

Cleveland POPS with The Texas Tenors (Oct. 4)

by David Kulma



Celebrating their tenth anniversary as a trio, The Texas Tenors starred in the captivating and wholesome opening concert of the Cleveland POPS Orchestra's 24th season, led by music director Carl Topilow on Friday, October 4 at Severance Hall.

The Texas Tenors sell themselves — tongue in check — with the methods of a boy band. The fresh-faced Marcus Collins with his clarion musical-theater voice is “The Contemporary Tenor,” while the rugged JC Fisher with his thicker, rounded voice is “The Romantic Tenor.” And the powerful *verismo* voice of John Hagen obviously makes him “*The Tenor*.” But hearing these three men sing solo and in close harmony across a wide array of styles, the real takeaway is their skillful musicianship and seasoned performing skills.

The first half was uplifting and patriotic, evoking generalized gratitude and striving to be better. Neil Diamond's *Coming to America* and Lee Greenwood's *God Bless the U.S.A.* mixed easily with Secret Garden's *You Raise Me Up* (popularized by Josh Groban) and two songs written for the trio by Jennifer Hanson, *RISE* and *Dreamer*. The modern patriotic anthems came off well, and the inspiration-oriented songs were especially effective in combination with the large-screen images and music videos.

As spirited as this set was, the trio finished the first half back in their wheelhouse with Righteous Brothers covers. *Unchained Melody* and *You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'* need long lines and full-bodied, expressive phrasing, which the Tenors supplied in spades.

They opened the second half with their country skills: the Osborne Brothers' upbeat *Rocky Top* and the Tenors' own toe-tapping *Bootdaddy*, featuring Hagen's surprisingly resonant low register. The concert ended with two justly famous mainstays of male singing: *Music of the Night* and *My Way*. But the highlights of the evening were when

each Tenor took his turn in the spotlight. Collins was a heart-melting delight in Bruno Mars' *Just the Way You Are*, especially with his humorous crowd work and well-planned spin into Adele's *Hello*. Hagen showed his full-throated, romantic power in *Core 'ngrato*, while Fisher was at his best during the moving *Bring Him Home*.

Topilow and the Cleveland POPS, along with the excellent 3 Bottle Band — The Texas Tenors' backing group — ably supported the trio in all the musical styles required. From uplifting ballads and hard-rocking country to musical theater classics and Neapolitan songs, everything was right on the money. And the anticipated Topilow clarinet feature was a great fit during the bluegrass-inflected *Rocky Top*.

Four western-themed orchestra works were interspersed among the Tenors' selections. Elmer Bernstein's music for *The Magnificent Seven*, a medley from *Oklahoma!*, and John Williams' *Cowboys Overture* had a thematic logic as part of a concert with Stetson-wearing singers. The POPS played each selection well, but the standout in the orchestra selections was Leroy Anderson's *Horse and Buggy*, which brought two percussionists out front with whip and temple blocks to underline the cute narrative that also featured a lovely solo from hornist Kent Larmee.

And the joyful, soaring Texas Tenors encore was Puccini's "Nessun dorma."

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