

Arkansas

Stephane Grappelli would be proud of 'Hot Swing!'

Somewhere, wherever great musicians go when they die, Stephane Grappelli is smiling a proud smile.

The great jazz violinist, one of the last musical links to the legendary guitarist Django Reinhardt, died in 1997. I remember asking fiddler Mark O'Connor if he would, someday, record a tribute to his friend, his mentor, his elder likeness. O'Connor said he would.

"Hot Swing!," with bassist Jon Burr and guitarist Frank Vignola, is O'Connor's incredible tribute to Grappelli and the unique swing jazz of the early 1930s. The CD, which will be released on Tuesday, will be on O'Connor's own OMAC label, distributed by Bayside Entertainment Distribution. Whatever you have to do, get this CD.

O'Connor has been a musical treasure since before he could get a driver's license, winning national bluegrass contests on both fiddle and guitar. In the 1980s he was the most sought after studio musician in Nashville. He met Grappelli at the age of 13, learned from him at age 17, and later played with Grappelli at Carnegie Hall. Grappelli even wrote the liner notes on O'Connor's first album of jazz/folk hybrids, and later would play a pair of duets with him on the album "Heroes."

Recently O'Connor took the classical world by storm with



Eye About Town
Roderick Harrington

"Fiddle Concerto No. 1," "Fanfare for the Volunteer," "The American Seasons" and "Appalachian Waltz," with Edgar Meyer and Yo-Yo Ma.

"Hot Swing" was recorded live at South Street Community Center in Morristown, N.J. O'Connor will release "The American Seasons" this fall on Sony Classical.

Reinhardt led the legendary Quintet of the Hot Club of France in the 1930s, mixing traditional jazz with swing. Gypsy music, blues and ethnic hybrids Grappelli kept his incredible sound and chops well into his 80s. Burr was his bassist for the final 10 years of his life.

"I cannot stop listening to the mood enhancing, deeply pleasing, and totally irresistible new 'Hot Swing!' by Mark O'Connor," writes violinist Arnold Steinhardt in the liner notes. He calls the performances of the three musicians

"magical," and notes, "for these are musicians who can race your heart with virtuosity, tickle your brain with their inventiveness, and get your toes moving frenetically when they swing. And how they feel the music!"

The "only negative to "Hot Swing!" is that it contains only eight songs, a mixture of Reinhardt classics and O'Connor and Burr originals. O'Connor contributes "Swingin' On The 'Ville," "Sweet Suzanne," "In The Cluster Blues" and "Pickles On The Elbow." The CD includes Burr's wonderful "Lament" and "Satin Doll" from Duke Ellington, Johnny Mercer and Billy Strayhorn.

You'll listen to this CD over and over again, first out of enjoyment and then out of amazement and wonder. Burr, O'Connor and Vignola are perfection throughout. "Swingin' On The 'Ville" opens the CD, and finds O'Connor blazing through one amazing solo after another. Quickly, however, the trio transforms your living room into a small cafe in Paris, or a smoky jazz club, with Reinhardt's "Nuages."

Very, very few musicians can hold a stage with O'Connor, but Vignola and Burr more than maintain the pace, which at times is breezy and slow, other times hot enough to melt a stereo speaker in the dead of



winter. Larry Spellens, former jazz appreciation teacher in Alaska, observed a performance of the trio recently.

"O'Connor is clearly an artist who knows jazz thoroughly but chooses to locate his playing in a special era."

"He is a brilliant improviser as well, always living a sense of spontaneity and joy in music making. The term virtuoso is entirely appropriate."

Steinhardt describes "In The Cluster Blues" thusly:

"... Frank's guitar continues ruminatively and then with spell-binding intensity, followed by Jon's winsomely atmospheric bass tugging ... at the heart strings. Then comes the most remarkable of violin solos. Mark enters like a wolf howling plaintively at the moon and proceeds to move up and down the fiddle at

will, drawing out a wealth of oh-so-blue feeling. When the theme returns for one last time, its sad and modest simplicity are memorable."

Jazz violinist Claude "Fiddler" Williams adds his take on the CD:

"The songs are played so beautifully. I thought at times I was actually listening to Grappelli, what a tribute. Really swings, a toe tapper and finger snapper. In The Cluster Blues - if I didn't know better, I'd swear Mark had the blues ... you have to move on this one, no way can you sit this one out."

Right after the boys rip your heart out with "Nuages," they kick your teeth in with "Sweet Suzanne," which romps at breakneck speed for more than six minutes. What follows is a mixture of O'Connor originals and Reinhardt-Grappelli music, such as "Minor Swing," truly a signature moment done to perfection by this trio.

Only history will back this statement, but "Hot Swing!" is one of the best live recordings you'll ever hear. From weeping blues, to all-out Gypsy swing to music so beautiful you won't believe your ears, this is one monumental CD.

What else would you expect from O'Connor?

If you need to order the CD,

write OMAC Records, P.O. Box 398, Bonsall, CA 92003 or visit www.markoconnor.com on the Internet.

O'Connor is part of another wonderful CD, albeit a small part. The violinist's "Let Us Move," his first composition for chorus and violin obligato, appears on "Appalachian Sketches," a beautiful CD from Glorae Dei Cantores.

"Appalachian Sketches" features hymns from Appalachia and the South. Charles K. Wolfe, music historian at Middle Tennessee State University, said, "O'Connor continues to merge his formal virtuosity and training with his early love of traditional Appalachian folk music, and takes both in new directions."

Glorae Dei Cantores, based in Cape Cod, Mass., performs in some 18 languages. The group has performed the music of Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson, Bach, Rheinberger, William Mathias, various Russian composers and more. If you like choral music purchase this CD. O'Connor's haunting violin is just an added bonus.

