

## The Cleveland Pops: from Queen to Byron Stripling

by Jarrett Hoffman



This weekend with the Cleveland Pops Orchestra is a case study in the breadth of sounds contained under the umbrella of “pops.”

On Friday, January 21 at 8:00 pm at Playhouse Square, that term means the music of a classic band outfitted in a mix of rock and orchestral clothes, as

conductor Brent Havens, vocalist Tony Vincent, and a full rock band join the Pops to celebrate “The Music of Queen.”

And on Saturday, January 22 at 8:00 pm at Severance Music Center, it means the singular jazz stylings of a trumpeter/vocalist with plenty of virtuosity and charisma to spare, as showcased in “All that Jazz with Byron Stripling,” a program led by music director Carl Topilow. Get tickets for those events [here](#) and [here](#), and read the Pops’ COVID-19 safety policies [here](#).

That kind of variety is a big part of the job for both Topilow and the ensemble. “We’re fortunate,” the conductor (*below*) said in an interview on Zoom. “Piano, bass, drums, brass — they’re sort of the core of our orchestra, like the pitcher and catcher of a baseball team. And so many of them are experienced jazz players, which puts us at a huge advantage in concerts like these.”



Speaking of jazz players and the Cleveland Pops, Byron Stripling — recently named principal pops conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony, in addition to being artistic director and conductor of the Columbus Jazz Orchestra — has already been a guest of the Pops on a few occasions. But, as Topilow said, that was “before he was Byron Stripling.”

Sure, he was already a great jazz trumpeter, and working with him has always been a joy for Topilow. “But then all of the sudden, he developed this whole vocal approach. Plus his humor — I’m standing there and tears are rolling down my face, because he’s just so funny. So now he’s the consummate performer on all ends.”

An excellent soloist, Stripling is also accommodating of others. “I say to him, ‘Hey Byron, do you mind if I play?’” (Topilow is also a clarinetist.) “And he says, ‘Yeah, of course man, I *want* you to play.’”



That led us into our next topic: Saturday’s premiere of a piece by Paul Ferguson (*left*) called *Momentum*, which lasts about five minutes and features “a sort of rotating solo,” Topilow said. “Someday I could play it, or Paul could, or Byron, or [Pops trumpeter] Jack Schantz, or whomever — it can be played by a multitude of people, which is great.”

Artistic director of the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra and director of jazz studies at Case Western Reserve University, Ferguson has been principal trombone of

the Pops “from day one,” Topilow said. “And he’s written probably fifteen arrangements, several of them for me” — including the theme from *The Godfather* in the form of a jazz samba. “He’s such a huge talent.”

*Momentum* begins the second half, while Ferguson’s *Jazz Overture* will open the concert. Also on the program: music by composers including Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, and traditionals such as the closing number, *When the Saints Go Marching In* — in Stripling’s signature version, which might have musicians and audience alike reaching for their dancing shoes.

Moving to the topic of Queen, I suggested to Topilow that orchestral arrangements seem like a great fit for their music — majesty and grandiosity being among the band’s wide palette of sounds and styles. “Their music definitely has a lot of character to it,” he said. “And I’m sure it reflected Freddie Mercury’s personality — at least in the movie.”

Every conversation deserves a fun tangent or two, and here, beginning with 2018’s *Bohemian Rhapsody* — where Rami Malek won a Grammy taking on the role of Mercury — we hopped around to other musical films of the past few years, including the Elton John biopic *Rocketman* and Steven Spielberg’s new take on *West Side Story*, all of which he enjoyed.

And for anyone who’s fearful of an update to that Bernstein-Sondheim classic, Topilow had a simple message: “Don’t be.”

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 19, 2022.*

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