

Accordion Pops Orchestra

Reviews

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32 accordions and only one polka: Pops orchestra breaks mold

By Steve Siegel
Special to The Morning Call

The mere thought of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony played by an arsenal of 32 accordions boggles the mind and just begs to be heard. And imagine all those polkas — oh, the humanity!

But hold that bubble machine! When the Accordion Pops Orchestra appears at the Scottish Rite Cathedral in Allentown next Sunday as a fundraiser for the Munopco Music Theatre's outreach programs, just a single polka will rear its head from among a medley of Henry Mancini favorites.

Accordion jokes are legion, but the professional musicians in the Accordion Pops are far from laughable.

"People are shocked when they hear us for the first time," says Daniel Desiderio, Accordion Pops music director and conductor since 1985. "They just don't know what to expect. When they hear us they say 'My goodness, we never knew accordions could do that.'"

In addition to the Tchaikovsky and Mancini numbers, the program includes some light classical fare, Broadway show music, including songs from "My Fair Lady," and a Strauss march. Sixteen-year-old guest pianist Aarthi Manohar, a student of Desiderio, will perform Rachmaninoff's Prelude Op. 3, No. 2, and Italian Tenor Rodolfo Veneziano will sing some popular arias.

The orchestra's roots go back to 1970, when it was organized by the Accordion Teacher's Association of New Jersey as the A.T.A. Orchestra. It performed at community functions for the next 10 years, and after a four-year hiatus was reorganized as the Accordion Pops Orchestra with Desiderio as conductor.

Its membership has expanded beyond the original members from New Jersey to include performers from Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania (including the Lehigh Valley), New York, Delaware, Maryland and Rhode Island. It's the only professional accordion orchestra of its kind on the East Coast.

According to Rosemarie Cavanaugh, the orchestra's public relations coordinator and a musician who has played with the group since 1987, most of the concerts are done for fundraisers and charities. The group has performed at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia twice and will perform there again next month, all three times for the benefit of the ALS (Lou Gehrigs Disease)

Foundation.

The group's appearance at the Scottish Rite Cathedral, its first in the Lehigh Valley, will also be a benefit. "This season marks Munopco's 80th anniversary," says Larry Williams, artistic director. "I wanted to bring special events in throughout the year."

Dorothea Hemerly, Williams' accompanist for some Munopco shows, suggested the Accordion Pops Orchestra, of which her mother, Madeline, has been a member for 30 years. Proceeds will benefit Munopco's outreach programs, which include the ALLSTARZ Down syndrome performing group and the Music in Motion Showchoir.

Cavanaugh has been playing accordion since she was 11. As a teenager she was a member of the Sano Symphony, an accordion orchestra so-named because all its members played the Italian-made Sano instrument. She still plays her 1957 model Sano, at one time considered the Cadillac of accordions, but now several manufacturers make fine instruments.

"We were national champions, and won the title with our performance of the Tchaikovsky Fourth Symphony," she says. In fact, the finale of that piece will be the opening number at the Allentown concert.

Speaking to audience members during intermission at a recent concert in Monroe Township, N.J., she recalled that "many confessed they had to be literally dragged out to the concert," such were the visions of polkas and overplayed ethnic tunes that danced in their minds like so many Lawrence Welk bubbles.

Earl Johnson of Bethlehem has played with the orchestra for 12 years. A part-time interior designer and real estate agent, Johnson plays a standard 120-bass Excelsior instrument. His wife, Jacquie, has been the orchestra's announcer for eight years.

The Johnsons travel to the once-a-month practice sessions in East Brunswick, N.J., with Germantown resident Madeline Hemerly. For Hemerly, the hardest part is loading and unloading her 30 pound Cordovox into the car. She is grateful for Desiderio's skill as an arranger. "If it wasn't for him, we'd just be doing polkas," she says.

The orchestra's unique sound comes from the combination of the unconventional (for an accordion) repertoire, the way the group is arranged and how the instruments are played.

