

**Cleveland POPS with Carl Topilow:
*The Genius of John Williams (Jan. 30)***

by Daniel Hathaway



Cleveland POPS music director Carl Topilow called in extra forces to celebrate the genius of composer John Williams in Severance Hall on Saturday evening, January 30. To his excellent POPS Orchestra, he added the 50-voice Cleveland Orchestra Children’s Chorus, more than 40 members of the Contemporary Youth Orchestra, and three local heroes — Howie Smith, Franklin Cohen, and Steven Greenman — who made cameo appearances during the celebration. Oh, and

Princess Leia, Darth Vader, Chewbacca, C3PO, R2D2, and a few storm troopers made a surprise visit during the concluding *Star Wars* set.

If that sounds like a logistical nightmare, Topilow and his forces pulled off all the stage business with admirable efficiency, allowing the capacity audience to immerse itself in the full glory of Williams’s chameleon-like music. That ranges from the terrifying (the theme from *Jaws*) though the poignant (the theme from *Schindler’s List*) to the ceremonial (music from the 1988 Seoul Olympics) and the triumphant (*Star Wars*, both old and new).

Topilow bounded onstage at the beginning, giving the downbeat to the *Mission Theme* for the NBC Nightly News with only one foot on the podium. Keeping up a running commentary, he turned to the *Jaws* theme (“the two notes that changed music forever”) and then to selections from *Amistad* and *Empire of the Sun*, beautifully sung by the Cleveland Orchestra Children’s Chorus, prepared by Ann Usher.

The Olympic Spirit from the 1988 games in Korea provided a striking introduction to three selections from *Catch Me If You Can*. Stylishly played by saxophonist Howie Smith, backed up by Bruce Golden on vibraphone and Ann Gilbert on bass, “Closing In,” “Reflections,” and “Joyride” recall Williams’s days as a jazz musician.

Intermission gave the stage crew time to bring out extra chairs and stands for Liza Grossman’s Contemporary Youth Orchestra musicians. Playing side-by-side with the POPS players in the march from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *The Patriot*, the combined orchestra made a grand effect.

For a change of style, clarinetist Franklin Cohen (in his first return to the Severance stage since retiring from The Cleveland Orchestra last season) gave a soulful performance of the theme from *Schindler’s List*, followed by the Klezmer-inspired “Viktor’s Tale” from *The Terminal*.

Topilow said he was thrilled to learn that the music for “Devil’s Dance” from *The Witches of Eastwick* had become available, and he obviously enjoyed leading a spirited performance of the slightly demented piece. Then Jewish music returned to the program with violinist Steven Greenman’s expressive stylings of excerpts from the film version of *Fiddler on the Roof*, as adapted by John Williams.



Leaving the most popular — and topical — music for the end, Topilow led two freshly-published excerpts from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. Then “The Throne Room” was the cue for *Star Wars* reenactors from the Ohio Garrison, 501st Legion, to parade up the aisles to the stage. An encore? Topilow had one at his fingertips. Returning to the stage with his multi-colored clarinet in hand, he sent the happy audience out into the night with a spirited toot through “Cantina Band.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 8, 2016.

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