

Return to Pops

Pops artists, like the orchestras they perform with, took a hit last season. Now they are beginning to return to orchestra stages across the country and hitting a note of realistic optimism. Ten pops artists reveal how they have fared, what they have missed, what they most look forward to, and what they have planned for the season ahead.

By Steven Brown

As gradually improving COVID-19 statistics and more widespread use of vaccine mandates encourage orchestras to reopen, orchestras' pops series and their headliners are returning to action onstage—for the most part. Engagement books are refilling, new material is being premiered, and thoughts are turning to future possibilities. All the while, wary eyes remain on the virus, lest it surge and spoil the plans. Here, 10 pops headliners and conductors share their experiences and outlooks.

DAVE BENNETT

Singer and multi-instrumentalist Dave Bennett made his name by taking orchestra audiences on voyages across the decades—paying tribute to artists from Benny Goodman to Elvis Presley and the Beatles. When the pandemic sent him home, he looked in a different direction. “This was a time for me to kind of tell my own story,” Bennett says. He had written music before, but “the things I started writing were mainly guitar-based, a different style than I usually play. These songs started to come out well. So I kept hammering away at it.”

Bennett began trying out the songs on audiences during his quartet's initial flurry of return-to-action gigs in mid-2020. The second-wave shutdown late last year “was tough” on his mental state, he recalls, even more so than the first lockdown. But this year has kept him busy. As audiences hear his new material, he says, “It's really cool that everyone has



Courtesy: Dave Bennett/Vancouver Symphony

Dave Bennett in performance with Canada's Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, January 2019.

been asking, ‘Where can we get these?’” So he recorded his eight new songs, and he hopes to have them on the market—recording label to be determined—by year's end.

As the season began, he looked forward to pops concerts with the

Allentown and Houston symphonies. “As weird as the world is right now, I'm probably in the most exciting and content spot I've ever been in,” Bennett declares. “I'm a very thankful guy.”



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STEWART COPELAND

Drummer and composer Stewart Copeland had to wait a year because of the pandemic, but he finally premiered his “Police Deranged for Orchestra”—a celebration of his onetime band The Police—with the San Diego Symphony Orchestra in August. More performances are in store in the United States and Europe into next year.

“This is about the orchestra,” Copeland says of the new show. It draws on “the beautiful colors and textures that an orchestra has”—which have been resounding in Copeland’s ear ever since he listened to *The Rite of Spring* and other 20th-century classics as a teenager. “I’ve got my Stravinsky and Ravel scores that I refer to, and I’ve stolen from them just as they stole from people before them, I’m sure,” Copeland says. Recasting “Roxanne” and other Police hits, “I’ve taken some liberties, and given the orchestra space to be an orchestra. I just love the sound.”

The lockdown gave Copeland more



time to focus on composing, but he was “always mindful that my fellow musicians, the players out there, were having a really tough time.” When he and the group he takes with him—three singers, a guitarist, and a bass player—premiered “Police Deranged” with the San Diego Symphony, he relished finally hearing the orchestral effects he had imagined.

Copeland says that when he performs with an orchestra, “I play really quietly. I rock out when appropriate, but in a lot of it, I’m holding way back. I put that flute part there, so I want to hear it!” He also soaks up the audience response. “It’s a lot of fun because a regular night at a rock show is a huge smash in the symphony world—everybody rushing down to the front of the stage, singing every song, dancing,” Copeland says. “I like being right in the middle between these two cultural territories.” And he hopes Police fans will make a discovery. “I want those people to get an experience of the orchestra that makes them take more interest in this fantastic instrument,” Copeland adds. “I want them to go home saying, ‘Wow. Orchestras. Cool!’”

DUKES OF DIXIELAND

The Dukes of Dixieland’s manager, John Shoup, opened a jazz club in New Orleans this past April. “How dumb is that? In the middle of a pandemic,” he quips, laughing. But his business venture had a purpose. Jazz@Blue Dog, next to the Sheraton New Orleans, gave the Dukes a place to play on weekends—in place of the pops concert that they played with

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The Dukes of Dixieland

“I think an arrangement for a choral group and a symphony with the Dukes of Dixieland would be phenomenal.” —John Shoup, Dukes of Dixieland

orchestras across the country before the pandemic.