Recordings are available through Paraclete Press, P.O. Box 1568, Orleans, MA 02653, 1-800-451-5006 or www.gdaf.org on the Internet.

(Roderick Harrington is weekend editor at the News-Times.)

The Boston Globe

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2001

Music Review

Light and joyful new anthem plays to strengths of the choir

By Richard Dyer
GLOBE STAFF

When *Gloriae Dei Cantores* approached Mark O'Connor to write a piece for them, the fiddling composer turned the ensemble down, saying he had no experience in choral writing. But a tune came along that wouldn't let him go; looking through an old hymn book, he found words that fit his tune: "Hail the Day That Sees Him Rise!" Now *Gloriae Dei Cantores* has a new 15-minute Ascension anthem, and the world will rejoice along with them, because O'Connor's piece is a beauty.

The anthem has a tune that's like the grain of planed wood, which the composer then builds upon with characteristic eclectic exuberance. Two substantial interludes for solo fiddle mark off the sections of the piece. The refrain is an Alleluia, which is also echoed in the fiddle; O'Connor threads it throughout the entire piece, sometimes just a syllable at a time — an example of the medieval technique called hocketing, in which syllables, words, and phrases hop among the sections of the choir and bounce joyously around the musical space. The choir, which had been statuesquely stationary for the rest of the program, got caught up in O'Connor's infectious rhythms and began to move and sway like a gospel group. There was a prolonged and heartfelt ovation for composer and performers at the end.

