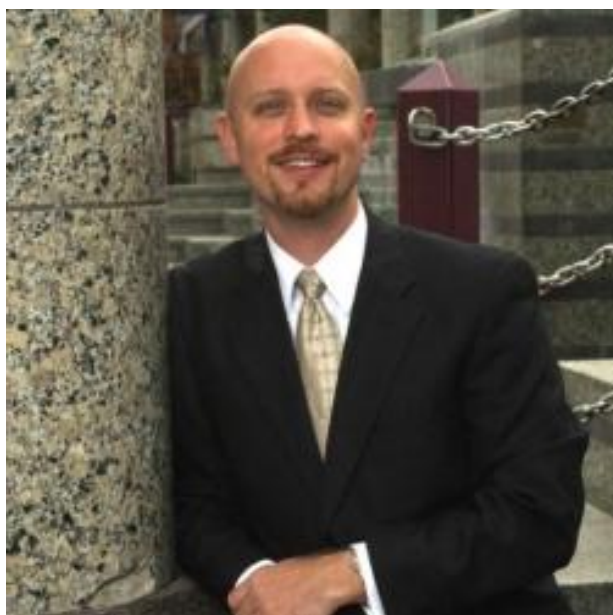


A chat with Ohio Light Opera music director Michael Borowitz about the OLO Orchestra

by Daniel Hathaway



Ohio Light Opera music director Michael Borowitz, who spends most of the year in Baton Rouge as assistant professor of opera at Louisiana State University, rejoined the Wooster company last summer. “I had taken a hiatus for a few years, and so this is my second year back,” he told me in a telephone conversation. He’s very pleased about that.

“The OLO Orchestra arrived yesterday, and I have to say that based on our auditions this year, which were really tremendous, we have some really fine artists who love to play in the pit. Some of them prefer playing in symphony orchestras, but the majority of our players here

are really hungry to play all of these pit jobs,” Borowitz said. “And they love the festival atmosphere — being able to play *Camelot* in the afternoon, and then *Orpheus in the Underworld* in the evening. They like that challenge. I’m excited. I think it’s a good group of people.”

Borowitz added that the OLO Orchestra has built an extensive national reputation that results in referrals from the players’ teachers, many of whom have performed with the ensemble before. “It’s nice to see references on their applications from violinists and clarinetists and oboists who played with me back in 2008, who are now holding really wonderful university positions and challenging their students to come and play here. That’s the circle of life in our art form that you can’t beat. And there’s no amount of money that can buy you that.”

In the early days, the performing situation was very different. The singers had to operate with piano and without benefit of a conductor, as veteran OLO singer James Mismas recalled in an interview with this publication in 2010.

“The piano was housed in a thing they called ‘The Moose.’ It was large enough to hold a Steinway B and the walls were such that the sound would come out. There were stairs up both sides and stairs down the middle, and the whole season was staged around it. It was really something, and of course at that time there was no conductor. You had to pay attention to whatever the pianist was doing, and do it! It was pretty cool,” Mismas said.

“I actually spent a little time playing piano during those first few years. Imagine being inside The Moose and trying to accompany a show when you can’t really hear it, and you can’t see a thing. I don’t know how, but by the grace of God or a miracle, it always worked out.”



This season, different shows pose interesting challenges for Borowitz and his colleagues in the pit. I asked the conductor to talk us through some of this summer’s repertoire and his approach to putting it across. The season opens with *Camelot* on Saturday evening, June 10 in Freedlander Theater on the campus of the College of Wooster.

“We’ve just finished staging *Camelot*. Steve [Daigle] staged it in two days, which is amazing,” Borowitz said. “I begin orchestra rehearsals for it today. The cast this year features some really fine singing voices. The ensembles are full and rich, and we are sticking to the traditional orchestration for the show. It’s just full of great color, and that period of pit writing was particularly good. And Robert Russell Bennett, who did a lot of those orchestrations, is just brilliant. So we’re excited about that. It’s going to be a really excellent show. It’s my first time with *Camelot*. I really don’t know how I avoided it so long, but here we are.

“We’re really embracing this part of our American musical theater history, because, who didn’t grow up with those soundtrack recordings with Julie Andrews and Robert Goulet? It’s in our blood. It’s a part of the fabric of our musical history,” Borowitz said.

“Steve has already [talked to you](#) about *No, No, Nanette* and the discovery of the original pit band parts for the show. It’s so interesting to go through all of those parts, not only to see how they approached the show back in the ‘20s when it first came out, but also to

enjoy the sense of humor of the orchestra musicians. The parts are filled with drawings and caricatures of the actors who were singing and some of the other orchestra members. So it's a lot of fun to look at."



Borowitz said that today most people know *No, No, Nanette* from the 1970s remount, which has a much more modern sound. "OLO's performances are going to give our audience a taste of what the actual sound was like back in the '20s. I love that. It really gives you a sense of that style from that period. Very cool."

Turning to *Orpheus in the Underworld*, Borowitz said that Jean-Christophe Keck has already started a wonderful, critical performing edition of Offenbach's works. "His two-act version has been out now for at least a couple of decades. We're using that version, which is one of my favorite scores just because of the small touches that Offenbach puts in — not just the quotes from Gluck and all of the other musical references that he makes, but the French have a very particular sense of humor and I take a great liking to that. I just love the percussion punctuation. At least from the pit standpoint, it's going to be a very traditional and stylishly done piece."

Borowitz said he has conducted *Orpheus* in many different versions, and he really loves this one. "The orchestra's slightly afraid of my tempi, but I tell them there's nothing to fear. Take a deep breath and just know that at this tempo the phrases won't be quite as long."

We'll hear more about OLO's six shows next week, and meet multi-talented choreographer, director, singer, and dancer Spencer Reese.

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