



Bringing Classical to Modern Ears: Ten Years of Michigan Pops

by Katherine Lewis

"If music be the food of love, play on; Give me excess of it..." Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice*

It's family-friendly, upbeat, diverse and filled with energy and antics galore – it's the "Best of Pops" concert, and it's open to all who want to sway, bop, bounce and tap their feet to pop's addictive rhythms.

Eighty members strong and growing, the student-run and student-directed Michigan Pops Orchestra, comprised entirely of University of Michigan students, will bust out a myriad of popular tunes during its 10th Anniversary Concert on April 2.

A branch of the University Activities Center, the group consists of freshmen musicians right on through those enrolled in the university's PhD program, representing various colleges and departments within the university.

The April concert will feature highlights from the group's 10 years of performances, including pieces from film favorites such as *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*. Also included will be "Seasons of Love" from the Broadway smash *Rent*, "Los Toreadors" from Georges Bizet's popular opera *Carmen* and George Gershwin's "Cuban Overture."

Vocal soloists, guest conductors and multimedia visual effects will round out the evening, providing depth and playfulness, a quality as integral to the group as its sense of humor. These layered performances help to satisfy children and adults alike, sometimes even making an orchestra fan out of someone who has never enjoyed previous orchestral experiences.

The orchestra, founded in 1996, was organized to offer students an opportunity to play and enjoy a variety of popular music, with a focus on musical excellence.

"As a student-run orchestra, our goal is to give all students the opportunity to appreciate and participate in our music," says Executive Director and violinist, Sarah Maynard. "We strive to promote our love and enjoyment of music to as wide an audience as possible."

In fact, Maynard says the group incorporates costumes, lighting effects, video and actors into the mix "so that (concerts) appeal not only to the avid concert-goer but the preschooler, the college student and the grandparent."

Parents can do their children a favor by taking them to the upcoming performance, says Nishon. "It should be a pretty incredible show....It is really a great way to get younger children involved in the symphonic scene in order to spark their interest in the arts."

Younger audience members especially should get a kick out of the group's take on "Circle of Life" from Disney's *The Lion King* while teens and those who grew up in the '80s will relish the lightsaber battles lighting up the stage during the *Star Wars* number.

It is this very eclectic mix of music that seems to satisfy audiences and orchestra members alike. The musicians deliver classical pieces but

it is their take on music from movie soundtracks, Broadway musicals, television shows and radio that really packs a wallop.

Students perform once per semester to an audience of fellow students from UM and surrounding schools, residents of the Ann Arbor community and friends and families of orchestra members.

To hone their instrumental talents, the group rehearses a minimum of two and a half hours a week, sometimes more.

According to Maynard, second-year graduate student Christopher Lees, in his fourth and final year of conducting for Pops, is "a dynamic and inspiring conductor who does an incredible job of connecting with the orchestra," giving concerts flair and creativity.

Maynard says new assistant conductor, John Zastoupil "fits into the culture of Pops" and says "his drive and excitement are sure to maintain the orchestra's level of musical performance next year."

Members say that audience reactions, investment and participation mean a lot. "When the audience leaves, we want them to take away that orchestral or symphonic music is much more than the stereotypes that surround it," Maynard says.

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Michigan Pops continued from 8 The orchestra has enriched its musicians as much as its audience. Publicity Director and violinist Carolyn Nishon says music has had a welcome impact on her life. "I would not be where or who I am today without (music). I've found that the beauty lies in the connections that I have made through music: the incredible friendships that I have formed, the instant bond I share upon meeting a fellow musician, and the ability to reach out to people..."

Trevor Verrot, who contributes viola flavor, says he wanted to be a part of the orchestra because of its spirited enthusiasm, and that it has helped to make him a more balanced person. "Music has always been an ongoing thread that carried me...and when you perform yourself you get satisfaction when people enjoy it."

Verrot says he thinks that people can easily sense that this particular orchestra is made up of "good people who like to play good music" devoid of pretense or arrogance. He says that sometimes musicians who play for pay or pure notoriety can lose sight of music for music's sake.

This would also mean a loss for audience members since according to Nishon, "music unites so many different people within a community...(and) allows musicians and audience members alike to express themselves and feel emotion in a way that the spoken word cannot."

The orchestra has made it a goal to inject music into the lives of all who are willing to lend an ear, and Nishon says she feels lucky to be in an orchestra "so



Conductor Christopher Lees

devoted to the spreading of love and passion for music."

Those who want to get an earful can flock to Sunday's concert ready to be inspired, moved or calmed by the rhythms and sounds of those who have made music a priority in their lives. Shakespeare – a pop idol in his own time – would be proud.

The Michigan Pops orchestra 10th Anniversary Concert, "The Best of Pops" comes to the Michigan Theater, 603 E. Liberty, on Sunday, April 2 at 7pm. Tickets are \$5 for students, \$8 for adults. For information and tickets call (734) 763-TKTS.

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