O'Connor expressed his gratitude to *Gloriae Dei Cantores* by of-

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**Gloriae Dei Cantores**  
Elizabeth C. Patterson, director  
At: Jordan Hall, Sunday  
~~~~~

fering two pieces for solo violin not listed on the program — "Appalachia Waltz," played with the darkly lilting movement of a saraband in a Baroque suite, and a lively, all-American Caprice that was also all over the fingerboard. It brought the house down.

The rest of the program ranged from Gregorian chant to Copland's "Old American Songs" and old Southern hymns, with stops at the Spanish Renaissance, Bach, and Russian liturgical music by Chesnokov and Rachmaninoff — this was admirably planned for variety and contrast, and it provided a context for O'Connor.

Both the group and its performances are unusual. *Gloriae Dei Cantores* is chorus in residence at the Church of the Holy Paraclete in Orleans; nearly half of the 38 singers are also members of the monastic Community of Jesus affiliated with the church. The group sings

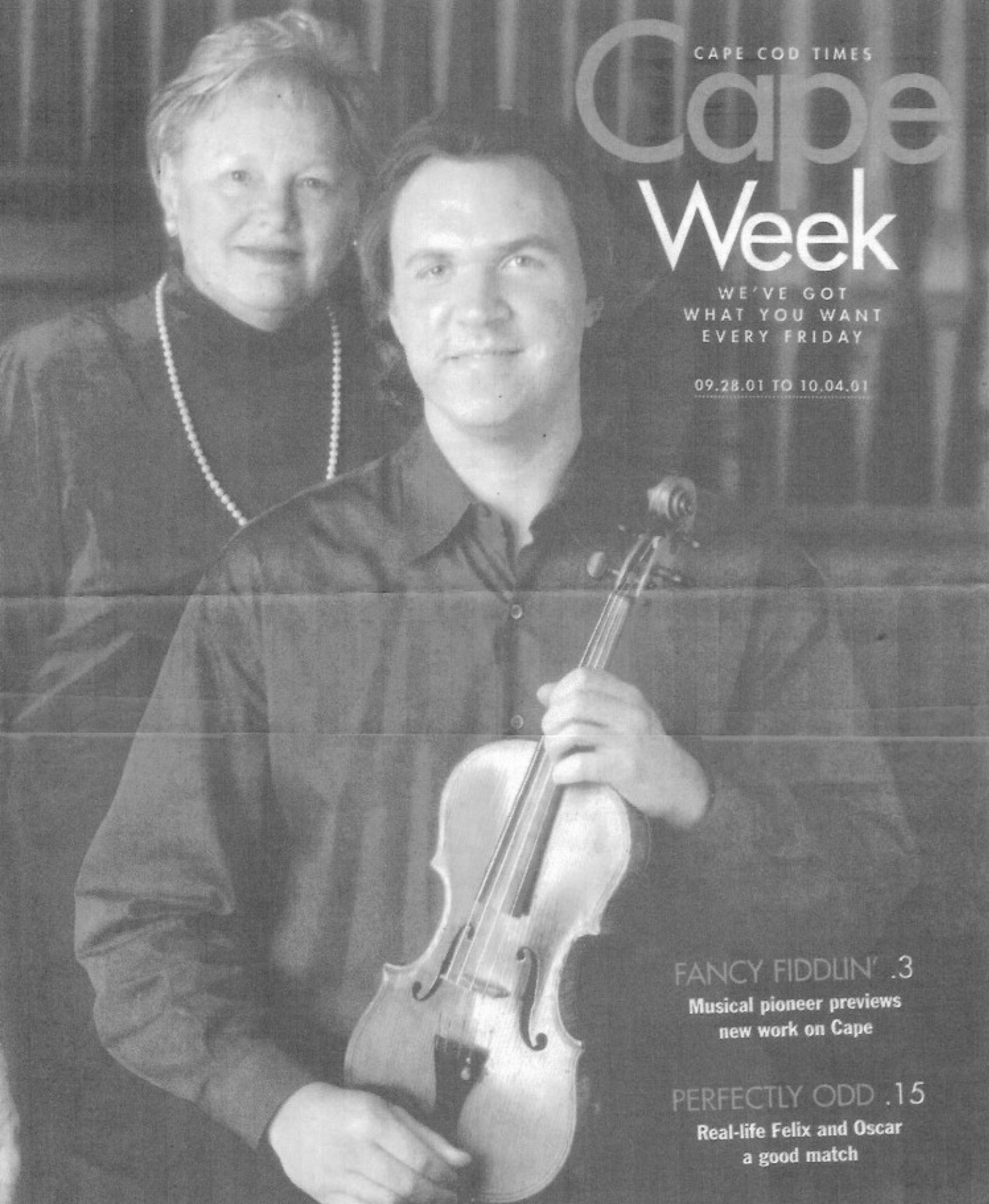
an annual concert in Jordan Hall, travels for Holiday Pops concerts with Keith Lockhart, tours the world, and issues its own CDs (more than 30 of them; the newest includes O'Connor's piece). Most in Sunday's audience looked as if they had just driven in from church on the Cape, like the chorus, but *Gloriae Dei Cantores* deserves a special niche for itself, even in our city's crowded choral

life. The group sings an important and glorious unaccompanied repertoire seldom heard outside of church — and, alas, seldom inside.

The tonal quality was always light, lovely, and balanced, but some of the intonation was dicey, and the group lost its grip on a Bach motet long before it was over. And there ought to be a more musical way of launching a piece than honking on a pitch pipe. Still, conductor Elizabeth C. Patterson has created a high level of musical discipline and encouraged a personal responsiveness to

texts in many languages. And the singing of the choir is a function of community and of religious faith, which brings into it a quality that lies beyond words, but that you can hear, feel, and share.

Most in the audience looked as if they had just driven in from church on the Cape, like the chorus, but *Gloriae Dei Cantores* deserves a special niche, even in our city's crowded choral life.



CAPE COD TIMES

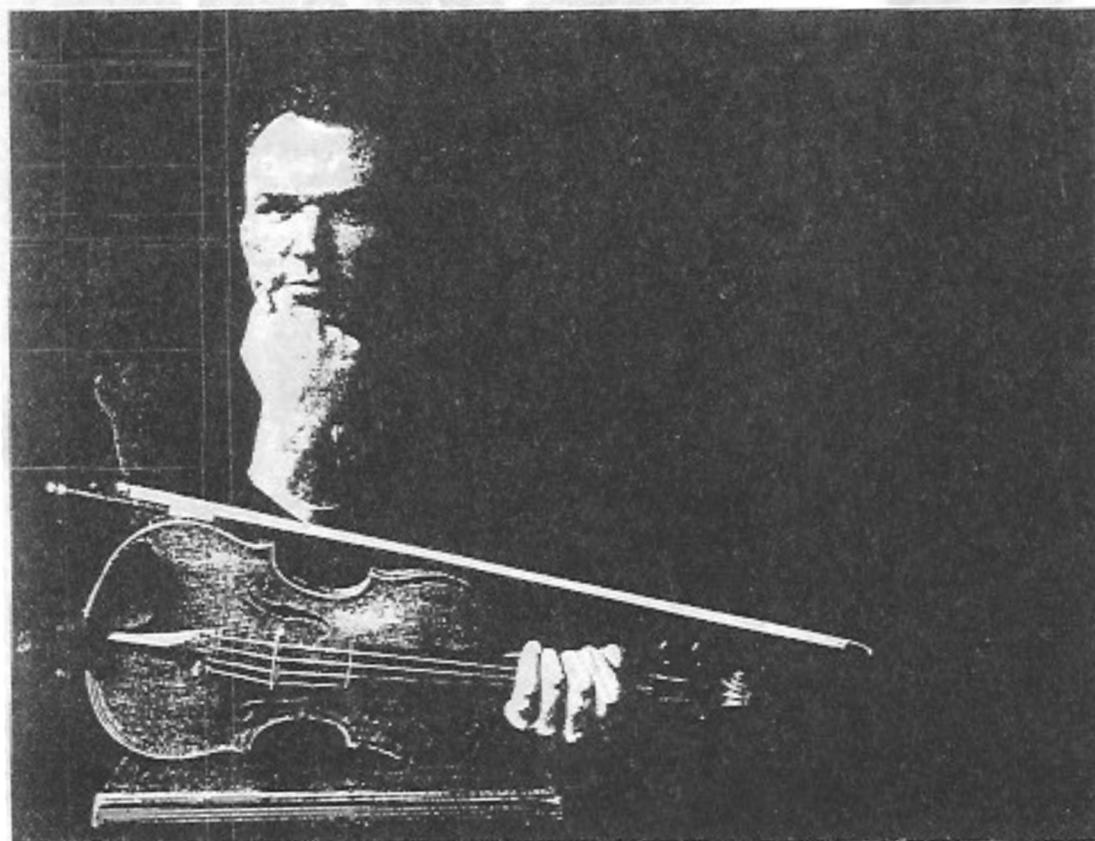
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Mark O'Connor's first choral work will be given a preview performance in Orleans Friday night before its official world premiere in Boston on Sunday.

In Concert

- **What:** program of sacred choral works, including preview performance of Mark O'Connor's "Let Us Move"
- **Performed by:** Glorïae Dei Cantores, with violinist Mark O'Connor
- **When:** 8 p.m. Friday
- **Where:** Church of the Transfiguration, Rock Harbor, Orleans
- **Tickets:** \$40 general admission (\$100 includes 6 p.m. dinner-reception), \$30 for students and seniors, 18 and under admitted free; a portion of proceeds will go to relief efforts in New York
- **Reservations:** 508-240-2400

The world premiere performance of "Let Us Move" will take place at 3 p.m. Sunday in New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall, Boston. Tickets range from \$16 to \$30, with a \$10 discount for students and seniors. Reservations: 617-536-2412 (box office) or 508-931-2090 (TicketMaster).

A common musical heritage

BY ANNA CREBO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Americans appear to be forging a new spiritual identity—a renewed sense of common heritage, but on a much broader scale.

American musical arts have been headed in this direction for several decades. With the post-Sondheim, so-called New Broadway composers, a more sophisticated, complex version of that traditional American fare, the Broadway musical, has emerged—ingeniously integrated with classical, operatic-like elements.

And on the folk music front, Mark O'Connor is a seminal fig-

Mark O'Connor's 'American style' blends folk, classical and jazz

ure in a new coalescence of classical music and traditional "down home" American music that as yet does not even have a name. But its presence and meaning already are perceptible in the excitement engendered by O'Connor's sold-out concerts and best-selling CDs, which feature such outstanding classical

Continued on next page

Mark O'Connor's CD "The American Seasons" contains a recording of "Appalachia Waltz," of which he says: "If I were to play it for classical musicians, they might say it sounds like folk music. But if I were to play it for folk musicians, they might say it sounds classical."



Continued from previous page

artists as Yo-Yo Ma, Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg and Wynton Marsalis performing with the virtuosic fiddler from Seattle and his phenomenal bassist, Edgar Meyer.

Even more important, they are performing O'Connor's own compositions, his uniquely personal fusion of American folk - particularly country fiddle music - with modern classical music and jazz. (He toured as a teenage "wonderkind" with the celebrated French jazz violinist, Stéphane Grappelli, who he regards as a mentor.)

Now, following the successful debuts of three violin concertos and sundry works written for solo violin and small ensembles (including his mega-hit, "Appalachia Waltz"), O'Connor has ventured deeper into classical waters with "The American Seasons: Seasons of an American Life." Released just a few days ago on the Sony Classical label, it will be performed in 27 cities this fall by O'Connor and the New York-based chamber orchestra, Metamorphosen. The four movement work also will be featured in a nationwide PBS telecast on New Year's Day.

And, because of the persistence of a local ensemble, O'Connor has been moved to write his first choral work, which will be given a preview performance on the Cape Friday night.

