

Classic Rock

Nashville-based singer/songwriter **Ben Folds** has built a stellar career as a bandleader and hitmaker on the pop charts. So why is he now returning to his symphonic roots and performing with orchestras?

Q uite honestly, I dismissed the notion of performing my pop music with symphony orchestras over ten years ago. I grew up playing percussion in youth orchestras, and my reverence for symphonic music initially ruled out such a collaboration. I'd seen amplified rock bands with orchestras fail a few times, blasting the orchestras off the stage, and the arrangements weren't dignified. It just didn't sound all that good the times I'd seen it attempted, and I never wanted to be part of it.

However, I had a revelation the second time I was approached by the West Australian Symphony Orchestra in 2004—I

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could abandon the amplified rock band and score the orchestra to be the band. The symphony orchestra has rocked for centuries, so why relegate them to whole notes when they can do the heavy lifting? I realized that the songs I've had in my head since I was a kid had always been rooted in orchestration and then brought to life and adapted to the rock band.

The formative musical experience of my youth was in school orchestra, regional and state orchestras, and the North Carolina School of the Arts Young Salem Symphony. I quite possibly grew a total of three inches during the cumulative time spent counting measures of rests holding

a triangle!

Fast forward, and my symphony orchestra shows are becoming an important part of my career. Working with a half-dozen fantastic arranger/composers, I now have scores for 40 of my songs, all of which went through quite a bit of revision as we look for ways to bring something new to my music for my fans, and to treat symphony-goers to a unique concert where the language of pop music and power of the orchestra complement one another. I aspire to dignify and hopefully even challenge the orchestras I work with.

I now find myself coming back to my symphonic roots in a way I never could have predicted. I want to give back to what helped make me who I am musically and personally. I am on the Nashville Symphony's board of directors and proudly serve on their education and art committees. My time listening to music is equal parts Chopin, Rachmaninoff, Debussy—and Nirvana, Beatles, Miles Davis. My records always feature large string and horn arrangements, and I'm secretly working on a piano concerto between beating up pianos at rock venues.

Our society and culture are dependent upon people working together in concert, in harmony, with focus and purpose. In 30 seconds of watching the news, we get the message loud and clear: people can't work together, whether it's Congress or the airport. What a ridiculous notion. Go



Kim Tones

Ben Folds



Mark Schaefer

Ben Folds performs with the North Carolina Symphony and conductor Sarah Hicks, 2010. Folds is performing with North Carolina and other orchestras this spring and summer.

to the symphony this weekend and wash that idea out of your head! The symphony orchestra is a major column at the core of our civilization, not a luxury or a special-interest art form. When it goes, so shall we! And what could be more inspiring than 80-some dedicated musicians, focusing their lives of discipline generously and passionately to create something beautiful. There never was a time when we were in greater need of such an example of people working together. In concert.

My hope is that new audiences are brought into the symphony hall to hear my music and walk through a door to a lifetime of the greatest music of our culture. **S**