Martini, made a big impression when they first appeared with The Cleveland Orchestra in March of 2010. The ensemble, anchored by the inimitable pianist Thomas Lauderdale and the charismatic vocalist China Forbes (back after a successful operation on her vocal chords) returned to spread a lot of sophisticated holiday cheer last night at Severance Hall with The Cleveland Orchestra as its distinguished backup band. The delectable program, stylishly conducted by James Feddeck (and to be repeated on Wednesday evening), was enhanced by two special guests with Portland roots: NPR commentator Ari Shapiro and clarinetist Norman Leyden, whose performances added special personality to some of the nearly twenty songs — music both for the season and for all seasons.

Pink Martini's programs are a wonderful grab-bag of musical styles. On their "Joy to the World" playlist there are "derangements" of classical originals (Schubert's *Fantasia in f minor* turned into two very funny pop songs — *And Then You're Gone* and *But now I'm back*, and Chopin transformed into *La Soledad*). There are well-known tunes freshened up with Latin rhythms (*Little Drummer Boy* as a *Bolero*, and a sultry, laid-back version of *We Three Kings*). There are ethnic songs (the Chinese *Congratulations—A Happy New Year Song* and the Ladino Chanukah tune *Ocho Kandelikas*).

There are pop and musical theater classics (*What'll I Do*, *Get Happy/Happy Days are Here Again*, and *Let's Never Stop Falling in Love*). There are arts song and opera arias (Leucona's *Yo te quiero siempre* and Verdi's *La Vergine degli Angeli*) and big jazz numbers like *The Flying Squirrel*. And there are unlikely cultural collisions (the Japanese *Mayonaka no Bossa Nova — Midnight Bossa Nova*).

Lauderdale and Forbes are musical omnivores and their obvious respect for all the music on this planet is the glue that links these disparate elements into an engaging show. It's also clear from his clever arrangements that Lauderdale never heard a tune he couldn't transform into something fresh and new.

Though Pink Martini soldiered on while China Forbes was sidelined with vocal issues, it's difficult to imagine the group without her. Her vocal qualities are alluring and her stylings (*Amado Mio*, *What'll I do*, *La Vergine degli Angeli*, to name a few), are exquisite.

The multi-talented Ari Shapiro, who grew up in Portland, made his debut singing with Pink Martini at the Hollywood Bowl in 2009. On Tuesday evening, he was every inch the lounge lizard, beautifully shaping (and sometimes crooning — but not too much) *But Now I'm Back*, *Ocho Kandelikas* and *Yo te quiero siempre*.

One of the wonderful features of the evening was the appearance of Norman Leyden, laureate associate conductor of the Portland Symphony, who gave Pink Martini their first opportunity to play with an orchestra. Spry and natty at 95, Leyden still plays a mean clarinet, as he showed everyone in *Hang On Little Tomato*, in his solo breaks in *The Flying Squirrel* — including a few licks from Richard Wagner — and especially in his affecting solo, *Skylark*. Toward the end of the program, he even shared the vocal mic with China Forbes for Irving Berlin's *White Christmas*.

Everyone in Pink Martini got a special moment to shine during the evening: Gavin Bondy on flugelhorn and trumpet, Dan Faehnie on guitar, Nicholas Crosa on violin, Timothy Nishimoto on vocals, Jeff Budin on trombone, and Brian Davis, Derek Rieth and Anthony Jones on congas, bongos, drums and percussion.

Music ruled the evening. Chatter was kept at a minimum and was pointed and funny. At the end, continuing a Pink Martini tradition, Lauderdale fomented a conga line that soon filled the ground floor aisles with happy, gyrating fans. In the right hands, music has the power to turn Cleveland into Brazil.

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