O'Connor's "Let Us Move," a 15-minute choral piece with violin obbligato, was commissioned by Gloriam Dei Cantores as the centerpiece for the Orleans-based organization's latest CD release, "Appalachian Sketches." The concert, scheduled for 8 p.m. at Church of the Transfiguration in Orleans, also will feature a cappella motets by four Spanish Renaissance composers as well as works by Bach, Rachmaninoff and Chesnokov. The second half will include three of Copland's "Old American Songs" and a medley of Southern hymn settings. On Sunday afternoon, "Let Us Move" will receive its official world premiere as the entire program is repeated in Boston's Jordan Hall.

Traveling from his Southern California home to the Cape via chartered bus, O'Connor was intercepted at Boulder, Colo., where he agreed to an interview before giving a master class at the University of Colorado. He was to perform a solo concert that evening - one of several dozen solo appearances he manages to fit in each season.

"I'm very excited about this first live performance (of 'Let Us Move')," he said. "I'm happy they asked me to write it. It's been a blessing. . . . Actually, I was not really sure if I could do it. I wasn't used to working with choral texts. I had no clear vision and put it on the back burner for over a year. But every time I thought about the Gloriam, there was this melody that

came into my head. I carried it around for several months, but (there was) no more inking than that."

"Then I was at one of my kids' piano lessons (the O'Connors have two school-age sons), and there was a book of hymns there on the piano. I randomly looked through, and the text of the third hymn I came to - 'Hail the Day That Sees Him Rise' - just jumped out at me. I could sing it to my melody. Later that day, I got on the phone (to choral director Elizabeth Patterson) and said: 'I think I can do this piece for you.' I wrote it over the next month and a half."

Actually, this is standard procedure for the composer/performer. With an almost pioneer-like spirit, he already has risen to many creative challenges. At first, there was a disheartening lack of interest in, and later, a scoffing resistance to, his essays into the world of classical music.

"I think it's faith that has gotten me where I am," he said. "It's not been because somebody gave me these opportunities. I had to believe in them to make them happen. I can't tell you how many times I would have a really big idea and I would be the only person to believe in it. These ideas (such as writing his 'Fiddle Concerto') were what put me on the map."

"I really started down this road about a dozen years ago in an effort to be a solo artist on my own terms and bring my American music style into the concert hall. I knew it was going to be a difficult road. There's so many hurdles to jump over. But I knew that I had ideas and a natural ability. I also had determination and perseverance. I thought I could pull this off, and that, eventually, I could find people to listen to my music."

In a letter posted on his Web site two days after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., O'Connor reaffirmed his strong belief in the power of music to communicate "joy and comfort . . . insight and solace." He was saddened and stunned by the tragic events.

"But we're back (on the road)," he said heartily, "and I'm really looking forward to rubbing shoulders with people and trying to do some healing through music." O'Connor said he planned to dedicate these programs "to those we have lost." A portion of the proceeds from his fall concerts will be donated to relief efforts in New York City.

"He has a wonderful, big heart," said Gloriam director Patterson, "and he's become such a good friend. . . . 'Let Us Move' is so uplifting, as soon as you listen to it, you have to rise in your spirit. It is such wonderful, toe-tapping music. When we had finished recording it, the members of the chorus said, 'You just can't feel bad with music like that.'"

LIFESTYLE & ARTS

Sacred music, fiddle an inspired blend

By ANNA CREBO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

ORLEANS — It would seem an unlikely combination: Mark O'Connor, the nation's foremost country music fiddler, and the eloquent, precise Gloriam Dei Cantores, primarily committed to performing and recording authentic renditions of the Judeo-Christian and Orthodox world's best sacred music. (The Community of Jesus-sponsored ensemble has made more than 30 CD recordings since its founding in 1988.)

Concert REVIEW

But the virtuoso folk violinist from Seattle undeniably has a way of homogenizing dissimilar elements.

In Friday's concert, he demonstrated the same expansive communication "crossover" skills he has exhibited in previous, much-publicized concerts with such top-flight classical artists as Yo-Yo Ma and Wynton Marsalis. It was there in his music, too — that unique O'Connor-style blend of American traditional folk with modern classical elements and touches of jazz.

"Let Us Move," originally commissioned by the Orleans-based group for inclusion in its latest recording, "Appalachian Sketches," is admittedly O'Connor's first attempt at writing for chorus. But years of voice training combined with strong spiritual leanings served him well as a springboard for his inspiration.

Based on Charles Wesley's 1739

"Let Us Move"
shows imagination,
a playful sense
of vocal rhythms
and colors, and,
best of all, an
optimistic openness
to inspiration.

hymn text, "Hail the Day That Sees Him Rise," O'Connor's piece begins rather staidly with women's voices affirming a softly intoned "Alleluia" after each of the men's simple, almost chantlike statements.

Touches of American folk music begin in the second stanza with the entrance of O'Connor's violin, which accompanies the chorus with subtly fluent double and triple stop chordal combinations, complete with trills and quintessentially folk-flavored slides and slurs.

In the third verse, O'Connor effectively gives the ever-rising voices a chance to sashay rhythmically on the words, "upward let us move." Interwoven gracefully with the violin, the in-

In Concert

■ **What:** Program of sacred choral works, including preview performance of Mark O'Connor's "Let Us Move"

■ **Performed by:** Gloriam Dei Cantores, with violinist Mark O'Connor

