

Review

Cleveland Orchestra with Pink Martini: a conversation with Thomas Lauderdale

by Mike Telin



Let's face it, people have ideas everyday, but not all of them are good. In 1994 in Portland, Oregon, the politically active Thomas Lauderdale had grown tired of attending fundraising events that featured music he found to be “underwhelming, lackluster, loud and un-neighborly.” Lauderdale, a lover of music from around the world, decided to form a band that would perform music that wove together the genres of classical, jazz and old-fashioned pop. The band would “provide more beautiful and inclusive musical soundtracks for

political fundraisers for causes such as civil rights, affordable housing, the environment, libraries, public broadcasting, education and parks.” Above all, both liberals and conservatives would enjoy the music. Eighteen years later, it's clear that Lauderdale's idea to form the “little orchestra” Pink Martini, was a good idea.

On December 18 & 19 at 8:00 pm, [Pink Martini](#) returns to Severance Hall for a holiday celebration with The Cleveland Orchestra, under the direction of James Feddeck. Described as a “globally-inclusive holiday concert for the 21st century,” the concert features the band's popular favorites along with holiday classics such as “White Christmas,” “Santa Baby,” “Little Drummer Boy,” “We Three Kings,” and more.

Pink Martini's music spans a number of musical styles and languages, and they have achieved international superstar status by consistently giving performances that are artistically top notch. “That's true, and what's more important than politics is the music itself,” Thomas Lauderdale told us by telephone from Fairbanks, Alaska. “There is a lot of classical music training inside the band, as well as other musical genres such as jazz, and Afro-Cuban. And I think what really makes the band is the diversity of musical material.” So how does Lauderdale describe Pink Martini's music? “At this point we are somewhere between a symphony orchestra, Lawrence Welk, the Muppets and maybe a little bit of Mary Tyler Moore and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. And hopefully we don't underestimate the intelligence of the audience.”

Lauderdale has referred to Pink Martini's musical style as old-fashioned symphonic global pop. “Our material is melody driven, with a sparse elegance. Everything should always support the melody and if it doesn't do that, then it shouldn't be there. One should always know what the melody is, *Moon River* should sound like *Moon River*. It's the dif-

ference between listening to modern Hollywood scores as opposed to those of Nino Rota, Bernard Herrmann or Korngold. There was a different sentiment during that era, they were simpler, smarter and more memorable. I'm just a bit old-fashioned and kind of a curmudgeon that way. I'm only forty-two but I do feel like Waldorf and Statler from the Muppet Show."



A Pink Martini bandmate once called Lauderdale an eccentric genius. How does he describe himself? "I would say empathetic in that I pay a lot of attention to what is happening around me. And I wouldn't say dictator because that sounds too severe."

Now in 2012, does Lauderdale think the band's original mission is still relevant? "I think the original impetus for the band, which was to make political fundraisers a little more fabulous, and take them up a notch by playing a more inclusive type of music that would have broad appeal is still viable." But he adds that today he may be a bit more subtle. "I had to realize that a lot of our audience may be conservative," and he is surprised by how popular the band is in many parts of the country that one might not consider to be liberal. "But again, I think of how many friends that I have who, if personally polled, might think that the chance of me going to hell would be pretty high," he says laughing, "And somehow I'm comfortable with that." He says that in the end it is about "quiet diplomatic friendship through the years." Lauderdale firmly believes that things do change and do get better if people are in dialogue with one another. "If someone is lobbing insults from across the street and not participating in a dialogue, that [doesn't help]." Lauderdale points out that he is also friends with many people in the military and the band collaborated with the 234th Army Band during the sesquicentennial celebration for the State of Oregon.

Did growing up in the Indiana play a role in shaping Lauderdale's thoughts about the world? "Yes I think so. I grew up with pretty liberal parents. My father was a Brethren minister, who eventually resigned and started a plant nursery. My mother's family was from Greenville, Ohio, and I think her parents were the first managers of the Brethren Home in Greenville. The Brethren have historically been a pacifist denomination known for their conscientious objection. We grew up around Guernseys and my mother would make butter from the milk. We had a garden and raised all of our own food. I don't really remember going to a grocery until I was 8. We must have, but I don't really remember it. My mother would can beans and peas; it was very pastoral. My parents also adopted four children from around the world, and I do think that all of these things played some role in shaping my thoughts about the world."

While he may call himself "old fashioned and kind of a curmudgeon," if you are worried about how to set the most fabulous holiday table for your friends and family, Thomas Lauderdale has prepared a most helpful video titled [*Holiday Table Setting Made Easy*](#). Have a look, you'll be happy you did.

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