



POPS EVOLUTION

The Cincinnati Pops' January 2019 Pops in Space concerts featured an LED screen with imagery created by Lightborne Communications.

Films-with-music, crooners and divas, rappers, winners of TV singing competitions, indie bands, nostalgia acts, tribute groups, Motown acts, millennial nights—what makes pops pops today? Pops conductors at orchestras offer insights, perspectives, trend-spotting, and more.

by Steven Brown

The Minnesota Orchestra has upped the ante on multimedia: “A Musical Feast,” a program from this year’s Sommerfest, was multisensory. A working oven, pots, and other cooking equipment occupied center stage at Orchestra Hall, and conductor Sarah Hicks and the orchestra welcomed a series of Twin Cities chefs.

Jose Alarcon of the Twin Cities restau-

rant Popul Vuh prepared fried tortillas with a meat filling as the first movement of Beethoven’s “Pastoral” Symphony conjured up musical fresh air. The Lexington restaurant’s Jack Riebel dished up frog legs with garlic and mushrooms to the strains of Leonard Bernstein’s *On the Town*. Maurice Ravel’s *La Valse* accompanied Grand Café’s Jamie Malone as she crafted the domed pastry shell of a *pithivier*—a French pie



Cincinnati Pops

John Morris Russell, conductor of the Cincinnati Pops.

puts it, focuses on “non-classical programming”—and sometimes classical works in new guises, as in “A Musical Feast.”

This season, the series will range from 1940s Big Band music to concerts featuring the indie rock group Cloud Cult; from a tribute to Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald’s duet partnership to performances with the cirque-dance-theater ensemble Troupe Vertigo. Meanwhile, this fall brings the release of a recording by the orchestra and Minneapolis hip-hop artist Dessa, whose blossoming relationship began with a concert Hicks conducted in 2017.

Like the Minnesota Orchestra, en-

sometimes turn up as special events.

“We here in North America have created new musical forms and new musical styles that can be found nowhere else on earth,” says John Morris Russell, conductor of the Cincinnati Pops. “To my mind, the future of the pops experience is to plumb the depths of great American music-making in all its forms.”

Pops Nomenclature

The Minnesota Orchestra doesn’t call Hicks’s programs pops concerts. Her series’ name: Live at Orchestra Hall. “I think the label pops is deceptive—because no one



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filled with chicken, sweet-breads, and pheasant.

For the concert’s climax, Travail Collective chefs Mike Brown, Bob Gerken, and James Winberg offered a cooking-as-theater homage to Walt Disney’s treatment of *A Sorcerer’s Apprentice* in *Fantasia*. Rather than a deluge of water, their version of Paul Dukas’s fantasy unleashed a 40-foot strand of dough that their helpers brandished through the auditorium. Throughout the concert, aromas wafted toward the audience, and a few people plucked from the crowd stepped onstage to sample the chefs’ handiwork.

Joining the two art forms—music and cooking—yielded “a completely new sensory experience for the audience,” says conductor Hicks. She is principal conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra series that, as she

At the Minnesota Orchestra’s “Musical Feast” program this summer, local chefs stirred up their magic onstage as the orchestra, led by Sarah Hicks, played culinary-themed scores.

sembles from coast to coast have branched out into areas they might once have hardly imagined. Orchestras get a crack at Hollywood-style box office when they screen blockbuster movies and play the scores themselves; they also attract big turnouts to multimedia concerts built around video artists, rockers, and TV-contest winners as headliners. They perform with circus troupes and bluegrass bands. The performances sometimes belong to pops series,

really knows what that is any more,” Hicks says. “Sometimes people expect the Arthur Fiedler mold, which is what pops used to be. But I think it’s so different that we needed a different name.”