■ **When:** Friday night only

■ **Where:** Church of the Transfiguration, Rock Harbor, Orleans

tricate polyphony of voices on the repeated phrases, "Ever upward . . . the wings of love . . . beyond the skies," was movingly poetic. The music suggested successive waves of birds taking flight.

Unexpected humor was introduced in a repeat of the "let us move" sequence as the chorus syncopatedly "da da da-da-li-da da'd" happily for some measures. There could have been more of these folksy touches. For the most part, O'Connor seemed to handle the chorus parts a bit too reverentially.

Much of the remainder of the piece was rather garbled and unintelligible. The dense polyphonies that are said to be characteristic of Appalachian-style music may well be effective instrumentally, but here they only served to obliterate the text. Consonants collided and canceled each other out.

Setting of texts is an art in itself,

and English is particularly unwieldy. O'Connor has much to learn; but, for a first effort, "Let Us Move" shows imagination, a playful sense of vocal rhythms and colors, and, best of all, an optimistic openness to inspiration.

In some prefatory remarks to the audience, Gloriam Dei Cantores artistic director Elizabeth Patterson expressed her hope that the music would provide a "much-needed healing touch."

Then, as the women's smoothly intoned Gregorian chant offertory began to drift in like incense from the wings, the audience was stilled, with hardly an audible breath.

From wonderfully effective antiphonal settings of Spanish Renaissance motets to Bach's graceful, intricately wrought "Fürchte dich nicht" to some stirring, deep-voiced Russian Orthodox choral pieces by Rachmaninoff and Chesnokov, the concert's first half amply fulfilled Patterson's design.

Spirits grew buoyant with the second half's zestful presentation of Copland's "Simple Gifts" and "Zion Walls," followed by three of the now-classic Parker-Shaw settings of Southern hymns.

Just before "Let Us Move," O'Connor performed two of his most popular solo violin pieces, the slow-moving "Appalachia Waltz" and the elegiac "Poem for Carlita." The audience was eager for a virtuoso encore piece after "Let Us Move," but church decorum prevailed.

SUNDAY Los Angeles Times

ES.COM

JULY 29, 2001

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MUSIC

HOME ACROSS THE RANGE

Fiddler Mark O'Connor has roamed far from his country roots into classical, jazz and even choral music.

By JOHN HENKEN

VISTA, Calif.—A lazy summer afternoon, and a conversation with a fiddler back home on the farm. Sounds relaxing enough, but pay attention. Don't let the sun on the avocado trees or the eloquently spun lilt of a fiddle tune prove too lulling—information overload is a real risk here.

The discussion darts among topics: the possible Turkish origin of distinctly Appalachian music, country-music politics, Oscar-winning composer Tan Dun's way with a chorus, the Kobe-Shaq Laker dynamic and the best approach to violin pedagogy.

The fiddler, obviously and uniquely, must be Mark O'Connor.

O'Connor, 39, is one of the world's truly great improvisers, and for the last decade he has been playing increasingly complex riffs on his career, transforming himself from a country-pop sideman, band member and soloist into a classical-crossover-roots-jazz-et undefinable *cetera* composer. Probably the best-known step on this journey was "Appalachia Waltz," a crossover collaboration with superstar cellist Yo-Yo Ma and composer-bassist Edgar Meyer that dominated the classical charts in 1996.

Right now, he has a gaggle of wildly varied concerts, CDs and other projects working. The release of his first classical choral composition on CD is imminent. A swing tribute to his mentor, the late jazz great Stephane Grappelli, is already out. He will play three times—in programs emphasizing classical music and jazz—as a composer in residence at the Summerfest chamber music festival in La Jolla starting this week.

He's also the host of his first West Coast fiddle conference, and will begin a national tour with Metamorphosen, the New York-based chamber orchestra, in support of the September release of "American Seasons." The recording featuring his new concerto draws inspiration from Vivaldi's "Four



DON BARTLETT / Los Angeles Times

O'Connor in Vista: "What I say [about crossover music] doesn't sound as outlandish anymore."

Seasons" and Shakespeare's ages of man imagery from "As You Like It."

"Ten years ago, when somebody like Yo-Yo Ma did duets with somebody like Bobby McFerrin, it was completely crossover, something you did just for fun and then came back to the main stuff," O'Connor says. "Now, it is the main stuff, bringing things together in a very sophisticated, classical way."

"This is an engine of thought that has helped me in my own journey. What I say doesn't sound as out-

landish anymore. Now it seems very familiar, almost foundational."

O'Connor's journey includes a literal as well as figurative trek. About three years ago, he left the heartland of country music, Nashville, for the anything-goes West Coast. He moved with his wife and two school-age sons from Tennessee to a hilltop avocado ranch here with plenty of

Please see O'Connor, Page 52

O'Connor: A Far-Flung Fiddler

Continued from Page 10

room for his wife's horses and an expansive studio for him. A manager oversees the ranch, and the 5,000 pounds of avocados just harvested keep the whole place watered, if not much more.

It is tempting to see O'Connor's geographical shift as a symbol of his journey away from commercial country-pop to a more unfettered, holistic personal music. And when he takes down his beloved white fiddle and plays a tune full of his characteristic wistful lilt, the sense of cultural disaffection and regret is made audible.

A relic of his *wunderkind* years (O'Connor won the national fiddle championship so many times as a teen that he was asked to stop competing), it is autographed by 24 of his heroes, from mentor and Texas swing paragon Benny Thomasson to the classical virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin. This violin has an implausibly big and warm tone for an instrument with the varnish replaced by a generous coat of white enamel paint. For 15 years it hung in the Country Music Hall of Fame.