“My guys don’t want to travel right now,” Shoup says. “They don’t want to get on planes. I don’t blame them. They all said, ‘There’s no real rush. We’ve got a gig.’” The new club and the Dukes’

weeknight home, the steamboat *City of New Orleans*, don't make up for the musicians' lost tours and gigs with orchestras, but they're doing okay financially, Shoup says.

For now, Shoup and the Dukes are keeping the music-making at home while looking ahead. Everyone's vaccinated, new orchestral parts are ready, and the Dukes expect to resume touring in 2022, Shoup says. His mind is also on gospel music, which landed the Dukes a Grammy nomination for a 2000 recording with a New Orleans choir. He's looking into having arrangements made. "I think a choral group and a symphony"—with the Dukes, of course—"would be phenomenal."

DAN KAMIN

When an offer came in for an orchestral date this fall, more than a year had passed since actor and comedian Dan Kamin had performed shows like his popular "Comedy Concertos" or "Charlie Chaplin at the Symphony" before a live audience. Yet he hesitated. Who could predict whether the virus might spike again? Kamin recalls, "I said, 'Why don't we hold off for a little while, until we're more certain?' I wish I had a good answer—a rational answer" as to what could provide that certainty.

Kamin has put himself before audiences virtually, though, thanks to his first love as a performer: magic. "I had this sudden realization in the early months of the lockdown that one thing that works on Zoom is close-up magic, because you can get up closer than you do in real life," he points out. With two cameras zeroed in tightly on his hands, he performs shows he has devised for the close-up medium—such as "The Quarantined Cards," the story of a family of aces that appear and disappear because they have to socially distance. He always performs these shows live with viewer interaction, to demonstrate that he isn't cheating by splicing in prerecorded sections.

Corporate and other groups pay a fee, but he performs for private individuals for free. "Magic releases pleasure in people," Kamin says. "This is our time to be helping each other. It's what I can do." In the meantime, he looks ahead to making a different kind of magic with orchestras.



Dukes of Dixieland

The Dukes of Dixieland perform with the Boston Pops and conductor Keith Lockhart.



Roger Mastroianni

Dan Kamin, center, performs his "Haunted Orchestra" show with the Cleveland Orchestra in 2014, with a little help from some scary friends.



Fred P. Kennerly

"This is our time to be helping each other. It's what I can do."
—Dan Kamin

NNENNA FREELON

Jazz singer Nnenna Freelon savors the experience of performing with orchestras. "It's like being on a magic carpet ride," she says. Since the pandemic's arrival, however, she has limited herself to virtual performances. What would make her feel safe going back onstage?

"For me personally, there is a list of questions that would need to be answered. Things like, are they disinfecting the microphones? Is everyone on the staff vaccinated?" Freelon says. "Can they eliminate all possibility of harm or illness? No. That wasn't possible before this. But it would show that they are tak-

ing care of the artists who are working for them.”

“I am mourning my lack of connection” with audiences and fans, Freelon adds. But she used the time to launch a podcast: “Great Grief,” inspired in part by the loss in 2019 of her husband. “This enforced solitude (away from the stage) has made it possible for me to think and write deeply about grief in all its aspects,” Freelon says. “As a musician, singer, and storyteller, it’s natural for me to respond to this in my art. That’s how I come to the podcast world...not as a therapist or counselor.”

CAPATHIA JENKINS

“I feel really fortunate,” says vocalist Capathia Jenkins. Many of her concert dates that the pandemic squelched are being rescheduled, and the singer-actress has been busy since a flurry of summertime outdoor concerts—including one in the Czech Republic. She especially looks forward to December. “The holiday season is always wonderful, but to think that we’ll all be back together again will be even more special,” she says.