Even orchestras that stay with the pops moniker have welcomed the wider musical



Joseph Scheller

Sarah Hicks, principal conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra’s Live at Orchestra Hall series



Taking a bow at Boston Pops' May 2019 *Redefining American Music: Rhiannon Giddens and Friends Rediscover the Incredible Black Composers* concert (from left): Boston Pops Conductor Keith Lockhart, Rhiannon Giddens, pianist Lara Downes, and vocalist Darius de Haas.

embrace. “Our pops audiences are more eclectic and more diverse than any other orchestral audience—more than practically any other *musical* audience,” the Cincinnati Pops’ Russell says. “Think of it. You’re got your traditional pops people, who want to hear their Broadway show tunes. You’ve got people who want to hear your popular classics from the orchestral repertoire. You’ve got all these people who are crazy about movie music. You’ve got rock ‘n’ rollers and jazzers, and you’ve got people who love bluegrass and soul and R&B and hip hop. As orchestras, we take these musical styles, and we flesh them out in the full splendor of the symphony orchestra.”

The orchestra’s splendors have grown especially vivid within a separate art form that has powerful American roots: the motion picture. “When we play a score like the original *Star Wars* or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, we are playing 75 minutes of great symphonic music, masterfully orchestrated,” says Boston Pops conductor Keith Lockhart. His orchestra has a direct link to sonic-showpiece film scores thanks to Lockhart’s predecessor: veteran film composer John Williams, who led the Pops for thirteen years.

While movie theaters’ sound systems push the music “down under the explosions,” Lockhart says, an orchestra right there in the concert hall can immerse the audience in the score’s lushness and power: “For movie aficionados and music aficionados alike, hearing an orchestra perform

a film score live gives an amazingly fresh perspective on how important great music is in making a movie great. It’s possible to appreciate how brilliant a score by someone like John Williams is.”

For conductors, coordinating an orchestra with a movie presents challenges all its own—especially when the soundtrack contains singing voices, as in *West Side Story* or *Mary Poppins*. “We’re linking up with the most inflexible singers in the world, because they’re on film,” the Minnesota Orchestra’s Hicks explains. To help make the pieces fit, a video monitor in front of the



Film composer John Williams was the Boston Pops’ conductor for over a decade. Here, he and the Pops greet a friend from one of the many hit films Williams scored.

podium flashes signals about tempos, measure numbers, and upcoming cues. Sometimes a click track adds audible guidance.

“The challenge for the conductor is to connect with the musicians as for a regular concert, and to add all these new levels of information at the same time,” says Canadian conductor Dina Gilbert, who has led the Montreal Symphony Orchestra and Omaha Symphony in *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (which has a John Williams score). Her solution is to put in extra time studying the movie and score “to memorize all the exact tempi, the crucial ‘hit points,’ and the abrupt transitions between the scenes.” Once the movie is running, she adds, there’s no time for second-guessing.

For conductors and players alike, movie-with-orchestra performances “are endurance tests,” says Susie Benchasil Seiter, who will guest-conduct the Kansas City Symphony in *Mary Poppins* during Thanksgiving weekend. Whereas a studio orchestra records a soundtrack in snippets that editors splice together, live musicians have to tackle the whole shebang in sequence—sometimes with mere moments to catch their breath between bursts of music. “There sometimes may be seven seconds of break, where I cut them off with one hand, and the other hand is already prepping the entrance for the next piece,” Seiter points out. “I’ve heard conductors say, ‘You need eye drops—because you can’t blink.’”

Collaborative Sounds

Bringing jazz into the orchestral arena “can be challenging,” Minnesota’s Hicks says, because jazz’s flavor depends so much on improvisation—“and we don’t improvise on a regular basis,” she says with a laugh. But she and others agree that the orchestra can dovetail with any genre if a savvy arranger crafts the scores.

“It’s about finding the right key. Writing for instruments idiomatically. Knowing the rhythmic groove and how to make it happen,” Cincinnati’s Russell says. “A lot of people refer to it as magic. It’s just hard work.”

Everything really clicks, Hicks says, when headliners are open to reimagining their songs in light of the orchestra’s colors. “For me,” she says, “it’s not an artist backed by an orchestra, but an artist and orchestra creating a third entity—which is completely different from either.” The



Cincinnati Pops

Damon Gupton, who recently signed on as the Cincinnati Pops' first-ever principal guest conductor.

freshest results often come from singer-songwriters such as Rufus Wainwright and Ben Folds, Hicks says, because “they’re aware of how you craft a song and give it a narrative. That structure is really suited to how orchestral musicians think.”

