

Cleveland Pops: a season overview with conductor Carl Topilow

by Mike Telin



Since 1995 conductor, clarinetist, and entertainer Carl Topilow and his Cleveland Pops Orchestra have delighted audiences with performances that inventively blend light classical, swing, jazz, Broadway, Dixieland, and Klezmer music. On Saturday, October 24 at 8:00 pm in Severance Hall, Topilow will kick off the Orchestra's new season with a program entitled "Big Band and All That Jazz."

"There's going to be a lot of great Big Band music, and a lot of joking around," Topilow said during a telephone conversation. "We'll be playing Paul Ferguson's arrangement of Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. It's a takeoff on Mozart's not-very-well-documented visit to New Orleans."

Topilow laughed. "It is a musicological discovery — it's K. 525B."

Other Paul Ferguson arrangements on the program include medleys of tunes by Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, Glenn Miller, and Harry James, as well as Hoagy Carmichael's beloved *Stardust*. Ferguson, who's also an outstanding trombonist, will be featured in *A Salute to Tommy Dorsey*. "Paul writes so well. He really is the star of this program," Topilow said, adding, "it's a big plus to have a guy like him playing in the orchestra. The Harry James medley he arranged for our fantastic trumpet player Jack Schantz is brand-new. Jack's been a fixture of the jazz scene in Northeast Ohio for so many years, and it's great to have him in the Orchestra."

Saturday's program will also include performances by vocalist Barbara Knight, who will be featured during Duke Ellington's *Caravan*, and pianist Rock Wehrmann, who will be front and center during George Gershwin's *Embraceable You*. Drummer Jim Rupp will round things out during Louis Prima's *Sing, Sing, Sing*. "One of the key elements of this program is that these are all local people," Topilow pointed out. "We're not calling in performers from New York or Los Angeles. We have our own home-grown talent, like Paul, Jack, Barbara, Rock, and Jim."

Of course, Topilow himself is a fine jazz clarinetist and can always be counted on to bring out at least one of his colorful instruments. “I’m sort of in fifth place next to these guys,” Topilow said earnestly. “But I will find my way into the *Glenn Miller Medley*, *South Rampart Street Parade*, and *Sing, Sing, Sing*.”

The Orchestra will have its chance to shine during Richard Rodgers’ *Slaughter on 10th Avenue*. “Most of the pieces on the program are only three to seven minutes long, but I wanted to program one substantial work for the Orchestra, and this is a nice ten minutes’ worth of jazz-influenced classical music.”

In addition to the Cleveland Pops Orchestra, [Carl Topilow](#) has served as conductor and Director of the Orchestral Program at the Cleveland Institute of Music for 35 years, and recently completed his 37th season as Music Director and Conductor of the National Repertory Orchestra, a summer festival held in Colorado. In 2008, he was appointed Music Director and Conductor of the Sandusky-based Firelands Symphony Orchestra.

I asked the maestro what keeps him going? “I get a lot of testimonials from people. You can touch lives in a very positive way with music, and that’s really what keeps me going. I just conducted Shostakovich’s first symphony with the CIM orchestra. It has so many big solo parts, and to see the students shine brings on a great feeling.”

Topilow said that he truly enjoys all kinds of music, not only as a conductor, but as an audience member as well. “I just went to see *Bullets Over Broadway*, which was unbelievable. Our American heritage really is jazz, musical theater, and film — I think we should embrace it all.”

Above all, Topilow likes to make sure that the audience is going to have a good time. “That’s the best part,” he said, “whether it’s me wearing a Superman costume or having the audience joining in singing. I love to see them having fun.”

I asked Carl Topilow to talk a little bit about what’s in store for the rest of the Cleveland Pops Orchestra’s season.

Holiday concert, November 29 at Connor Palace Theatre: “Of course we’ll have the Cleveland Pops Chorus. The program will include some Klezmer music in honor of Hanukah, and the NEOS dance company from Mansfield will be the special guest — along with Santa Claus.”

New Year's Eve celebration, December 31 at Severance Hall: “This year the fantastic singer Connor O’Brien will be joining us. The concert begins at 9:00 pm, followed by dancing from 11:00 pm to 1:00 am.”

The Genius of John Williams, January 30 at Severance Hall: “It’s hard to know where to start when talking about his music. When you’re watching his movies the music never gets in the way, but when you extract it, you see not only how brilliantly written but also how brilliantly orchestrated it is. I’m programming some of his standard works but also some that are lesser-known. Violinist Steven Greenman is going to playing music from *Fiddler on the Roof*, which won Williams his first Oscar for his adaption from the show to the screen. The Cleveland Orchestra Children’s Chorus will be singing excerpts from *Amistad* and *Empire of the Sun*. And saxophonist Howie Smith will be playing ‘Escapades’ from *Catch Me If You Can*. Clarinetist Frank Cohen will also be featured during *Amistad* and in the first movement of *Schindler’s List*. Of course there will be music from *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*, but there is a very different slant to this program, which I think is nice.”

The Music of Rodgers & Hammerstein, March 11 at Severance Hall: “I’ve always thought of Rodgers & Hammerstein as having written the five great shows — maybe you can add *Flower Drum Song*. But now that their absolutely wonderful *Cinderella* is on Broadway — it was written for television, so it never appeared on Broadway until now — it’s like discovering their lost musical. Of course there will be plenty of their well-known music. The Cleveland Orchestra Children’s Chorus will be singing ‘Do-Re-Mi,’ as well as ‘Getting to Know You.’ The Cleveland Pops Chorus will sing on the concert too.”

An Evening of Gershwin, April 29 at Severance Hall: “The brilliant pianist Richard Glazier is a leading Gershwin historian. He’ll be playing *Rhapsody in Blue* and parts of the *Concerto in F*.”

The Annual Armed Forces Concert, May 27 at Severance Hall: “This program will have all the usual pageantry. The centerpiece will be the Pops Chorus joining the orchestra for the *1812 Overture*. They’ll be singing in Russian, which is very exciting.”

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