

Cleveland POPS brings in the New Year with Melinda Doolittle at Severance Hall (Dec. 31)

by Mario Buchanan, *Special to ClevelandClassical.com*



On December 31 the Cleveland Pops Orchestra, under the direction of Carl Topilow, performed their annual New Year's Eve concert at Severance Hall. Above the partygoers' heads in the Grand Foyer were two nets filled with blue and white balloons waiting to welcome the new year, and attendees were required to grab a party horn from the table for the concert. In the auditorium, "2017" was spelled out with balloons above the stage. Clearly, this was going to be a night to remember.

As Topilow came on stage, the lights dimmed and all that could be seen were stand lights and the first three digits of '2017' lit up. The concert started with two famous "crowd-warming" tunes: the opening of Richard Strauss' *Thus Sprach Zarathustra*, which segued into "O Fortuna" from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* — a rather interesting way to start the evening.

Then Melinda Doolittle, the guest vocalist for the occasion, greeted the audience, wearing a gorgeous, elegant dress and immediately stunning the crowd with her beautiful, wide-ranging voice. By her own admission, Doolittle was tone deaf as a child, but determined to prove herself, she eventually earned a bachelor's in music. She became famous while competing on *American Idol*, where Simon Cowell called her his "personal favorite." Since then, Doolittle has performed all over the nation.

The vocalist described her song selections as being like her personality: "romance and sass." She sang some old, romantic classics, including *Don't Get Around Much Anymore*, *Home* from "The Wiz", and *Over the Rainbow*. The sass included *I'm a*

Woman, Don't Touch Me, and *All About that Bass* (which also featured double bassist Ann Gilbert). Two songs in the first half of the concert also spotlighted local jazz legend Jack Schantz on trumpet.

Next it was time for the party horns. Carl Topilow, with his dry sense of humor and festive green sports jacket festooned with multi-colored polkadots, cued the audience to play during Joseph Strauss's *Feuerfest Polka*. Topilow was later featured on clarinet during Paul Ferguson's arrangement of *Latino Melody* (Ferguson is another local hero). Even though Topilow was miked, his solo was often covered by the orchestra. The first half of the evening ended with Victor Herbert's *Festival March* with the audience singing along on *Auld Lang Syne* at the end.

The second half featured a Hoedown with guest violinist Ed Caner. Caner teaches Physics at Case, but demonstrated that he's equally at home with traditional fiddling. The orchestra followed with themes from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, including the Princess Leia theme to pay homage to Carrie Fisher's death earlier this week. Even with occasional intonation problems, it was a great tribute to John Williams, who is still composing at the age of 84!

The concert ended with more sass and romance from Doolittle, who was was a delightful person to spend the last evening of 2016 with and go forward into the new year. The audience continued the celebration with bands and dancing in the lobbies of Severance Hall. Hopefully, more of the younger generation will turn out and experience this wonderful Cleveland tradition next year.

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