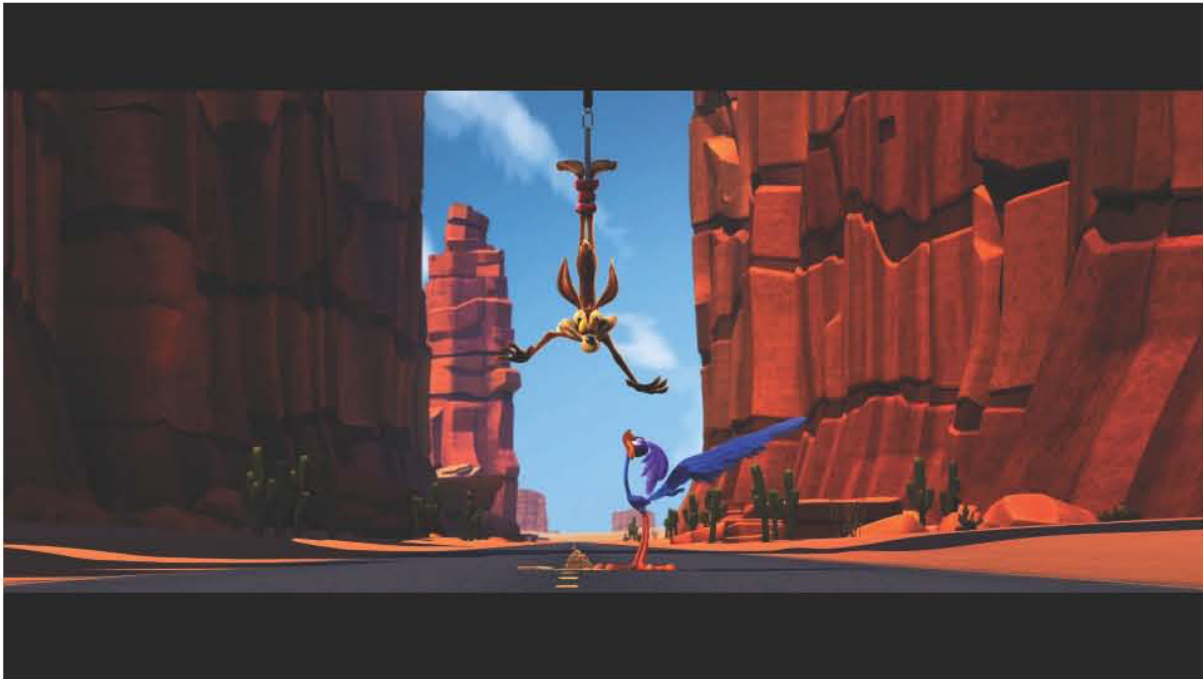


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ARTS & THEATER

Classic cartoons get classical treatment



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Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote star in the Looney Tunes 3D cartoon "Coyote Falls."

By Steven Brown

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Bugs Bunny is back, and he brought along some friends.

The rascally rabbit has been cutting a swath through concert halls since 1989, when orchestras uncovered a box-office hit by playing along with his cartoon antics. Now, some other members of the Looney Tunes stable have gotten in on the act.

When the Houston Symphony brings the latest version of the show - "Bugs Bunny at the Symphony" - to The Woodlands on Tuesday, Daffy Duck and Pepe Le Pew will share the spotlight for the first time. In a pair of new cartoons, 21st-century computer graphics brings beloved characters to life in 3-D.

"The Royal Shakespeare Company does all the Shakespeare plays, and we're trying to work our way through all the Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoons," conductor George Daugherty says with a laugh. Then he gives in to reality.

"There were over 1,000 cartoons made during the golden era of Warner Bros. animation" in

the 1940s through the '60s, he adds.
"So we won't get to all of them."

No safety net

Daugherty, who devised the idea of combining cartoons with live orchestras in the late 1980s, has spearheaded the shows ever since. He leads a team of technicians and musical arrangers who make it possible for flesh-and-blood musicians to replace the long-ago studio orchestras.

Daugherty estimates that more than 2.5 million people have savored the fruits of his crew's labors.

"It takes a lot of work and commitment to do this," Daugherty says. "But it's rewarding and exciting because audiences really love them."

Computer software is the key. But this is no case of pushing a button and leaving the computer to do the rest.



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Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote star in the Looney Tunes 3D cartoon "Coyote Falls."

