

Carl Topilow's retirement marks the end of an era at CIM

by Mike Telin



On Wednesday, April 11 at 8:00 pm at Severance Hall, Carl Topilow will lead the CIM Orchestra for the last time before his retirement from the conservatory, after 36 years as the director of CIM's orchestra and orchestral conducting program.

The concert will include Topilow's own arrangement of Verdi's Fanfare from Act III of *Otello*, Barber's *Overture to The School for Scandal*, Korngold's *Violin Concerto* with Aaron Chan as soloist, and Dvořák's *Symphony No. 6*. The performance is free, but [tickets](#) are required. The event will be broadcast live over WCLV 104.9 and [wclv.com](#).

Although Topilow is leaving CIM, marking the end of an era at the school, he will remain in his positions as music director and conductor of the [National Repertory Orchestra](#), the [Firelands Symphony](#), and [The Cleveland Pops Orchestra](#). "I'm leaving in order to pursue other things, like guest conducting," Topilow said during a conversation at the Cleveland Pops offices. A quick look at his [website](#) confirms that the versatile maestro is by no means retiring from the podium.

Talking with Topilow about his expansive career, it's evident that he loves music of all kinds, and especially enjoys playing the clarinet. A native of Bayonne, New Jersey — he joked that you can see the Newark Airport from their house — Topilow said that he started playing the clarinet because his brother Arthur was an accomplished pianist by the age of fourteen. "My parents thought I'd get discouraged if I started with the piano because my brother played so well," he said. "So they gave me the clarinet."

The instrument has served him well. “I do so much playing on the Pops concerts and it’s a source of cultivation at house parties. Arthur and I still play together — he appeared on New Year’s Eve with the Pops, and we still play a lot in New Jersey. And we’ve made three recordings. But he went the right way in life. He’s an oncologist-hematologist.”

When did Topilow first pick up the baton? “I remember conducting the *Star Spangled Banner* in high school,” he said. “Bayonne had an amateur community orchestra and I conducted the *Coriolan Overture*. That was my first adventure as a conductor.” After high school, Topilow entered the Manhattan School of Music, where he earned a degree in clarinet performance and a master’s degree in music education.

He went on to hold conducting fellowships with the National Orchestral Association and the Aspen Music Festival, and began his professional career as an Exxon Arts Endowment Conductor of the Denver Symphony Orchestra, now the Colorado Symphony. “I don’t have any conducting degrees,” he said, “I went to the school of hard knocks.”



When his tenure in Denver was coming to an end, Topilow initially thought that he would work his way up the orchestral ladder. He was up for a number of positions when the job at CIM entered the picture. “Being at the Institute, and with my experience at NRO, I found that I really enjoy working with musicians who are college-age or recent graduates. You can work in a fashion which is uniquely different from working with a professional orchestra. You can develop characteristics they can carry for the rest of their lives.”

Nearly four decades later, Topilow’s success as a pedagogue can be seen in the expansive list of students from CIM and NRO who have gone on to hold positions in orchestras including Cleveland, Minnesota, Dallas, and Fort Worth, to name a few.

“I cannot tell you the number of musicians who have said Carl was a tremendously important figure in their musical development,” Dave DePeters, CEO of the National Repertory Orchestra, wrote in an email. “After musicians win their first job (quite often just after leaving the NRO), their first call is to their parents, and their second call is to Carl. That is how much he means to these musicians. He agonizes over the audition process, and after listening to over 850 auditions a year, he will give

comments to anyone who asks — whether they are accepted or not. It is remarkable.” Topilow estimates that he has listened to 32,000 NRO Auditions, and has mentored 125 conductors through the NRO and CIM programs.

Topilow has also played a role in advancing the careers of performers who come from outside the classical world. “It’s because of Carl that I have a symphony career,” singer Connor O’Brien said in an interview with *ClevelandClassical.com* prior to his 2015 New Year’s Eve appearance with the Cleveland Pops. “Growing up in Ashtabula, I remember when Carl started these concerts, and I remember thinking that I needed to find a way to meet him. I guess I pulled that off years later. Carl has changed my life in a lot of ways. We’ve become very good friends and I’m very thankful for him.”

Laurie Korobkin, executive director of the Firelands Symphony in Sandusky, credits Topilow with breathing new life into the 35-year-old community-based orchestra. “Sandusky is a special community of people, and has strong support for arts,” Korobkin said, “but he dialed us up, and is completely responsible for the professional orchestra that we present to our patrons.”



Korobkin said that Topilow also understands the musical tastes of the community. “When he came on 10 years ago, we had 55 season subscribers and this season we have 566. That sort of says it in a nutshell. Carl produces and presents concerts that are tailored to our audience. He selects pieces that he knows our patrons will enjoy. I think that makes a big difference in our town.”

When it comes to an audience fan base, I can attest that there is none more loyal to Topilow than that of the Cleveland Pops Orchestra. “The board often asks me — what is it about Carl?” Shirley Morgenstern, executive director of the Cleveland Pops Orchestra, said in a conversation in her office. “I always say, I’ll tell you exactly what it is because I’ve been in show business all my life — Carl makes you feel that you are part of the experience, not watching it. And that’s something you cannot teach.”

Morgenstern, who is also married to Topilow, said that she enjoys seeing his personality come out during performances. “He loves people and absolutely loves what he’s doing. He values the gift that he has been given, and loves to share. When we got married he would complain that there was no pops orchestra in Cleveland, so I said, let’s just start one. I got a bunch of my friends together at the Beachwood

Chamber of Commerce. Knowing his personality and watching him onstage, I knew it would be successful.”

Winding up our conversation, I asked Topilow there was an accomplishment that he was most proud of. Without missing a beat he said, “I’m most proud of my family.” His daughter Emily attends Bowling Green State University where she is majoring in psychology and is a violinist with the university orchestra. His daughter Jenny is a violinist in the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra. “We also have two grandchildren, one boy and one girl,” Topilow said smiling. “We visited them a couple of weeks ago and it was great to see them. Thanks goodness for Facetime.”

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