During the shutdown, Jenkins did a few streamed performances—including from the home of frequent collaborator Tony DeSare, who lives a half-hour from her in Georgia. She declares herself hopeful about the music business getting back on its feet as safety protocols coalesce. But the grief that gripped her during the lockdown, when she couldn’t work, has left an imprint. “I feel like I have a mild anxiety, just under the skin. Is the phone going to ring and everything go away again?” During the lockdown, she recalls, “I was so sad. It doesn’t seem far away. But I’m glad it’s in the rear view for now.” What’s ahead



Chris Charles

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—Nnenna Freelon



John Such Management

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—Capathia Jenkins

a big-band concert, where we had no strings and I brought in a sax section. People really loved that. It was like the Houston Big Band.” Another program featured wind ensemble. Billed as “Musical Storytellers,” it included programmatic works such as a movement from Johan de Meij’s *Lord of the Rings* Symphony. “A lot of people from the orchestral community, including the Houston Symphony, said, ‘This was really great.’ Maybe we can do it once every season or once every two seasons.”

As more orchestras return to action, Reineke is especially optimistic about the northeastern United States, where vaccine mandates are taking effect at leading venues—including Carnegie Hall, where he’s the New York Pops’ music director, and Washington’s Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, where he’s the National Symphony Orchestra’s principal pops conductor. He thinks that when COVID-19 eventually comes under control, performing and attending concerts “will look very similar to what we used to do.”

Meanwhile, Reineke’s mind is on the reckoning with social injustice that the country went through prompted by the police killings of George Floyd and others. Programs like the hip-hop concerts he has done at the National Symphony can bring in wider audiences, he says, but “the bigger question is, how do we make the orchestras themselves look more like the communities they’re in? This is where orchestras have to change.”

for Jenkins? Among other gigs, multiple dates singing an Aretha Franklin tribute shows with orchestras.

STEVEN REINEKE

The Houston Symphony managed to do an entire nine-program pops series last season with in-person, socially distanced audiences. Social distancing onstage forced Principal Pops Conductor Steven Reineke to try new ideas, “some of which may stick around,” he says. “We did



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Capathia Jenkins takes a bow with Tony DeSare (left) and Steven Reineke (on podium) at a 2019 New York Pops concert at Carnegie Hall.

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—Steven Reineke



“I can’t tell you how many times singers have said to me, ‘I’m so happy to be singing again.’ ‘I’m so happy to be performing again.’ ” —John Such



Melissa Taylor

Steven Reineke leads the Houston Symphony and vocalist Renée Fleming during the orchestra's September 11, 2021, opening night. Reineke is principal pops conductor at the Houston Symphony, New York Pops, and the National Symphony Orchestra.

JOHN SUCH

John Such, executive director of John Such Artists' Management, which represents multiple pops artists, knows firsthand that COVID-19 remains a threat: He recently came down with it. Thanks to his vaccination, he says, two days of flu-like symptoms were about all he experienced. Wariness of another surge in the virus tinges his optimism as he sees his clients getting back to work.

The pandemic prevented what would have been “an amazing year” for his artists, Such says, but “a fair number of those engagements have been rebooked for 2022. I feel encouraged by the number of calls and engagements we have coming up.” Recognizing the financial squeeze orchestras face, Such and his artists have often agreed to rethink their fees. “I don’t know any artist so far who” has not been willing to at least discuss that, he says.

As his clients have gone back before live audiences, Such has grown familiar with an after-concert refrain. “I can’t tell you how many times singers have said to me, ‘I’m so happy to be singing again.’ ‘I’m so happy to be performing again.’ ” Such recalls. “I don’t think any of the artists took it for granted, necessarily. But the lockdown showed them how lucky they were to be able to perform, and how much they missed it.”

TAKE 6

Full-blown touring has yet to come back for the soul and R&B vocal group Take 6 due to the pandemic, but “we’re doing some things here and there,” founder Claude McKnight says. “We’re blessed to have gigs coming in.” The group, which usually performs widely, has been getting around enough to watch the concert business grappling for ways to coexist with COVID.

