

Review

Cleveland Pops Orchestra and Chorus at Severance Hall (May 17)

by Daniel Hathaway



The troops were out in force for Cleveland POPS' thirteenth annual Armed Forces Salute at Severance Hall on Friday, May 17 — not the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard who were honored in a medley of official songs, but in addition to the orchestra and its new Cleveland POPS Chorus, the evening featured a Joint Veterans Honor Guard, the Gates Keystone Club Police Pipes and Drums, the Mutual Gifts Gospel Choir (employees of Medical Mutual, who sponsored the evening) and a celebrity narrator, former Cavs star Austin Carr, aka “Mr. Cavalier.”

All these participants were masterfully deployed and led by POPS conductor Carl Topilow, chorus master William Zurkey and gospel choir leader Jimmy L. Wilcher, Jr. in an evening of rousing patriotic and military-inspired music that brought the spirit of the Fourth of July indoors a few weeks early.

After a ceremonial entry by the honor guard, pipes and drums and a gospely version of the national anthem by the Mutual Gifts choir, those seventeen singers remained onstage for Kevin Bond's *God be praised* with orchestral backup arranged by the POPS's tubist, J.c. Sherman. Topilow took over for the first of two John Williams film pieces, the *March from “1941”*, then turned the podium over to William Zurkey for the *Hymn to the Fallen* from *Saving Private Ryan*. The POPS Chorus, just organized at the beginning of the season, made a lovely impression with its first, wordless number and remained onstage for a finely blended, nuanced performance of *Shenandoah* (arranged by James Erb) and a gorgeous rendition of *America the Beautiful* (arranged by Jack Halloran).

The orchestra — made up of the “A” list of area freelancers plus some of the best players from CIM, where Topilow regularly conducts — made its own fine contributions to the first half with Alford's *Colonel Bogey March* and Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. The one is British, the other Russian (now an American patriotic standard thanks to [Arthur Fiedler](#)), but never mind. Topilow worked the crowd during the march, inviting audience members to whistle the tune into his mic. In the Tchaikovsky, the chorus sang the Russian church chants usually played by the orchestra to great effect. An ersatz digital cannon provided chest-thumping punctuation.

The Civil War provided thematic glue for the second half of the evening with Warren D. Troutman's *Abe Lincoln Centennial March*, James Horner's Coplandesque *Suite from "Glory,"* and the real Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*, sonorously narrated by Austin Carr. Peter J. Wilhousky's classic choral arrangement of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* ended the set, inspiring the audience to quietly hum along.

The evening ended with patriotic songs: Lee Greenwood's *God Bless the USA*, Robert Lowden's *Armed Forces Salute* during which Topilow asked those who had served in each branch to stand at the appropriate moment, a patriotic sing-along, and what else but Sousa's *The Stars and Stripes Forever* as the grand finale. The orchestra's beaming piccolo players, Mary Kay Robinson and Kyra Kester, marched front and center for the famous obbligato, joined by Carl Topilow, who had raided his closet of technicolor clarinets and assembled a red, white and blue version for the occasion. To top it all off, a huge flag was ejected from the ceiling as the low brass stood for the last strain.

Cleveland POPS puts on a high-quality, engaging evening which is only enhanced by the voices of the POPS Chorus and the skillful hosting of Carl Topilow. Next season, the orchestra plans seven concerts: "Ballroom with a Twist" on November 9, a Holiday Concert on December 1, the annual New Year's Eve Concert and Dance on December 31, a tribute to Marvin Hamlisch on February 21, a St. Patrick's Day Celebration on March 15, a tribute to NASA on April 25, and the fourteenth annual Armed Forces Salute on May 30 — all at Severance Hall except December 1, which takes place at the Palace Theatre in Playhouse Square.

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