

Where Richard Wagner Wouldn't Give a *Gotter-Damn*

New York
Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center
05/14/2015 - & May 15*, 16, 2015

New York Philharmonic and Warner Bros Present: “*Bugs Bunny at the Symphony II*”

Music by Carl W Stalling, Milt Franklin, Scott Bradley, based on the works of Richard Wagner, Gioacchino Rossini, Johan Strauss II, Richard Strauss, Franz Liszt etc. Starring Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, Wile E. Coyote, Road Runner, Tweety, Pepe Le Pew, Tom and Jerry

New York Philharmonic Orchestra, George Daugherty (Creator, Music Director, Conductor, Producer), David Ka Lik Wong (Creator, Producer, Technical Director, Music Supervisor, Tour Director)



Maestro B. Bunny/Maestro G. Daugherty
(© Warner Brothers/ New York Philharmonic photo by Chris Lee)

by **Harry Rolnick** for *ConcertoNet.com*

We kids knew that Bugs and Daffy and Wile and Tweety were the real thing, not those sissy Mickey-Minnie twerps.

Bugs and Daffy were Bugsy and Capone, Disney's creeps were brown-suited FBI. Looney Tunes were ethnic dudes from Russia or Africa or Puerto Rico. Disney characters were Anglo-Saxon squares who sold real estate. Warner Brothers cartoons were Huck Finn and Jim on a raft going nowhere, while Mickey and Minnie were Tom Sawyer and Becky, afraid to get their feet wet in the Mississippi.

Had we known them growing up, we would have said that Disney characters were the well-manicured innocent Beatles. Bugs, Tweety and Speedy Gonzales were the dangerous Rolling Stones.

On Thursday, last night and tonight, the name Disney was mentioned only once in passing. For George Daugherty has known for 25 years that when Jack Warner insisted on having a cartoon before each Warner Brothers feature film— with the same kind of gangsters, lowlifes and criminal elements as Road Runner and Daffy—those cartoonists had to work with limitless energy.

That energy found its way into thousands of cartoons, out of which Mr. Daugherty and his partner David Ka Lik Wong had taken about 20 cartoons and excerpts of cartoons for the event called “Bugs Bunny at the Symphony II”.

And while Warner Brothers had a terrific music ensemble—California's best musicians moonlighted for the extra money—last night the New York Philharmonic were playing music *live* music, to the cartoons on the screen.

This had to be quite the challenge. But Mr. Daugherty, an experienced conductor for ballet and symphonies, handled this assignment with musical flair and a suitably expansive personality. Since Warner cartoons were faster than the Road Runner, with literally dozens of cuts a minute, he had no time for Brucknerian pauses, no impulses to try things a “different way”. When Jerry the Mouse waltzes, the Phil waltzes to the millisecond. When Wile E. Coyote plunges to the bottom of the cliff, bassoons and piccolos have to be right on target to catch the crash.

Mind you, Mr. Daugherty had some ringers in the orchestra (and not bells either). E.G: How *do* you put the music to Daffy Duck's tap-dancing?

Mr. Daugherty, admitting his unalloyed delight at conducting the New York Philharmonic (well, duh!), explained “This orchestra has instruments worth millions of dollars. But to get Daffy’s sounds right, we went to a 99 cents store and bought these clappers for a dollar.”

Then there is the first measure of the Looney Tunes motto, that upward Hawaiian-guitar glissando, written by the Warner’s cartoon composer-in-residence, Carl Stallings. Daugherty and his team searched for years to find the guitar with just that sound—and one day in a film-production musical archive came up with the *original* guitar, which was played last night.

The cartoons themselves were utter manic joy. When the story-committee of Warner’s came together, one doesn’t need a Chuck Jones imagination to conceive what would happen if somebody suggested, “Hey, let’s do a cartoon about cooperation...living together...kumbayah. Let’s give peace a chance.”

Ha!!! That guy would be tossed off the nearest Road Runner cliff.

Instead, we had unending violence: defenestrations, shootings, hangings, 16th Century lyres turned into bows and arrows, endless TNT, dynamite, stabbings...

And of course nobody is killed. (The worst that happens is one of the miscreant cats winds up happily in heaven after being blown up.)

In essence, Warner cartoon characters make ISIS executioners seem as innocuous as Bambi or Mickey Mouse.

But this was secondary to the singular extraordinary use of “classical” music in the cartoons, thanks to the classical training, sensibility and love of the genre by Stallings, Jones and others in the Warner stable.

When Disney did *Fantasia*, he made it an “event.” An event including Leopold Stokowski, turning Stravinsky into middle-class America pabulum (the composer sued, but Disney lawyers easily won the case), and degrading, debasing and diluting Dukas’ *Sorcerer’s Apprentice* to the size of a mouse. (Though, granted, the hippo-dancing for *Dance of the Hours* has never been surpassed.)

That was stuff for a Dagwood Bumstead *paterfamilias* complaining, “Oh, Blondie, do we *have* to go to that concert?”

Warners simply assumed that this was terrific music. That when Bugs conducted, his pants would fall down, that when Tom the Cat played a *Hungarian Rhapsody*, that Jerry the Mouse plays a duet on a tiny piano. That when we had a Wagner opera—and *six* Wagner operas were set up in the almost flawless genius of *What’s Opera, Doc?* (“almost” because this spectacular quodlibet didn’t need a pun in the title), the plot would not *quite* be about the End of the World.

Instead, the Ring Cycle, with all the *leitmotifs*, (as well as a bit of *Rienzi* and *Flying Dutchman* thrown in for kicks) was about Elmer Fudd hunting Bugs Bunny.

In Valhalla, of course. And with Bugs, in typical transvestite outfit, made love with the unknowing Elmer Fudd.

It would be useless to ask, as those Jesus-bracelets have it, “What Would Wagner Think?”. Frankly, my dear, nobody gives a Gotter-damn!”

Nobody cared during this golden age of cartoons, and nobody cared during the kid-filled audience at Avery Fisher Hall last night. The kids roared at the flatulence and wildness, the adults roared with the genius, the Philharmonic *seemed* to go with the flow (but their concentration probably eschewed total enjoyment), and Mr. George Daugherty, jumping from his conservatory training to the Nirvana of imagination, was the happiest of them all.

Today, audiences often say that they were first inspired by *Fantasia*. But that music created only a discriminatory elite, a Dagwood Bumstead/season-subscriber mentality. What Carl Stalling, Milt Franklin, writer Chuck Jones, director Fritz Freling, and today George Daugherty provided was sheer mania.

South Park and *The Simpsons* (and the music of the *Smurfs*) are estimable. But reaching deep deep down into the prehistoric, irrational phantasmagorical brain stems, we gotta turn to Bugs and Daffy.

With joy, cackles and eternal awe!

Harry Rolnick