“We have created new musical forms and new musical styles that can be found nowhere else on earth,” says Cincinnati Pops Conductor John Morris Russell. “The future of the pops experience is to plumb the depths of great American music-making in all its forms.”

Russell tips his hat to the likes of roots musician Rhiannon Giddens, bluegrass singer Aiofe O’Donovan, and jazz singer Gregory Porter, “who jump into the orchestral experience with both feet.” Bluegrass band Steep Canyon Rangers and vintage-jazz band Hot Sardines, he adds, welcome the chance to “make something new” out of familiar tunes. The headliners’ fans welcome the new perspective, Hicks says. They “love the artist, and they’re interested in the artist growing and expanding and finding new ways to express themselves. I think audiences are always excited and willing.”

The orchestras count on that, of course. Hip-hop artists and other new-breed headliners bring in “a completely different and often younger” audience, Hicks adds. And it’s often “very vocal in showing appreciation, which is great.”

The audiences at video-game concerts may be the most exuberant of all. “They come in costume. It’s so much fun,” says Seiter, who has conducted hundreds of performances of *The Legend of Zelda: Symphony of the Goddesses* and *Pokémon: Symphonic Evolutions*. “They come as their favorite characters. So it’s a whole experience.” At home, gamers generally play alone, Seiter adds, or maybe with one friend. The concerts let them join 2,000 or 3,000 of their fellow fans in a communal celebration. “We’re giving them an experience that they’ve craved for a long time,” Seiter says. “Meeting these audiences, I’ve found that they come to these concerts for this amazing, shared experience. A lot of it has to do with nostalgia and their childhood. There’s so much love. There are tears of joy—and so much enthusiasm.”

“These are people in their twenties or thirties who don’t normally go to hear Mozart or Beethoven,” Seiter adds. “They don’t have preconceived notions about how you’re supposed to behave in a concert. They come in, and they’re so fresh and loving. And their reactions are so honest, because they don’t know anything else.”

The Times They Are A-Changin’

At the same time that orchestras aim at new listeners, they still have to focus on their core audiences, says Jacksonville Symphony Principal Pops Conductor Michael Krajewski, formerly principal pops conductor at the Houston Symphony, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and Philly Pops. The orchestral pops faithful are typi-

Michael Krajewski, principal pops conductor of the Jacksonville Symphony



Michael Krajewski

cally in their fifties through seventies, Krajewski adds, “and they really like to hear music that they feel is their music,” adds.

That, too, means that pops programs continually evolve.

When Krajewski started his career 30 years ago, he recalls, Big Band music was “all the rage” on pops series. Since then, hits of subsequent decades have gradually moved into the spotlight, and Krajewski’s programs have followed suit. Enlisting soloists and commissioning arrangements, he has assembled such programs as a sampler of Carole King songs and a tribute to Simon and Garfunkel. Krajewski cites the duo’s “Bridge Over Troubled Water” as a favorite example of how an orchestra can magnify a song’s impact. “In our arrangement, it starts like it does on the record, with just a piano and the guys singing,” Krajewski says. “Then you keep adding more and more instruments. It’s sort of the *Bolero* effect, adding more and more color from the orchestra. By the time you get to the climax of that, the audience is pretty much stunned.”

This season, the Fort Worth Symphony, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and others will introduce Krajewski’s newest pro-



Pasadena Symphony and Pops

Pasadena Pops Principal Conductor Michael Feinstein leads the orchestra at the LA County Arboretum.

gram: “The Vinyl Years,” featuring a vocal trio in favorite songs by the Doobie Brothers, Fleetwood Mac, and their contemporaries. Others, too, bring audiences new experiences by reaching into the past. The Pasadena Pops enables Principal Conductor Michael Feinstein—who also enjoys a career as a singer of the American Songbook and musical sleuth—to revive long-lost gems from golden-age Hollywood. In September, he and the orchestra showcased rediscovered arrangements from *The Wizard of Oz* and other MGM musicals. Among other treats the orchestra has helped him spotlight, Feinstein especially savors composer Johnny Green’s overture to *Raintree Country*, a 1957 melodrama starring Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift. “It’s a glorious piece,” Feinstein says. “It’s Coplandesque. It’s four minutes of bliss. Things like that are thrilling. These are pieces that deserve to be played. Orchestras eat it up, and so do audiences. Because the level of quality and emotional impact are supreme.”