“We’ve seen some venues where everybody (in the hall) is masked up. We’ve seen some venues where very few people are masked up,” McKnight says. “We’ve seen some venues where they’re requiring vaccinations. We’ve seen some venues where you have to have had a COVID test within 48 hours. It’s all over the place.” Until a consensus about protocols develops, enabling performers and audiences to feel safe, “I’m not sure we will get back to what we took for granted (before the pandemic)—at least not anytime soon.”

Popular rituals like greeting fans after concerts are off-limits because of the risk, McKnight said, and he misses the personal contact. But the pandemic pushed Take 6 into a new way of reaching its public: last February, the group created a Valentine’s Day show for streaming, and McKnight foresees more

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“Innovation doesn’t always happen because you’re looking to be innovative. Sometimes it happens because you’re forced into it.”
 —Claude McKnight, Take 6



Take 6, with founder Claude McKnight at center foreground.

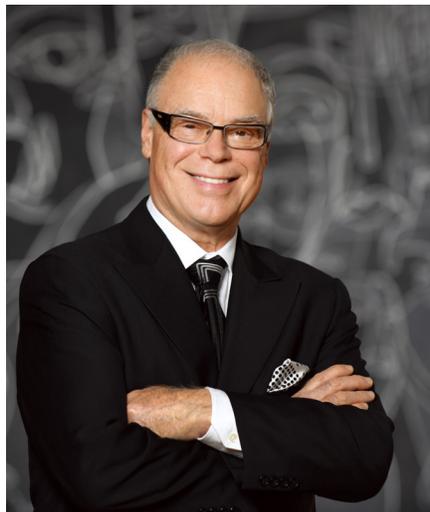
such projects. “Innovation doesn’t always happen because you’re looking to be innovative,” he says. “Sometimes it happens because you’re forced into it.”

JEFF TYZIK

After conducting concerts last season that had limited in-person audiences, Jeff Tyzik encountered his first full-sized crowd at Colorado’s outdoor Bravo! Vail Music Festival this July. Not only were he and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra fired up, but the feeling he got from the audience of 3,000 was, “Wow! Have we missed this,” recalls Tyzik, the Dallas Symphony’s principal pops conductor. “The electricity that night was as exciting as anything I have felt in 40 years.”

Another eager audience greeted Tyzik in September, when the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra—where he’s also principal pops conductor—welcomed its first in-person listeners since the lockdown. The concerts illustrated the transition that orchestras are maneuvering. A stage extension enabled the 55 players to maintain a degree of social distancing, Tyzik says. Attendance was limited to half the Eastman Theater’s capacity, and the available tickets sold out. Concertgoers wore masks and presented vaccination cards “with no resistance,” Tyzik says, adding that the crowd was “enthusiastic and obviously happy to be there, so it’s a good sign.”

Tyzik has a broad view of the pops business. In addition to his Dallas and Rochester posts, he’s the principal pops conductor for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and Oregon Symphony; not only does he guest-conduct all over, but he’s in touch with still others that book



“We have been through an incredibly difficult time, but we have learned what to do to survive and how to keep music alive and orchestras playing. You can’t put a price on that.”
 —Jeff Tyzik



Jeff Tyzik leads the Dallas Symphony Orchestra at the 2010 Bravo! Vail Music Festival in Colorado.

shows he helps produce. What has he observed? “I get a sense that everybody is guardedly optimistic, but fearful that it would be quite easy to run up against major difficulties again, depending on how things go with the Delta variant,” he says. “The one thing I’m happy about is that we have been through an incredibly difficult time, but we have learned what

to do to survive during that and how to keep music alive and orchestras playing. You can’t put a price on that.” **S**

STEVEN BROWN is a Houston writer who specializes in classical music. He’s the former classical music critic of the *Orlando Sentinel*, *Charlotte Observer*, and *Houston Chronicle*.