



Inside
Good-time music
with the
Naples Philharmonic Orchestra

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Review: Good-time music, incredible xylophonist makes Pops evening perfect

By PEG GOLDBERG LONGSTRETH
Special to the Naples Daily News

It began Tuesday evening with drum rolls, ruffles and flourishes, and the "Star Spangled Banner." It ended with a roar of approval, an encore, another set of drum rolls, and a taste of Dixieland during a high-spirited arrangement of "When The Saints Go Marching In."

In between, the evening was another trip down memory lane, this time during "Pops III: All American Pops."

Jeff Tyzik and Jack Everly, very popular guest conductors, were at the helm of the first two programs in this year's series. This time it was another guest conductor, Michael Krajewski's, turn. Krajewski, a graduate of the "Don't Scorn Corn" school of pops entertainment, quickly won over the audience with his signature dry wit.

The sellout crowd left two-plus hours later, smiling, eager for more. And no rude "Naples Shuffle" interrupted the program: That, in itself, was reason to make this reviewer smile.

But there was another reason I smiled during this first of seven concerts at the Naples Philharmonic Center for the Arts: Bob Becker was back.

Becker, the acknowledged guru of the xylophone, at whose feet all other xylophone players worship, first appeared here a couple of years ago as a guest performer for the "Percussion Summit," the brainchild of John Evans, principal timpanist for the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra.

Forget every other reason you need to try to get tickets for the remaining "Pops III" performances. You have to see Becker perform to understand what all the awe afforded this man is about. He is, in the vernacular, "smokin' good."

The only disappointment of the evening was an arrangement that preceded Becker's arrival on stage — a well-played but uninspired arrangement of a Stephen Foster medley by a composer named Robert Wendel. The old favorites — "Oh, Susanna," "Camptown Races," "Suwannee River," "I Dream of Jeannie With the Light Brown Hair," and "Beautiful Dreamer" — were all tucked into the arrangement.

There were nice contributions (in particular by the piccolos and oboes, and during "Camptown Races" the sound effects of hooves produced by the percussion section), but I was totally underwhelmed by Wendel's sophomoric

adaptation of "Beautiful Dreamer." I have heard many haunting arrangements of this gentle piece of musical history. This was not one of them.

Next up was another Wendel arrangement, "The Original Ragtime Band," the musical style that heralded the arrival of the 20th Century. This arrangement, which most notably included "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and "Dizzy Fingers," showcased some nice tuba contributions by Mo

Anderson, principal tuba, and good work by the entire brass section.

Krajewski left the podium midpoint to join the festivities on piano. He later proved himself to be more than adequate in this department. However, from my position in the audience, the piano was greatly in need of more amplification to be heard above the orchestra.



Michael Krajewski

Then Bob Becker silently glided on stage, his every graceful step projecting the quiet calm of a Zen master, the grace of a Baryshnikov. Becker is a trim, exceedingly fine-boned, professorial-looking man who wears his beautifully tailored clothes like a doekin glove.

At his earlier performance during the "Percussion Summit," he was simply attired in slacks and form-fitting turtleneck. An hour's blistering performance later, during which he had all but tap-danced on the xylophone, he hadn't even developed a crease in his turtleneck.

Last evening he wore a high-buttoned, form-fitting navy blue pinstripe suit: something visually akin to a Dickensian undertaker's suit. I would have thought he would have been sweltering and might have had his arm movements constricted by the fit of the suit.

But he never even broke a sweat as he dazzled the audience with his incredible arrangements of three numbers: "Fluffy Ruffles," "Nola," and his signature piece, "Xylophonia." The audience roared their approval.

The first half concluded with an excellent arrangement of two George Gershwin numbers: "I've Got Rhythm," and "Fascinating Rhythm." The Phil's own xylophonist, Darcy Timmerman Jordan, offered up a fine performance during this arrangement, as did the trombones and trumpets. The audience loved Krajewski's addition of "tap dancing while seated" by the Phil's orchestra members.

If you love the Big Band sounds of the 1920s and '30s — such as Benny Goodman, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Glenn Miller and Lawrence Welk — you would have enjoyed the next arrangement of that era's songs. Kudos in particular are due Paul Votapek, principal clarinetist; Michael Zion, principal trombone; and Matthew Sonneborn, principal trumpet.

Once again the audience got a taste of Bob Becker's magic, this time with two of his own compositions — "Bye Bye" (a combination of "Bye Bye Birdie" and "Bye Bye Blackbird") and a number entitled "States," showcasing the familiar theme songs of various states.

Four members of the Phil's percussion section — Jim Dallas, principal percussionist; Kevin Garry, Darcey Timmerman Jordan, percussionists; and John Evans, principal timpanist — joined Becker front and center, performing on two marimbas.

Do you remember the magical sounds of the carnival merry-go-round when you were a kid? The otherworldly sounds of the first music box you heard? Becker's arrangements have that same magical flavor, the huskier, vibrato-saturated notes of marimbas awash in the vapors while Becker's two, then four, then harder, then softer sets of mallets tap-dancing their way across his keyboard, his wrists little more than a blur.

The evening concluded with three selections by the orchestra:

— a fun arrangement of country music, though no self-respecting Appalachian fiddle player I ever heard sounded like a Juilliard grad

— a "fiddling" sequel, "Orange Blossom Special," which included a dizzying "Flight of the Bumblebee" tucked alongside "I've Been Working on the Railroad"

— and, as Krajewski wryly commented, a musical tribute to 1950s rock music, for the six to eight of us in the audience who were looking forward to hearing it.

Were you struggling in vain to remember the titles, as the Fifties music roared by in a blur? The answers are: "Rock Around the Clock," "Great Balls O' Fire," "Hound Dog," "Jailhouse Rock" and "At the Hop" (where Krajewski shined on a better amplified piano).

It's difficult to believe so much of the world has been reduced to madness when you take a trip down memory lane with this genre of music. Try to get tickets for the remaining performances. Take your teenage kids with you. They need to know it's still possible for magic to exist on our planet.

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Bob Becker