The Cincinnati Pops has enlisted Paul Shaffer, onetime music director for David

“For movie aficionados and music aficionados alike, hearing an orchestra perform a film score live gives an amazingly fresh perspective on how important great music is in making a movie great,” says Boston Pops Conductor Keith Lockhart.

Letterman’s long-running late-night TV shows, to curate and perform in a March program titled “The Cincinnati Sound.” Focusing on two Queen City recording companies of the mid-1900s—King Records and Herzog Studios—the concerts will feature songs by artists who flourished in the companies’ studios, from country icon Hank Williams to bluegrass stars Flatt and Scruggs to funk fireball James Brown. “This was one of the very first times black and white musicians worked together,” Russell says. By zeroing in on what they created, he adds, the concerts will “reflect a deeper appreciation of our American experience.”



Berry Johnston - Grand Rapids Symphony

“We’re in a very prickly time in our nation’s history,” Russell says. “Can we present the types of concerts that raise people up—that bring people together and celebrate a sense of shared humanity, a shared purpose that can bring everyone together? Music can do that. American music tells those stories.”

The Cincinnati Pops expanded its podium roster this August, when Damon Gupton signed on as the Pops’ first-ever principal guest conductor. Gupton, also an actor, has played major roles on stage and film, and is known to television audiences as detective Bill Henderson on *Black Lightning*. He was assistant conductor of the Kansas City Symphony and has led orchestras all over the country, and before that studied music and conducting at the University of Michigan and the Aspen Music Festival, and participated in the League of American Orchestras’ American Conducting Fellowship. At Cincinnati Pops, he launched his tenure leading Williams’ score for *Star War: The Empire Strikes Back*, and will conduct a New Year’s Eve concert, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra’s *Classical Roots* concert, and more. The *Star Wars* concerts are almost a kind of homecoming, as he told the *Cincinnati Business Courier*: “My initial plan was to be John Williams.... To be able to do this soundtrack with this orchestra as my first concert in a newly appointed position is deeply moving to me.”

Room for the Unexpected

Programs that aim a single type of music at a single audience, the Boston Pops’



Stephanie Dana

Susie Benchasil Seiter

Susie Benchasil Seiter leads the Grand Rapids Symphony in a 2016 performance of *Pokémon: Symphonic Evolutions* (far left). This November, she will guest conduct the

Kansas City Symphony in a live-to-film concert featuring *Mary Poppins*.

Lockhart says, have a downside: They don’t give listeners a chance to discover something new to them. In his view, that neglects a bigger goal. “Our mission is to introduce people to the joy and amazement of hearing live music performed really well by great musicians,” Lockhart says. “Orchestras rise and fall on people’s commitment to live entertainment experiences—to being there, to seeing the sweat, to hearing the music made again.”

So Lockhart always tries to work in something the audience doesn’t expect. While planning a 2017 concert with Ben Folds, Lockhart says, he remembered that the singer-songwriter studied percussion in music school. So Lockhart asked Folds to name a few classical pieces that had moved him when he was young. Lockhart and the orchestra played two of them—Gioachino Rossini’s *William Tell* Overture and a movement from Henryk Górecki’s somber Symphony No. 3—ahead of Folds’ set. “I brought Ben out and said, ‘Hey, tell me about these pieces,’” Lockhart recalls. “They were things that I’m sure 95 percent of the people who came to hear Ben Folds had never heard before. It was an inroad.”

Sometimes, Lockhart adds, “we get pushback. People call customer service and say, ‘If you’re doing concerts with Ben Folds or Audra McDonald, we want to hear all Ben Folds or Audra McDonald,’” Lockhart says. “But that’s not the way we do things. We have to stay true to ourselves.” **S**

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