

Cleveland Pops with Capathia Jenkins (Mar. 9)

by David Kulma



A golden age in American popular music began about a century ago. Lasting four decades and pervading musical theater, sound recordings, film, radio, and jazz stylings, it left a body of music that has never gone out of circulation and is regularly trumpeted as one of America's best collective creations. We now call it "The Great American Songbook."

And that was the title of a delightful and engaging concert by the Cleveland Pops

Orchestra on Saturday, March 9 at Severance Hall with music director Carl Topilow and the excellent Broadway singer Capathia Jenkins.

Over eighteen numbers, Topilow and the highly polished Pops Orchestra brought favorites from stage and screen to life again. The nine items that featured the orchestra ranged from medleys to instrumental solo features. The medleys — Henry Mancini's jazzy film music, Richard Rodgers' waltzes, and tunes from Kander & Ebb's *Chicago* — were fun nostalgia trips, while the solos showed off major local jazz players.

Trumpeter Jack Schantz and trombonist Paul Ferguson's tasteful lyrical skills were respectively on display in George Gershwin's *Embraceable You* and Rogers & Hart's *My Funny Valentine*. Solo saxophonist Howie Smith's exciting, slightly jagged playing (and body movements) in Hoagy Carmichael's *Georgia on My Mind* and Duke Ellington's *Caravan* showed how jazz players can pay homage to the past while still finding new ways through the chord changes.

Drummer Jim Rupp gave an impressively vigorous, tom-heavy solo to Louis Prima's inescapable *Sing Sing Sing*. And of course, no Cleveland Pops concert would be

complete without Topilow's signature clarinet playing — full of chromatic sweeps and an active, loving vibrato. His tour through Carmichael's *Stardust* was lovely, with just the right amount of sentiment.

Capathia Jenkins was an energetic and immensely musical presence throughout her nine featured songs. Singing Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Johnny Mercer, Rodgers, Marvin Hamlisch, and Gary Geld, she conjured up the entirely appropriate air of the lead in an old movie musical — pepped up, raring to go, dancing along, and smiling at the joys of making music. The opening two numbers showed her range immediately. *Strike Up the Band* was a brash and joyous romp, while *Over the Rainbow*, with its great intro verse, gave her the chance to show off her impeccable pitch and long, smooth phrasing.

Two other highlights included a rare, funky trip to the '70s with "I Got Love" from the musical *Purlie*, and Jenkins's virtuosic and powerful rendition of *Summertime* where she pulled out all the stops. Howie Smith's marvelous soprano sax solo on the Gershwin was icing on the cake.

After a full evening of lustrous jazz-era jewels, Jenkins, Topilow, and company delivered an encore that made me laugh with glee. The '70s feminist disco anthem *I Will Survive*, originally performed by Gloria Gaynor, had the audience clapping in time — and midway through, dancing. It was the perfect way to end a wonderful concert experience.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 18, 2019.

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