

Connor Bogart O'Brien rings in 2018 with the Cleveland POPS

by Mike Telin



Life is never boring for vocalist [Connor Bogart O'Brien](#). For the past several years he has split his career performing with symphony orchestras, recording jingles for American Greetings, and singing in Mandarin on cruise ships in Asia — he travels to Shanghai or Tokyo every two

to three weeks. And he has recently added Home Renovator to his resumé. “My life is now a strange juxtaposition,” O’Brien said during a telephone conversation. “I’m either smashing out drywall at my house on the west side of Cleveland, or dressed in a tuxedo performing onstage for a couple thousand people.”

On Sunday, December 31 O’Brien returns to the Severance Hall stage, where he will join Carl Topilow to ring in 2018 during the Cleveland POPS 22nd Annual New Year’s Eve Celebration. The festivities begin at 9:00 pm with a two-hour concert titled [“Legends of Rock-and-Roll.”](#) Following the performance, the audience can dance their way into the new year to live music: Topilow and a Cleveland POPS ensemble will play in the Grand Foyer, while the No-Name Band will play rock music in the Smith Lobby. Click [here](#) to learn about hotel package discounts.

The evening’s playlist will feature music from the ‘50s to the present and will include songs by Elvis Presley, Billy Joel, Richard Harris, Frank Sinatra, Michael Jackson, and Simon & Garfunkel. “Rock is a wide genre, and we’ve had a lot of sit-downs to choose the songs,” O’Brien said. “We’re opening the show with two full Elvis numbers. We’re also doing *MacArthur Park*, *Mrs. Robinson*, *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, and *Sweet Caroline*, and we’re going to end the evening with some Beatles tunes. The arrangements we have are fantastic — a couple were made especially for this show. I am from Cleveland and Carl was my first mentor, so I’m thrilled to be back at Severance

with the Cleveland POPS, which is where I began my symphony career.”

While we were discussing song lyrics, I asked O’Brien what’s up with the words to Jimmy Webb’s [MacArthur Park](#) — why is MacArthur’s Park melting in the dark, and who left the cake out in the rain? “I knew you were going to ask that,” O’Brien said, laughing. “I kid you not, when I mention the song, people either tell me it is their favorite or they hate it, there’s nothing in between. It is probably my father’s favorite song, so I grew up listening to it. What I do know from reading about the lyrics is that the cake is a metaphor for a relationship that he has not paid enough attention to and is now falling apart. Who really knows? But I love the song and with a full symphony it is going to be glorious.”

When *ClevelandClassical.com* spoke with O’Brien in 2015, he had just begun performing his Mandarin show, but after nearly twenty contracts in Asia every year since then, it has gotten a lot easier now. “The hard part is the travel and logistics — the performer is often the last person to find out the important details. For example, I have shown up on a cruise ship in Asia that is full of Europeans, Americans, and Australians, instead of a ship of all Chinese guests, with an entire show in a language that none of these people are going to understand. So I have to come up with songs in English and wing it — I have a thumb drive full of PDFs with band charts for songs like *Sweet Caroline*. You need to turn on the balls of your feet and solve problems quickly, and that’s where the real work comes in.”

And about that travel? “I’ve been in situations where I’ve had to sleep in airports for days, but I have become somewhat of an expert on world travel because I can get myself anywhere. I once lost my passport in Shanghai and couldn’t get back. I have been through every possible situation — I need my own travel show on CNN because I can do it all. When I get on a plane for a trip that’s less than five or six hours, I don’t even think of it as flying.”

How did O’Brien acquire his house renovation skills? “That also has to do with music,” he said. “I studied opera at Eastman, but after graduating I decided I was going to be a rock star. Years ago I had a rock band in Cleveland that toured a lot and opened for all of the major acts that came to town. But I was spending all my money recording rock and roll albums, so I thought, ‘Why don’t I put this money into building my own recording studio?’ My parents had a small milk house on their farm in Ashtabula, so I renovated it. I still use it to record jingles for American Greetings. The project took me a year or two, but that’s how I learned to do renovation work. So when I bought my house — which had had a fire, and all the windows were boarded up — I said, ‘I can do this.’ I’m rebuilding from the studs up by myself. I paid for the house in cash that I earned with my voice, and that feels really good.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 18, 2017.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)