Technicians, relying on their ears as much as the software for guidance, extract the long-ago studio orchestra from the soundtracks while leaving the voices of Bugs, Daffy and the others intact. Daffy is the trickiest to deal with, Daugherty says, because his voice is in the same range of pitch as the orchestra. And Daffy never shuts up.

"The character Granny says, 'Keep that orange bill quiet with your infernal talking,'" Daugherty says. He obviously sympathizes with her.

Next challenge: With many of the cartoons, the sheet music used by the Warner Bros. orchestra when it recorded the soundtracks has disappeared. So Daugherty's musical crew listens to each cartoon repeatedly, taking down everything the orchestra plays by ear.

"That's a very big process because these are not easy scores," Daugherty says. "There are tons of notes."

The music is "very fast and very frantic," Daugherty says. Of course, that's the whole point: The musical whirlwind drives the cartoons' fun, propelling Bugs' shenanigans and Wile E. Coyote's eternal pursuit of the Road Runner.

The studio orchestras that originally played these scores were first-class groups. Yet they didn't try to play a whole cartoon - much less a whole movie - straight through. When they went to work on a cartoon, its music was split into sections, Daugherty says. The orchestra would rehearse, perfect and record each one, then move on to the next. An editor stitched the pieces together.



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Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote star in the Looney Tunes 3-D cartoon "Coyote Falls," which is to the "Bugs Bunny at the Symphony" lineup.

When today's musicians play for "Bugs Bunny at the Symphony," they lose the safety net.

"They're playing 11 cartoons a night. Whereas the Warner Bros. orchestra only had to deal with one cartoon at a session, and they were breaking it up," Daugherty says.

"Our modern orchestras, to play this concert, have a harder task than the original Warner Bros. orchestra ever had."

New to the mix

As Daugherty and company have refreshed the show over the years by trading cartoons in and out, the ones that give classical music a leading role have always had pride of place. "The Rabbit of Seville," with Bugs tormenting Elmer Fudd in sync with Gioacchino Rossini's Overture to "The Barber of Seville," has been a constant. So has "What's Opera, Doc," in which Elmer vows to "Kill the Wabbit!" to the heroic strains of Richard Wagner. They're in the new version of the show, too.

But the latest incarnation, which premiered July 5 at the Hollywood Bowl, has several cartoons that are new to the mix. They include:

"Duck Amuck," one of the greatest Daffy Duck cartoons. The audience watches Daffy being

tormented by the hand of the cartoon's animator.

"Zoom and Bored," one of the earliest Road Runner cartoons. The score, climaxing with Bedrich Smetana's "Dance of the Comedians," is "an amazing piece of music," Daugherty says. "You could do a ballet to it."

A Pepe le Pew montage that showcases the amorous skunk's love songs.

Two recent cartoons in 3-D. "I Tawt I Taw a Puddy Tat," featuring Sylvester the Cat and Tweety Bird, includes a song that was recorded decades ago by Mel Blanc - the voice of Bugs, Tweety and others - but never used until this cartoon. In "Coyote Falls," with the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote, the 3-D especially pays off, Daugherty says.

"When the Coyote gets his foot caught in a rope and does this gigantic loop around the top of a mountain," he says, "you really feel it."

Universal appeal

Next year, Daugherty will have been pairing Bugs and company with orchestras for 25 years.

"It never occurred to me that it would last this long," Daugherty says. He thinks the shows' longevity is a tribute to the cartoons and their creators.

When the cartoons were new, Daugherty says, classical music was a bigger part of popular culture. Musicians were featured in movies and on popular TV shows. When Bugs made an entrance in "Long-Haired Hare" as a conductor with swept-back hair, many viewers would've recognized the spoof of Leopold Stokowski - one of the biggest celebrities of his time, not to mention a onetime leader of the Houston Symphony.

Fewer people catch onto such jokes nowadays. But the cartoons are full of hijinks that need no explanation, Daugherty says. He and his team have seen Bugs break through in China, Japan, Russia and other countries.

"We have been to places where the Looney Tunes experience wasn't part of everybody's childhood. People still find (the cartoons) universally, instantaneously funny," Daugherty says.

"These cartoons transcend culture, they transcend language, they transcend everything. The humor is universal."

'Bugs Bunny at the Symphony'

When: 8:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion, 2005 Lake Robbins, The Woodlands

Tickets: \$15 for orchestra-level seating, free on lawn

Details: 281-364-3024, woodlandscenter.org

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