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Ensemble brings merriment, vibrancy on holiday tour

MUSIC REVIEW

Boston Pops
Esplanade Orchestra

By DONALD ROSENBERG

PLAIN DEALER MUSIC CRITIC

What has green socks, Dick Goddard and a rubber chicken? The Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra's concert Thursday at Gund Arena, that's what. And a whole lot more.

For the record, Pops conductor Keith Lockhart wore the green socks. Weatherman Goddard was a dandy, sonorous narrator in "Twas the Night Before Christmas." The rubber chicken? It was flung into the percussion section by a rotund fellow named Santa Claus.

All of this merriment was part of the Esplanade Orchestra's holiday tour program, a lineup of varied works played with flair and abounding in seasonal warmth and whimsy. Of course, listening to Lockhart and friends would have been much more gratifying in a smaller space. In Gund Arena, the music emerged mostly from speakers, sounding less spontaneous than canned.

Once the ears adjusted to the artificial acoustics (and the eyes to the video projections, which were clumsily done), it was possible to enjoy the orchestra's vibrancy in popular and classical fare. Lockhart brought along several substantial works, including Vaughan Williams' "Fantasia on Christmas Carols," which benefited greatly from the forceful singing of baritone Jubilant Sykes. He was even more vital in the spirituals "City of Heaven" and "Ride on, King Jesus," in which he shaded his voice to bold, poetic effect and made sure that the words rode expressively on the music.

The breezy satisfaction of Boston Pops' concerts stems in part from the spectrum of musical colors found in the arrangements.

Lockhart chose a number of ingenious examples, such as the glittering activity in Patrick Hollenbeck's version of "Tomorrow Is My Dancing Day" and swing reworkings of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," "Good Swing Wenceslas" and "Frosty All the Way!" that revealed the many strengths inside the orchestra.

Along with Goddard and Sykes, the Esplanade musicians welcomed *Gloriae Dei Cantores*, a chorus from Cape Cod. The sound system placed the choristers in the distance at times, but the basic excellence of the ensemble could be discerned. In the *a cappella* "Hodie Christus Natus Est," director Elizabeth Patterson drew crisp rhythmic response and finely gauged nuances from her singers. Collaborating with the orchestra, the chorus sent voices freshly into the night in such favorites as "Joy to the World!" and "Christmas Time Is Here."

Lockhart was alert to every piece's needs and served as amiable host, even donning antlers in Leroy Anderson's "Sleigh Ride." He managed to extract rather impressive warbling from the Gund Arena crowd during the sing-along.

Toward evening's end, Lockhart made a generous nod toward local groups, reminding the audience about the holiday concerts being presented this month at Severance Hall by the Cleveland Orchestra and Cleveland Pops Orchestra. It was sort of a musical variation on "Miracle on 34th Street" — Macy's telling people to go to Gimbel's.

Perhaps Cleveland one day can return the favor. After all, the Boston Pops usually performs in one of the world's great concert halls, Symphony Hall. Word is that the rubber chickens there are first-rate.

TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

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MONDAY, DECEMBER 14, 1998



WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

Capturing the spirit of season

Boston Pops glitters in holiday concert

By Peter Landsdowne
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER

WORCESTER — What is it about the Christmas holiday season that brings out both the worst and the best in musical offerings? This season, we've heard everything from the ridiculous — those pesky barking "jingle dogs" again — to the sublime, the latter in the form of an exquisite version of Vince Guaraldi's wistful "Christmas Time Is Here."

That selection was just one of many Christmas songs that were admirably performed by the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra yesterday afternoon at the Centrum Centre in an annual holiday concert sponsored by the Fallon Healthcare System. Charged with entertaining an audience of more than 10,000 people ranging in age from 3 to 93, the orchestra succeeded with a winning blend of virtuosity and versatility that simultaneously challenged the musicians while remaining accessible to the listeners.

Guest conductor Robert Bernhardt immediately captivated the crowd with a resounding version of "Joy to the World" arranged in the form of a fanfare. From that point on, he veered far and wide through the Christmas musical canon but kept the audience informed every step of the way.