"The hall of fame moved into a new building last winter," O'Connor says, "with almost four times as much space, but no room anymore for my white fiddle. It made me so sad. I said, if it is just going to be tucked away in a vault somewhere, then I want my fiddle back."

"It could have had something to do with turning in my Country Music Assn. membership last year, when they didn't put the instrumentalist of the year award on the televised show. I had campaigned so hard for that and finally got it. Now it is gone again. It was very frustrating."

O'Connor believes his fall from Nashville grace came not so much from what he was doing with his continually wider-ranging stylistic forays as with what he was *not* doing: the high-profile session work he had done on 450 albums in the '80s. He counts the decision to skip a triple-scale session on a Kenny Rogers project in favor of doing an interview with a small paper about his own music as a major step on his journey.

"Silly me—I thought that if I quit doing session work, the fact that I maintained my fiddle camps in the area and that I taught fiddle classes at Vanderbilt University would keep me in the community. I lobbied hard for a regular instrumental spot on the Grand Ole Opry but wasn't able to get that. They are so conservative."

Still, the move to Southern California isn't completely about cultural disaffection. Climate was a big part of the decision, he says, along with a general desire to get

back to the West Coast (but not the Seattle area where he was born).

And O'Connor is making every effort to fit into his new community. A longtime basketball fan, he happily transferred allegiance to the Lakers (although he no longer accompanies televised games at home on the guitar, due to trouble with bursitis). He has also become an almost monthly fixture in the Southern California music scene.

This past season, he appeared at the California Center for the Arts in Escondido with the San Diego Symphony, and presented a four-part lecture series on American violin and fiddle music at the San Diego Museum of Art. Last year, he drove up to Los Angeles to record the fiddle solos for John Williams' score for "The Patriot," work he would be happy to have more of.

And he drove up last month to see the world premiere of a new dance Twyla Tharp choreographed to some of his music. The son of two dance teachers, O'Connor has worked with dancers before and has always been "a little underwhelmed. But this time, when I saw the rehearsal, I thought, 'Oh wow, so this is what it can be.' It was just marvelous."

"The hardest stretch for me is to embrace a different interpretation of my music. But that is one of the things I like about how flexible instrumental music is. I am amazed at what people can get out of it."

For O'Connor, reinventing himself has gone hand in hand with reinventing American music. And both have involved a closer look at roots as well as a mind wide open to the possibilities.

Consider "Let Us Move." A 15-minute piece for chorus with violin obbligato, "Let Us Move" is the centerpiece of "Appalachian Sketches," a disc from the Cape Cod, Mass.-based choir Gloriam Dei Cantores due out in September. O'Connor's work mixes various elements, from traditional shape-note singing to jazz licks, in a propulsive structure reminiscent of a Baroque passacaglia.

Some passages of close, dissonance-spiked harmony suggest Balkan or Middle Eastern singing. According to O'Connor, that may not be a separate, exotic ingredient in the mix so much as a part of Appalachian style itself.

"This is a mystery I am starting to unravel for myself," O'Connor says. "I've been challenged to dig deeper and to find the essence of American music. I've been doing some research and I think that many Appalachian or Melungeon cultural elements are Middle Eastern or Mediterranean in origin."

"Melungeon" is an umbrella

term for tri-racial groups and subcultures in the broader Appalachian area, from Ohio to South Carolina. Tradition has long posited a sort of pan-Mediterranean component to that heritage. There is suggestive genetic and linguistic evidence for these links, and a whole industry of Internet-spurred genealogical investigation into the subject. O'Connor finds persuasive explanations here—particularly in the possibility that in 1586 Sir Francis Drake dropped off at the lost colony of Roanoke several hundred Turkish or Moorish sailors liberated from service in Spanish colonies further south—for el-



AL SDB / Los Angeles Times

O'Connor with his Grammy for best classical crossover album.

ements he sees and hears in Appalachian culture and music.

"More and more, I'm going to start developing what I think were the original sounds of this music," he says. "The commission for 'Let Us Move' came at a point when I was making these discoveries for myself and experimenting with vocal sounds."

"We wanted to do some more early American music," says Elizabeth Patterson, music director of Gloriam Dei Cantores. "There is maybe what you could call a depressed awareness of some of the original sources of music in this country. Appalachia is one of them—music carried so much of their life and customs."

"So we thought, look around and see who is a really authentic performer, one who is also able to cross over with a fresh voice. We knew about Mark doing some classical things with Yo-Yo Ma."

The idea of doing a piece with text was a fascinating problem for O'Connor. It took almost a year but he finally got a musical theme in his head that clicked when he rediscovered a Charles Wesley hymn, one that his mother used to sing—the words matched his mood and the music in his mind. It includes an alleluia that he could draw out, using the voices almost as instruments.

"A lot of my instrumental music is spiritual in nature," O'Connor

