

Review**Youngstown Symphony Pops
with Carl Topilow (February 9)**

by Robert Rollin



Last Saturday evening the Youngstown Symphony presented an outstanding Powers Auditorium pops concert under gifted guest conductor Carl Topilow. Topilow heads the conducting degree programs at the Cleveland Institute of Music and is music director of the Cleveland Pops Orchestra. The headliners included talented veteran vocalists Lisa Vroman and J. Mark McVey, and exceptional pianist Kathryn Brown. McVey achieved fame as Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*, and Vroman as Christine Daae in *The Phantom of the Opera*. Their Broadway lead credits number literally in the thousands. Brown, Associate Head of the Cleveland Institute's Piano Department, is a remarkably gifted soloist and chamber performer with many competitions and international venues to her credit.

I had the pleasure of reviewing a CIM Orchestra concert last November. Topilow conducted Ernest Bloch's *Viola Concerto* and Béla Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* beautifully. In Youngstown he displayed his pops talents, beginning the show in a bright red dinner jacket and playing an excellent *My Funny Valentine* jazz solo on his signature red clarinet. Concertmaster Calvin Lewis had started the Rodgers and Hart number, enabling Topilow's surprise offstage entrance.

Though the show had many wonderful moments, Brown's nuanced *Rhapsody in Blue* performance was definitely the high point. Her limpid piano passages displayed great technique, but, more importantly, a thorough understanding and passion for the Gershwin masterpiece. Topilow kept the tempos true to the old Gershwin Whiteman Band Twenties recordings and never eclipsed Brown's dazzling solos. The Symphony played the piece with poise and warmth. Notwithstanding the work's improvisational character, a rare pellucid performance like this makes its structure truly clear. The horns played especially expressively.

The vocal highlights were equally good. The Lerner and Lowe medley had fine Vroman performances of *Bang, Bang, Bang*, *Went the Trolley* and *I Could Have Danced all Night*, though her show-stopping, powerful energy didn't fully emerge until later. McVey gave Porter's *Begin the Beguine* a charming, fresh, and less pretentious reading than usual. The

Bernstein/Sondheim Balcony Scene from *West Side Story* afforded the first duet opportunity, but the scene's euphoric nature demanded a difficult suspension of disbelief.

After intermission the Kern *Showboat* medley was also a duet, but didn't rise to the highest level, despite fine orchestral clarinet solos and solid string playing. The particular songs selected by the unnamed arranger seemed a bit cloying, even for a Valentine's Day concert, and left one longing for *Old Man River*. The Tribute to Richard Rodgers was far better, and included McVey's *That's Why the Lady is a Tramp* and *There's a Song in My Heart*, both delivered smoothly and enthusiastically, and Vroman's, *Be Brave Young Lovers*, sung quite expressively. McVey's *Some Enchanted Evening* seemed especially effective because of his simple, understated reading.

Berlin's *Blue Skies* was truly excellent and rhythmically precise, enabling Vroman to display her prodigious jazz talent. The *42nd Street* medley provided another sparkling Topi-low solo in the *Lullaby of Broadway*. Vroman's *Getting Married Today*, an amazing patter-song performance from Sondheim's *Company*, was absolutely exquisite. It's hard to believe she could enunciate those rapid words so clearly.

The wonderful rhythm section, consisting of Domenic Ciarniello, piano, Don Yallech, drums, and Jeffrey Bremer, bass guitar — all Dana School of Music graduates — was sensitive, expressive, and imaginative throughout, often inserting interesting short riffs among the vocal and instrumental parts. Such surprising subtleties must be mentioned.

The final selections were truly remarkable. McVey's amazingly sensitive *Bring Him Home* from *Les Miserables* was absolutely magnificent. His soft high range lines were as gorgeous as can be imagined. The song is one of the greatest pieces in recent show music. Vroman's and McVey's duo medley from *Phantom of the Opera* was also excellent.

Published on clevelandclassical.com February 12, 2013