

Melissa Etheridge to perform with Contemporary Youth Orchestra June 7

by Mike Telin



“This concert is going to be one of the most unique things that I’ve ever done,” celebrated singer-songwriter [Melissa Etheridge](#) said during a telephone interview. “I’m just so thrilled, excited, and nervous — I’ve got to be on top of my game for this.” On Wednesday, June 7 at 7:30 pm in Severance Hall, Etheridge will join conductor Liza Grossman and her 115-piece [Contemporary Youth Orchestra](#) plus a 50-person choir for a concert that will

feature some of the legendary singer’s greatest hits, as well as rarely-heard tracks from her multi-decade career.

The evening marks CYO’s eighteenth annual *Rock the Orchestra* series, which has included artists Tommy Shaw, Ben Folds, Graham Nash, Bootsy Collins, and Jon Anderson of Yes. “I have envisioned this show with Melissa and CYO for more than a decade,” Grossman said during a recent interview. “I saw her tribute to Janis Joplin at the 2005 Grammy Awards. Although she was being treated for breast cancer and was bald from chemotherapy, I was so taken with the way she embraced who she was as an artist. I love her honesty, and that comes through in her music.”

The admiration that Grossman has for Etheridge is also bestowed on the conductor by the Grammy-winning singer. “I’ve got to tell you that Liza is an amazing human being,” Etheridge said. “What she’s bringing to this project is the stuff a musician’s dream is made of. She’s not only gone into my hits, but she’s dug deep into my catalogue and pulled out songs that I haven’t played in years. She chose the song *Kiss Me*, which is one of my favorites, but only my biggest fans know it.”

While Wednesday’s concert is not the first performance with orchestra the Leavenworth,

Kansas native has performed without her band, she said this one is different because of the attention that Grossman has given to the arrangements. “What I love about Liza’s approach is that she didn’t just add strings to what is already on the records. She worked with videos of my live performances. It’s hard to arrange what I do live because it is improvisational. For her to understand what I’m doing and then to put that with an orchestra is incredible.”

Prior to her first rehearsal, Etheridge requested a private meeting with the orchestra and the chorus. “I have a deep belief that music is a contact sport, and the musicians are a team — one voice is beautiful, but when voices come together it can create a memory that will last a lifetime,” she said. “The art of entertaining is about getting everyone to have the same intention at the same moment. I do this with all of my musicians whenever we play. We come together and say that we’re going to do this and it’s going to be fun, and I want these young people to feel like they are on a team.”

In addition to being a musician, Etheridge is also an activist for human rights and environmental causes. Why is it important for her to be vocal about the causes she believes in?

“I made a choice a long time ago to try to walk through everything in life truthfully. What’s unique about my being an entertainer — or an artist, as you say — is that we talk to the press, we talk constantly, we promote. You ask the questions, and I made a promise to myself twenty-five years ago that I would always answer whatever question was asked truthfully. And being willing to do that has made me an activist. Believe me, I’ve never gone out of my way to insist on anything, I don’t think that’s how it works. But I think the best thing I can do is to be an example. To say my truth and then live it.”

Winding up our conversation Melissa Etheridge said that she appreciates the enthusiasm that Liza, the orchestra, and everyone connected to CYO has brought to the project. “The musical opportunity to connect with youth is something that I am amazingly grateful for — I’m really looking forward to it.” And asked about her health, she said, “I’m twelve years cancer-free.”

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