

## Contemporary Youth Orchestra: A conversation with Kenny Loggins

by Mike Telin



A highlight of each Contemporary Youth Orchestra season is the annual Rock the Orchestra concert. On Monday, May 21 at 7:00 pm in Severance Hall, Liza Grossman and her 115-piece Orchestra and 50-voice choir will join forces with the legendary singer, songwriter, and guitarist [Kenny Loggins](#). Tickets are available [online](#).

During a career that has lasted over four decades, Loggins has pretty much done it all. He began writing songs while still in school in San Gabriel, California and formed his first band, Second Helping, in

1968. Two years later he was introduced to Jim Messina, which led to the birth of the “accidental duo,” who released their first album, *Sittin’ In* in 1971. Loggins first solo album, *Celebrate Me Home* in 1977 includes the song “I Believe In Love,” sung by Barbra Streisand in the film, *A Star Is Born*. His second album, *Nightwatch* (1978), features “What A Fool Believes,” a song he co-wrote with Michael McDonald. The two would also co-write the hit song “This Is It”. His albums *Return to Pooh Corner* and *More Songs from Pooh Corner* received Grammy nominations for Best Musical Album for Children.

Loggins’ many film contributions include “I’m Alright,” the theme from *Caddyshack*, and the title track from *Footloose*, which received an Academy Award nomination.

As an advocate for numerous social and environmental causes, Loggins participated in *We are the World — USA for Africa*, the American benefit single for African famine relief. His song “Conviction of the Heart” was dubbed the unofficial anthem of the environmental movement by Vice President Al Gore.

In 2000 Loggins was awarded a Hollywood Film Award for Outstanding Achievement in Songwriting. In 2010 he received the TJ Martell Lifetime Artistic Achievement Award. Never slowing down, Loggins formed the band Blue Sky Riders in the mid 2000's with Georgia Middleman and Gary Burr.

*I spoke to Kenny Loggins by telephone from his home in California, and began by asking him how the CYO concert came about.*

KL: Liza contacted my agent. I've been doing some interesting symphony shows, but this one was the most interesting-sounding of them all. CYO re-writes all your charts, and Liza doesn't like the performer to bring his band, so I compromised by bringing my music director and guitar player Scott Bernard. Scott has been in constant contact with Stefan Podell, the arranger, as have I. We'll see when we get there, but I think the trickiest arrangement to do was *Celebrate Me Home* without a piano. They prefer to voice the piano parts throughout the instruments.

What makes it especially interesting is working with a youth orchestra. They bring a level of energy to the performance that you don't normally get from career players. I know that they've been working very hard to get ready for this and have it in their hands by the time I get there, so I'm just looking forward to the enthusiasm that the young ones have.

*MT: What can the audience expect to hear?*

KL: Pretty much a hit show, but I have moved a few songs into it that I don't normally get to do. I wrote a spiritual called *That's When I Find You* and I've linked it to a song called *If You Believe*. I'm also using some young singers, as well as my daughter Hannah. Because of the youth angle, I thought it would be fun to bring her in. She plays piano and guitar and she's been singing, recording, and writing for movies.

There are other songs that I don't usually do, like *Heart to Heart* — which I wrote with Michael McDonald and David Foster — and the Redwoods version of *This Is It*.

*MT: You started writing songs when you were still in high school, and the words just keep flowing out of you. Has it always been easy?*

KL: I won't say that it comes easy. I work with a lot of great songwriters and some write lyrics quickly — they have a certain kind of gift. Like Gary Burr in the band I started called [Blue Sky Riders](#). Gary's a Nashville songwriter with fifteen number-one songs, which is pretty amazing. He's all about words — the kind of guy

that does crossword puzzles when he's not writing songs. He's effortless, so I always push him to see how much further we can take it — can we get into an idea that is more universal, something bigger than getting laid in the back seat? But writing takes time for me. Sometimes I'll work on a song for months.

*MT: Do you have a favorite song you've written?*

*KL: This Is It* is still very special to me. I wrote it for my father when he was having surgery. I had to help him change his attitude because he was thinking he was going to die. That's what the song is about, taking a positive stance to living. And *Conviction of the Heart*, which I wrote with Guy Thomas years ago. It's about one's connection to all life, equating the environmental movement to a spiritual movement. The chorus is 'One with the earth, one with the sky.' A song like that has more meaning to me and to my fans.

*MT: How is it different to write a song for a movie?*

*KL: When they have a scene that they want a song for, they deliver you the emotion on film, and the job of the songwriter is to try to capture that emotion and write something that enhances that moment. Sometimes the lyrics are important, and sometime they are secondary. If you have a strong emotional scene, a song can enhance it, and the scene can become ten times more powerful.*

*MT: What makes a good song?*

*KL: Hard to say. I'm a writer from an era where melodies were important and in this era, usually melodies are not that important. It's more about the groove, which is the tradition of rock-and-roll. So to me, what makes a good song is a strong melody and lyrics, and that it has an emotional content that I resonate with. Some songs do that and some don't.*

One time on the radio I was asked what makes some songs live forever and some go away immediately. I said that a song that lives forever tells the truth. And the guy said, 'You mean that *Louie Louie* told the truth?' I said, well to some people it probably did. But there is something to that. If the lyric of a song or the emotion of a song — which is not necessarily the lyric — resonates with the audience, they feel it as an expression of their own emotion.

*MT: You've collaborated with many great songwriters and performers over the years, and when I watch your videos, you always look like you're having fun.*

KL: It is fun. A good collaborator is someone who is willing to let go of control and just dive in, say anything, and not be afraid. As Gary puts it, don't be afraid to suck. Get in there, have ideas, and share your ideas, but be ready to turn on a dime, because the point of collaboration is to get something bigger than what any one person would have done alone.

*MT: You've generously given your time to many environmental and social causes. Why is it important to give back?*

KL: It feels like a circle is being connected. I find that when I'm involved in something that I really connect with, it feeds my soul, and sparks my own creativity.

Lately I've been doing a lot of things with young people. We did a benefit concert here in Santa Barbara called "Teens Sing for Santa Barbara" in reaction to the mudslides and fires that happened back in December and January. We knew so many people that lost their homes — 500 homes were destroyed and 22 people lost their lives. These are our neighbors in this small community.

So these kids came to me and said they'd like to do a benefit concert with the singers and dancers from the local musical theater. I had the idea of helping put together a real show, and not just a talent show. It ended up being a powerful moment for the community to come together, honor their teens, and express their grief. It was a very healing evening. For me, just being part of it and helping guide them was very rewarding. I felt like I was where I belonged.

But you asked me why it's important to give back. It's only important if it is important to you, there isn't a rule of thumb that everyone has to give back. That would be wonderful, but it's not the case. Some people just aren't drawn that way. But again for me it matters because it feeds me as well as all of the people around me.

*MT: You've been doing this a long time: what keeps you going?*

KL: Yeah, I have been. Well, (pause) I love what I do, and as long as I can pace it in a way that doesn't wear me out — I like to do a few shows every year and connect to the audience. And I can still sing and do what I do, so I want to get out there and use it while I can. So the trick for me is to have a balancing act and not work myself to death. Go out there, make connections, and have some fun. It's part getaway from the norm of what I do, and in part, earn a few bucks to pay the rent.

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