

Preview

Cleveland Pops Orchestra to present a night in New Orleans

by Mike Telin



“Music and Fun for Everyone!” For seventeen years the [Cleveland Pops Orchestra](#) has been presenting concerts that feature the music of Hollywood and Broadway along with light classics and jazz. “It’s music you can hum along with or tap your toes to and that you can just enjoy,” says Cleveland Pops founder and conductor Carl Topilow. On Friday, May 3rd beginning at 8:00 pm in Severance Hall, Topilow and his orchestra will present an evening of New Orleans Jazz featuring trumpeter [Byron Stripling](#). We spoke to the multi-faceted Carl Topilow by telephone and began by asking him about the evening's program.

Carl Topilow: In keeping with the New Orleans theme, the concert features Hershy Kay’s arrangement of Louis Gottschalk’s *Cakewalk Suite*, a medley from *Showboat* and *Mardi Gras* from Ferde Grofé’s *Mississippi Suite*. Byron will join the orchestra in tunes like *Bourbon Street Parade*, *St. James Infirmary*, *Please Don’t Talk About Me When I’m Gone* and *Sweet Georgia Brown*. I’ll also join in with my clarinet, that’s always something very special for me.

Mike Telin: I have heard Byron with the Columbus Jazz Orchestra but never as a soloist.

CT: We’ve had him with us before and he’s a fantastic player and great entertainer as well.

MT: The orchestra has another performance on May 17th also at Severance, the annual Salute to Our Armed Forces concert.

CT: That’s right and this year we’re taking advantage of the fact that we have the Cleveland Pops Chorus. So for me one of the great highlights is to perform the *1812 Overture* with the chorus singing the Russian hymn in place of the cellos at the beginning, and “God Bless the Czar” at the end. I’ve done it this way only once before and it’s very exciting. The program also includes *God Bless the USA*, the *Armed Forces Salute*, *Pops Sing Along*, *God Bless America* and *The Stars and Stripes Forever*.

Also on the program is Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait*, which Austin Carr from the Cavaliers will be narrating. He’s never done anything quite like this and he’s really excited to do it. *Lincoln Portrait* will be part of a segment that is devoted to the Civil War since this is the

150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Peter Wilhousky's classic arrangement of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* with the chorus is also part of that.

MT: Both programs sound great, but you always come up with interesting programs.

CT: We do Broadway programs every year, and we did a concert of *Music Around the World*. But coming up with the themes is a really important part of what we do, and frankly coming up with new programs every year that are exciting and relevant is the biggest challenge.

MT: I read on your blog that you just performed a concert with your brother. Did you come from a musical family?

CT: Not really, but I had an uncle who was a vaudevillian, a drummer, and played piano by ear. He could play any song in C major. But my brother is a fantastic pianist, maybe a better oncologist/hematologist but a fine pianist in his own right. I grew up listening to him play and the reason my parents gave me a clarinet is because he was already very advanced as a pianist and they were afraid that I would give up when I was at the rudimentary stage and he was already playing Chopin, Rachmaninoff and Beethoven.

But it worked out because this clarinet business has been a lot of fun for me. I always play something like a Glenn Miller medley on the patriotic program. And I'll play *Stars and Stripes* with the piccolos on my red white and blue clarinet.

MT: OK, I've always wanted to ask – what are the colorful clarinets made of?

CT: Plastic, the finest plastic you can find. I always joke that it used to be a bowling ball. I also have a blue, a green and a white one so I can mix and match colors to the occasion.

MT: You have been very successful as a conductor in the classical music world as well. What were your musical interests growing up?

CT: Of course pops has changed over the years and when I was growing up, rock and roll was the classic rock of the 50's and 60's and it was a very different sound although I was always interested in jazz and big band music as well.

MT: Were you part of orchestra programs in high school?

CT: I Played in a community orchestra in New Jersey, but my epiphany came when I was at the Indian Hill camp in Stockbridge Massachusetts, where coincidentally one of my co-campers was Arlo Guthrie. But it was a place where other people were doing what I liked to do and all of a sudden I wasn't an odd ball any more and that was great for me. I also went to performances at Tanglewood, Jacob's Pillow and some of the other places up there.

MT: But eventually you did decide on the classical path and went to the Manhattan School of Music as a clarinet major and then followed the conducting path. Did you continue to play pops music during that time?

CT: When I got my first job as a conductor with the Denver Symphony, now Colorado Symphony, I really didn't want anyone to know that my background was playing dance band gigs, so I put the clarinet in mothballs for a little while. Then I realized that there was a market out there. I saw Doc Severinsen work and I thought, gee I think I could do something like that. So I put my own arrangements together, developed some shows and concerts and it's worked out well, I have to admit.

I've been very fortunate, but the defining day of my life was playing a new Benny Goodman arrangement that Paul Ferguson wrote for me at the opening of the Maltz Museum in 2005. And that night I conducted Mahler's 5th symphony. Those was sort of the extremes of my life.

MT: Amazing — and you're a great example of why one should never give up what they love doing as a child, especially in the music business.

CT: Yes, and it's all good. There are only twelve notes in a scale that are used in many mysterious ways.

MT: I'd like to bring Shirley (Morgenstern) into the conversation since she played an important role in creating the Cleveland Pops.

CT: Right. Essentially she got all of her friends together from the Beachwood Chamber of Commerce and started the orchestra. And here we are seventeen years later and we're still doing it, which is amazing in itself. As you know, starting an orchestra from nothing is a real challenge.

There are two sides: the business side, keeping the support and the fund raising and the board involvement, which Shirley is involved with on a daily basis, as am I to some degree, then there's keeping the programs fresh and interesting, which is an equally big challenge.

MT: Do you have a system for developing the programs?

CT: Yes, [laughing] Shirley and I discuss them heatedly. But we do try to figure out the right program for the right situation. I'll come up with a program and she'll say this piece and this piece are good but this piece really doesn't work for this situation. We discuss what needs to be done to make the programs work and be successful. It's not uncommon to have four or five versions of a program before we decide on the one that works.

We've also been able to unearth some fantastic local talent that we never knew about and suddenly we were able to have people like Joan Ellison, Helen Welch, Susan Hesse and Barbara Knight and others perform with us. There are a lot of fine vocalists in the area — and all of our musicians are local, we don't import anybody.

MT: Congratulations on all of the success with the Pops. I know it can't be easy to wear all of the hats you need to wear.

CT: Thanks you, that's much appreciated.

Published on clevelandclassical.com April 30, 2013