says, "but it was a big deal for me to commit my instrumental music to words. It was something I was feeling at the time, right when the elections were going on and I felt that the country was being divided. 'Let Us Move' just jumped out at me—music can move us in a positive direction—and it became a healing time for me."

This may have been O'Connor's first choral piece, but thanks to his insatiable experimentation and gregarious networking, he was involved in another large-scale choral work, with violin obbligato, just before he got this commission. He was the violin soloist in Tan Dun's, "Water Passion After St. Matthew," a work that was premiered in Stuttgart last year and is due out soon on CD.

"Tan Dun was a big influence. He is a friend and a colleague that I met through Yo-Yo Ma. He knew I liked water, and probably felt like I do that there are associations between Asian and American music. I was inspired by what he made voices do."

O'Connor's new jazz album, "Hot Swing," is another project with a basis in collegiality.

"When Grappelli died [in 1997], people asked me to do tributes," he remembers. "Since he was one of my teachers and mentors, I said yes to every one. In the process I met some musicians and sort of rediscovered my swing repertoire. It felt so good, I wanted to do more."

The CD, a straight-ahead jazz trio album, features O'Connor, guitarist Frank Vignola and bassist Jon Burr, and it has been released on O'Connor's own label, OMAC Records, which he sells through his Web site, www.markoconnor.com, along with his sheet music in downloadable form.

The "American Seasons" project—besides the CD and tour, it includes a PBS special based on a performance of the work interspersed with Vivaldi's "Four Seasons"—began with O'Connor's composition; it was Sony that put him together with Metamorphosen. The tour, which begins in November in Washington, D.C., will feature O'Connor's string orchestra arrangement of his signature "Appalachia Waltz" and Richard Strauss' "Metamorphosen" (which gave the ensemble its name), as well as "American Seasons."

"Thirty musicians. This is the only tour I've ever done with a band this big," muses the former member of the country-pop band Dixie Dreg. "This is difficult music to play, but we've got it about as tight as it can be. I was really blown away by this group."

"American Seasons" represents "a considerable advance in fluency; it is concise, lyrical and irresistibly rhythmic," according to classical music critic Richard Dyer,

writing in the Boston Globe about the premiere. "The movements are thematically interconnected. The opening movement, for example, includes a passage that moves through all 12 keys as a statement about youth's infinite possibilities. The last movement brings this music back with more complex harmonies that dissolve, then open again on fresh perspectives."

O'Connor's summer bookings should only cement his good standing as a new member of the Southern California music community.

His appearances this month at Summerfest, in La Jolla, came about in part because the 2001 festival director, Cho-Liang Lin, is part of his far-flung circle of friends.

He'll play some of his "Appalachian Journey" music for string trio on the program Friday, and his Quartet for an Aug. 14 collaboration with another local institution, the guitar-playing Romeros. On Aug. 16, he presents another Grappelli tribute, with guitarist Steven Mackey. He'll also participate in the festival's program of free lunchtime panel discussions. "I'm really excited about doing this with my friend Jimmy Lin," he says, using Lin's nickname and talking happily about the caliber of player he'll be working with—cellist Carter Brey, violinist Lin and others.

Concurrently with Summerfest, O'Connor will oversee his Fiddle Conference at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. Again, diversity, imagination and synthesis will be at the core of an O'Connor project. Although the instruction will emphasize improvisation, the curriculum covers the gamut of classical, folk and jazz styles, with mariachi and Latino music a new addition in San Diego. All the students—nearly 300 total, of all ages and experience levels—work in all areas, no specialization allowed.

"The more they know, ultimately the better off they will be," says O'Connor, in his ambitious and omnivorous way. "I'd like to take them all the way from having an open mind to having a job. The long-term goal is to have a full-tilt, summer-long festival and to provide an alternative form of string education. It is a shame to constrain musicians with a narrow education." □

Summerfest La Jolla opening concert, Friday, Sherwood Auditorium, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 700 Prospect St., La Jolla, 7:30 p.m. The festival continues through Aug. 19. For more information, call (858) 459-3728.

John Henken is a frequent contributor to *Calendar*.

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NEW ENGLAND NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

MONDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2001 (10) WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS



The Gloriae Dei Cantores choir performs with the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra yesterday at the Worcester Centrum Centre.

T&G Staff/BETTY JENEWIN

Boston Pops brings Christmas cheer

By Richard Duckett
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER

WORCESTER—The annual holiday visit of the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra to the Worcester Centrum Centre is usually a good time, both musically and in the sense of bonhomie that tends to exude from these concerts.

But yesterday afternoon's visit — the 20th consecutive to the Centrum — seemed to have even more of an exclamation point than normal.

Music Review

Indeed, the first half of the concert was probably as good as the orchestra has ever been here. The programming and the performances were exceptional — much to the delight of the 12,000-plus audience.

The afternoon got off to a flourish with an emphatic rendition of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." The orchestration by the Boston Pops was dashing with vigorous use of trumpets, and the voices of the Gloriae Dei Cantores choir from Cape Cod were glorious.

