

Classical music in a sitcom: NBC's *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*

by Jarrett Hoffman



Here's a trivia question: what current television series references Mahler, the oboe, and the recorder, and occasionally features one actor's real operatic singing voice?

It might surprise you that the answer is a cop comedy —

NBC's *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, which recently finished its seventh season and has been picked up for an eighth. The show is about the fictional 99th precinct in Brooklyn, NY, and the group of oddball police officers who work there, including two with a fondness for classical music.

One of them is Detective Norm Scully (played by Joel McKinnon Miller). He's one of the two "magnificent oafs" of the precinct — a best-friend pairing of older cops whose main interests are greasy food and comfy chairs. But going against trope, Scully also sings opera.

In Season 1 alone, we hear him deliver excerpts of *La donna è mobile*, *Una furtiva lagrima*, and *O sole mio*, the latter two in Episode 16. These aren't spoof renditions — Miller has a good voice, having studied opera and theater at the University of Minnesota, Duluth.

The other fan of classical music is Raymond Holt (Andre Braugher), the respected captain of the precinct who has slowly risen up the ranks of the NYPD despite facing harassment as a black, openly gay man. He's also known for his intense stoicism and peculiar level of blandness — his favorite breakfast is plain toast, and rather than the "grammatical abomination" *whodunit*, he prefers the phrase *who has done this*.

(Braugher's brilliant deadpan is the perfect contrast to lead actor Andy Samberg's unfailingly silly Detective Jake Peralta, *below*.)



Depending on who you ask, Holt's love of classical music either plays into his boring personality or goes against it, but it certainly reveals a more emotional side of him. Episode 16 of Season 3 involves the fictional character of John William Weichselbraun, the "world-renowned oboist" and "first chair with the New York Symphony Orchestra," who has reported his instrument stolen. Holt makes himself the primary detective on the case, and when he has the opportunity to interview the oboist, he fawns.

"I must admit," he says, "I'm a bit of a Weichselbrauniac. I saw you perform Bach's *Oboe Sonata in G Minor* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. I was in the front row." Here, Weichselbraun remembers Holt: the man who was escorted out for gasping too loudly.

Episode 12 of Season 2 includes several short scenes with Telemann's *Fantasias* for solo recorder playing in the background. "The recorder is generally thought of as a training instrument for children, but listen to it," Holt tells a group of his detectives during a beach-house retreat. "In the hands of an expert like Joram Leifgrum, the passion is..." He pauses. "Breathtaking."

The reaction? "I now hate a whole new genre of music," Peralta later tells a colleague.

(Leifgrum seems to be a made-up name, while some references to classical music in the show are not fully researched. Others will impress insiders: in Episode 4 of Season 2,

Holt repeatedly references the Dutch conductor, recorder player, and Baroque flutist Frans Brüggen.)

Peralta's reaction is not an outlier — as a rule, the detectives roll their eyes at any mention of classical music. In that way, the writers use Holt's interest in the genre as a way to emphasize how out of touch he is with youth culture.

That can create moments that are simultaneously really funny and, for those steeped in the world of classical music, grounding: a reminder of how small that community really is, and how that music is perceived by the vast majority of people.

You can stream all seven seasons of Brooklyn Nine-Nine on Hulu.

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