"We are arranged like a symphony orchestra, in four sections, that provide melody and harmony," explains Desiderio. There are sections for strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion, although the accordion's eight or more shift buttons can completely alter the sound, so lots of crossover is possible.

In standard accordion practice, the right hand plays the melody and the left operates the bass keys. Here, however, the musicians play only with their right hand. The bass line is played by a bass accordion, which has piano keys on the right and a blank space where the buttons would normally be. A midi accordion, with an electronic synthesized sound, adds tonal color. Rounding out the group is George Feeser on timpani and Mike Beswick on percussion.

One can hardly discuss accordions without mentioning the Mickey Mantle of the instrument, the late Myron Floren, who was "that accordion guy" on the Lawrence Welk Show from 1950 to 1982. For years afterward he could still be seen hosting numerous repeats of the show, which continues to bubble across the airwaves on PBS. Floren died from cancer in 2005.

Floren played with the Accordion Pops frequently as a guest artist and was a close friend of both Desiderio and Cavanaugh. "Myron was a beautiful person, a gentleman and one of the finest in our industry," says Desiderio, himself one of the country's foremost accordion artists.

He is well-known in the field not only as a performer, but as an arranger and composer. During his four years of military service, he was the featured soloist with the U.S. Air Force Band and Symphony Orchestra based in Washington, D.C. He teaches accordion, piano and organ at his studio in Media.

Desiderio is no stranger to accordion jokes, and even tells one of his own. He recalls a performance in Germany with the Air Force Band under a makeshift tent in a torrential rainstorm. A colonel asked him to go to the officer's club to continue the show. He really wanted to call it quits, so he told the officer that he had to first pump all the water out of the bellows of his accordion. "The guy actually bought it and left me alone," he snickered.

And he's probably heard every bubble joke there is, although once the orchestra did indeed use a bubble machine, for a Myron Floren tribute concert held last year at the Hunterdon Hills Playhouse in Hampton, N.J.

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ACCORDION POPS ORCHESTRA

I didn't know what to expect from the 30 accordions, percussion and timpani that covered the stage at the Scottish Rite Cathedral in Allentown Sunday for a concert by the Accordion Pops Orchestra.

By the first few notes of the first piece on the program, the finale to Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, the doubts among the 500 in the audience were put to rest. The group actually sounded like an orchestra, not just a bunch of accordions, due both to the skill of the musicians and its conductor and music director Daniel Desiderio.

The musicians really shined in a medley of pieces from Lerner and Loewe's "My Fair Lady." The familiar Broadway tunes were given an unfamiliar Technicolor sort of exaggerated sound, rich in

color and clarity. The sound of flutes and a tin whistle in "Wouldn't It Be Lovely" was indeed lovely, and "I've Grown Accustomed to Your Face" was filled with sweetness and warmth.

One just had to smile at Desiderio's Lawrence Welkian arrangement of "The Juggler," sparkling with playful sound effects. And the instruments were right at home with the Cuban texture of rumbas and congas in "Manha de Carnaval."

Tenor Rodolfo Veneziano thrilled the audience with his powerful renditions of popular Italian arias, and piano soloist Aarthi Manohar passionately played Rachmaninoff's Prelude Op. 3 No.2 to a suitably dark and dissonant accordion background.

Lightening things up was a wonderful medley of Henry Mancini film music, evoking visions of Audrey Hepburns and Pink Panthers dancing in the hall. It was here that lone polka appeared, to the obvious delight of the crowd.

A medley of patriotic songs and an audience sing-along concluded this most delightful concert.

Steve Siegel

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Accordion Pops show wiped out the jokes

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We enjoyed the concert so much. I have played the accordion since I was 8, and I am now 64. I have heard all the jokes and disparaging remarks about the accordion.

Anyone who listened to that concert could tell, however, that the accordion is a serious concert instrument. In fact, in Europe, it is regarded as such.

We thank the Scottish Rite organization for bringing such a talented group of professionals to Allentown.

Anyone who thinks the accordion is meant only for polkas, waltzes or rustic folk tunes should try to catch a concert by the Accordion Pops. I think they will be pleasantly surprised.

Sam Gentile
Allentown