SOLOIST SYKES

English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams' "Fantasia on Christmas Carols" was notable for the introduction of baritone soloist Jubilant Sykes, whose booming voice filled the cavernous confines of the Centrum in a series of early holiday



T&G Staff/PAULA B. FERAZZI

Baritone Jubilant Sykes sings with the Pops Esplanade Orchestra yesterday.

songs that prefigured many of our contemporary carols; "Come All You Worthy Gentlemen," for example, was but a few notes away from "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen." Sykes outdid himself during the concert's second half, however, during some genuinely impassioned singing on "City Called Heaven" and "Ride On, King Jesus," two traditional spirituals that reflected a somewhat different view of Christmas.

Not to be outdone, the orchestra itself turned in some fleet playing on Bizet's "Pat-a-Pan (A Fantasy)," which was included only because it contained snatches of an ancient Basque Christmas carol, and really got rollicking on "Tomorrow Is My Dancing Day," a collection of was-sail songs arranged by Pops percussionist Pat Hollenbeck. Hollenbeck also arranged Harry Belafonte's well-received "Mary's Little Boy Child," which gave a calypso twist to the concert's Christmas theme.

A WONDERFUL CHORALE

The aforementioned "Christmas Time Is Here," a new holiday classic from the popular animated TV special "A Charlie Brown Christmas," provided one of the more peaceful moments in a medley of seasonal

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swing songs that culminated in Don Sebesky's bold and brassy arrangement of "Frosty All the Way!," a clever (and jazzy) juxtaposition of "Frosty the Snowman" and "Jingle Bells." Dr. Charles S. Mills, Associate Medical Director of the Fallon Healthcare System, did a surprisingly professional job of narrating Clement C. Moore's "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," but the concert's best moments came when the Pops joined forces with director Elizabeth Patterson's Cape Cod-based Gloriam Dei Cantores, a chorale of some 50 singers.

All in all, the combination of the Pops orchestra, the chorale, Bernhardt's inspired conducting, and an audience eager to be propelled into the Christmas spirit via the medium of music made yesterday's Holiday Concert a winner all the way around. Even an acknowledged grinch would have been hard pressed not to sing along with the Pops, the chorale, and yesterday afternoon's enthusiastic crowd during the rousing "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" and other such fare.

Tubas find true meaning of Christmas

Overview

CLASSICAL



The phrase "the true meaning of Christmas" is one that is often boldly spoken and rarely questioned during the holiday season.

But what,

after all, does it mean in such multi-cultural, multi-religious, hyper-consumptive times as these?

Everyone has experiences which have hit one or the other of Christmas's many meanings on the head. Last week's TubaChristmas at the Lorain Palace Civic Center did it for me as more than 100 low brass players — and I mean low — gathered to give a free performance of seasonal music on the Palace stage.

A festive mood prevailed as Brookside High School music director Dale Hildebrand chatted with the crowd, encouraged them in the sing-alongs, and took up a collection to credit renovation of the place.

Of course the sound — a slick-up, all-inclusive, volunteer and of more than 100 tubas, euphoniums, sousaphones, and baritone, with just two hours of rehearsal — had its own special kind of power and mazing grace.

review

TRUE MANNHEIM STEAMROLLER: This week Mannheim Steamroller's "A Christmas Angel" at the Gund Arena aims to show audiences the true meaning of Christmas in a once-in-Cleveland performance of "A Christmas Angel," a spectacle on ice featuring a live band and driving an olympic cast of skaters telling a Christmas tale.

The story begins on the town square in the village of Bethlehem, where all the townspeople have gathered on Christmas eve to place the Christmas Angel — Cleveland's

own Olympic skater Tonia Kwiatkowski — on top of the Christmas Tree.

After the ceremony everyone goes home except a young mother — skater Dorothy Hamill — who lingers for one last look to make certain everything is in its proper place. While she is alone in the Christmas eve quiet, the toys come to life to celebrate the new homes they'll soon have.

Revelry is interrupted when the evil Gargon descends on the scene and steals the Christmas angel. Of course the young mother sees him, however, and leads an army of toys to overthrow the evil one and return the Christmas Angel to its rightful place.

The Mannheim Steamroller — aka the Christmas Angel Orchestra — drives the skating along at a supercharged pace with trademark interpretations of popular carols such as "Joy to the World," "Silent Night," "Carol of the Bells," "Deck the Halls," and others.

It promises to be quite a spectacle. Tickets cost \$22.50 to \$42.00. You can charge by phone by calling 216-241-5555.