Thus the stage was set. Conductor Keith Lockhart, an extremely youthful 42, was an enthusiastic host, and his orchestra played with polish and precision.

And insight. Excerpts from Menotti's beautiful "Amahl and the Night Visitors" expertly captured the mood and atmosphere of the opera, which is now 50 years old.

But the person who pretty much stole the show was guest vocalist Renese L. King of South Lancaster. Her performance of three marvelous Christmas spirituals — "My Lord, What a Morning," "Rise Up Shepherd," and "Glory Hallelujah" — nearly brought the house down. She has a powerful and expressive voice and imbues virtually every syllable with feeling and meaning.



Conductor Keith Lockhart leads the Boston Pops at yesterday's holiday concert.

T&G Staff/BETTY JENEWIN

With "Carol of the Drum" it was time for the Gloriae Dei Cantores to harmonize with the orchestra again, and the rendition hit highs that this reviewer has never heard before regarding this particular much-loved piece. The choir is extremely talented, not least in the way it can so clearly articulate a lyric. And once more it was a case of brilliant orchestration allowing the orchestra and choir combined to make the piece both haunting and stirring at the same time.

The one quibble with the program selection was "What Child is This?" which as played yesterday was an inferior musical adaptation of Ralph Vaughan Williams'

"Fantasia on Greensleeves." "What Child is This?" came across as schmaltzy in comparison. Vaughan Williams is the real thing.

But a medley of Christmas favorites titled "A Christmas Scherzo" positively sparkled, and Ms. King rejoined the stage to offer a stunning interpretation of "Do You Hear What I Hear?"

The concert's focus in the second half was generally on the lighter side of things. Nothing wrong with that, and highlights included a cleverly arranged "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" with skillful narration by actor Will LeBow and some amusing interaction from the orchestra.

SPRINGFIELD



News-Union



Today's forecast
High 42, Low 25
See weather, Page A2

50c

MONDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2001

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Keith Lockhart conducted the Boston Pops in its annual holiday concert Saturday.

Program by Pops offers holiday fun

Charlie Brown and the Grinch were among cultural touchstones evoked at the Springfield Civic Center.

By CLIFTON J. NOBLE Jr.

SPRINGFIELD - Ho, Ho, Ho, the Pops put on a show! Conductor Keith Lockhart brought his Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra to a well-filled Civic Center Friday evening to kindle and enhance the holiday spirit with a glistening array of seasonal musical gifts.

Aiding them in this endeavor were the Orleans-based Gloria Dei Cantores choir, vocalist Renese King and actor Will LeBow.

It was impossible to keep a sentimental smile from coaxing up the corners of one's mouth as the choir and orchestra reveled in the child-like wonder and innocence of Vince Guaraldi's "Christmas Time is Here" from "A Charlie Brown Christmas."

Smiles were rampant during "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" as well. Though he's no Boris Karloff, Will LeBow conjured up a mean Grinch, narrating his preparation of the Dr. Seuss classic. The musicians gleefully negotiated arranger Danny Troob's clever encapsulation of the music from the 1966 cartoon that Lockhart, along with many of his players and a hefty slice of his audience, grew up loving.

Lockhart and company marked the 50th anniversary of Gian-Carlo Menotti's made-for-TV opera "Amahl and the Night Visitors" with polished performances of excerpts including the "Shepherds' Chorus" and "Shepherds' Dance." Here and throughout the evening, the Gloria Dei Cantores singers enunciated superbly, chiseling their words with consonants that could cut masonry, phrasing with exquisite subtlety in perfect tune with glorious tone. It's no wonder they are the Pops' choir of choice for these annual tours.

Other nostalgic entries were Carmen Dragon's tender scoring of "What Child is This?" and Harry

Someone's beloved setting of the Clement Moore poem "A Visit From St. Nicholas," the performance of which heralded a visit from the "jolly old elf" himself.

The most successful and pleasing pops programs, holiday or otherwise, find a balance between music old and new, sentimental and timely. The Boston Pops, with an impressive roster of ingenious arrangers at its beck and call, is eminently capable of delivering the goods.

Relatively hot off the presses was Randy Bass' arrangement of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," mixing fanfares and marches that owe a great deal to the Indiana Jones and Star Wars film music of Pops Laureate Conductor and Lockhart predecessor John Williams with fresh harmonization of the hymn tune - a sort of harkening to cosmic angels, perhaps.

Vocalist Renese King brought together the heart of Marian Anderson, the rhythm and blues flexibility of Whitney Houston and the earthy drive of Aretha Franklin in a medley of spirituals: "My Lord, What a Morning," "Rise Up Shepherd and Follow" and "Glory Hallelujah." King, a Massachusetts native who currently holds a full-time position at her alma mater, the Berklee College of Music in Boston, returned to close the concert's first half in fine style with a pumping gospel arrangement of "Do You Hear What I Hear?"

Arranger Don Sebesky contributed two gems to the program, "A Christmas Scherzo," deftly capitalizing on the effervescent triple meter prevalent in so much Christmas music, and the hard-swinging medley of secular carols, "Frosty All the Way," complete with double-bass spins in the slick tradition of the Pops' "Sing, Sing, Sing" performances.

Colored lights and strobes, projections, starry backdrops and some pretty but pesky poinsettias, moved before the show to clear the view of front-row patrons on the floor of the arena, completed a cheery holiday picture and evidently delighted those present.