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GLORIA DEI SINGERS: Of course not all music aims for performance spectacle, and that is especially true at Christmas time. People singing Christmas carols in the shower certainly do so for the sheer joy of it — unless of course they're practicing. Houses full of partiers singing Christmas carols do so perhaps with the idea of entertaining each other, but also out of simple joy in the season and in the spirit of togetherness.

The Gloria Dei Cantores take the idea to a different plane. The internationally acclaimed chorus has glorification of God as its mission and performs weekly services at the Chapel of the Holy Paraclete in Orleans, Massachusetts. Recently on tour with the Boston Pops, the Gloria Dei Cantores ("Glory of God Singers") performed at Gund Arena in Cleveland.

Directed by Elizabeth Patterson, the choir offers two CD recordings of music for Christmas. The first, "The



ICE ANGEL

Mannheim Steamroller's Christmas Angel delivers the true meaning of Christmas at Gund Arena.

"Chants of Christmas" (GDCD-005) is a collection of chanted Masses and Marian Antiphons for the Christmas season. The second, "This World's Jole" (GDCD 020) features carols and hymns both ancient and contemporary accented by the Gloria Dei brass and bell choir renditions of two popular works, Leroy Anderson's "Sleigh Ride" and "Ding Dong! Merrily on High."

Both recordings are the work of a world class choir marked by supreme blending of voices, dynamic control, natural, unaffected phrasing, and of course, rich, clear tone. Though it's a few years old (released in 1995) "This World's Jole" is my favorite of the score of holiday recordings I've come across this year. Contact Paraclete Press at 800-451-5006.

ANDY STATMAN: Music has a place in most religious tradi-

tions as a means of either honoring or bringing oneself closer to God. Chassidic music, the Jewish musical style on which most Klezmer music is based, consists largely of melodies written for that purpose. It was in that spirit that Andy Statman performed at the Cleveland Museum of Art last week.

With a background in bluegrass, jazz, Middle Eastern, and Western Classical music, Statman is accomplished both on mandolin and clarinet, both as composer and performer. That diversity of styles blend in his play. Statman is regarded as the premiere Klezmer clarinetist of his generation, and indeed he has virtuosic command of the instrument, playing the boleros dances with speed and precision, and coloring the Chassidic "niggunim" (melodies) with vibrato, bent

itches carrying notes to their emotional extremes.

The rest of his trio — pianist Brendan Dolan and percussionist Bob Weiner — were technically excellent, but with a conservative playing style which undercut rather than accentuated the urgency of the music. The concert would have been better placed in a small club than in the museum's Gartner Auditorium. Everything about the music is too intimate for such a space, and there seemed an enormous distance between the audience and the stage. Statman chatted amicably with the crowd, which helped somewhat, but I couldn't get over the thought that opportunities to hear world-class, virtuoso players in the intimate surroundings of a jazz club or dance hall are all too rare.

Dateline

Here is a brief rundown of classical music offerings in the region.

ORCHESTRAS:

CLEVELAND POPS ORCHESTRA: Carl Topfow conducts New Year's Eve Concert at 9 p.m. Thursday at Severance Hall, 11001 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland. Call 216-765-7877.

DANCE:

CLEVELAND BALLET: "The Nutcracker," with music by Tchaikovsky and choreography by Dennis Rinaldi, continues its final week, with a special "Truly Nutcracker" on New Year's Eve. Performances Saturday, Sunday, Tuesday and Wednesday at 7 p.m.; Thursday at 8 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday at 1 p.m. at the State Theater on Playhouse Square in Cleveland. Tickets \$15 to \$40. Performances through January 3. Call 300-756-6048.

CHURCHES, MUSEUMS, BROWN BAG:

ANCIENT ROCK SERIES: A special performance of early music will be at 12:05 p.m. Free. Old Stone Church, 91 Public Square, Cleveland. Call 216-241-6145.

CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART: Organist Karel Paukert gives a recital at 2:30 p.m. Sunday at the Museum, 11150 East Blvd., Cleveland. Call 216-421-7350 or 688-CMA-0033.

MUSIC NEAR THE MARKET: Robert Myers performs music for the new year, free to the public. Wednesday, 12:15 p.m., Trinity Lutheran Church,

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Lorain, Ohio