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- Classical Music
- Opera
- Dance
- Jazz/Blues
- New Recordings
- Spotlight
- All

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- Classical Music
- Opera
- Dance
- Jazz/Blues
- All

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Polls
Quizzes

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Features: Classical Music

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On with the Show...with Bugs Bunny

By George Daugherty
05 May 2015

The mastermind behind *Bugs Bunny at the Symphony* explores why the great Warner Bros. cartoons have grabbed hold of the hearts and souls of generations of music lovers.

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SEINFELD, Season 4, Episode 9: "THE OPERA"

EXTERIOR. OPERA HOUSE. NEW YORK CITY.

(Jerry and Elaine wait outside the opera house, as last-minute patrons rush in to the performance.)

ELAINE: Jerry, we're going to miss the overture!

JERRY (singing): "Overture, curtain lights! This is it, we'll hit the heights. And oh what heights we'll hit! On with the show, this is it!"

ELAINE (after a pause): You know, it is so sad. All your knowledge of high culture comes from Bugs Bunny cartoons.

Jerry was not alone. In fact, there's an old joke that if you stand on a street corner and sing the first few bars of Wagner's *The Ride of the Valkyries* to passersby, 90% of the world will find the mantra "Kill da wabbit" uncontrollably popping into their heads.



If the experiment were conducted outside Lincoln Center, where decades of music lovers have heard Wagner performed in the most glorious manner possible at the New York Philharmonic or The Met, the percentages (and mental images) might skew a bit more favorably toward breast-plated Valkyries in horned helmets. Still, the association of *Looney Tunes* and Wagner — and Rossini, Liszt, J. Strauss II, Suppé, Smetana, Tchaikovsky, and any other number of golden age composers — is indelible.

It's no accident. Hundreds of millions of people, in America and the world over, first experienced classical music (and opera) at the hands of *Bugs Bunny*, *Daffy Duck*, *Elmer Fudd*, and the rest of the *Looney Tunes* ensemble, cavorting to the masterful, classically infused cartoon scores of Carl Stalling and Milt Franklyn.

For these composers, the cartoons may have been hilarious, but the creation

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of music for them was no laughing matter. They arduously and passionately worked with the same glorious Warner Bros. Studio Orchestra — and within the same studio music hierarchy — as did the more famous (and better paid) WB feature film composers of the day, legendary names like Max Steiner, Erich Korngold, and Bernard Herrmann. Yet even though their animated shorts were only seven minutes long (instead of the two- or three-hour running time of a full-length feature) and starred *Bugs Bunny* instead of Bogart or Bette or Bacall), Stalling and Franklyn painted with a compositional magic that was irresistible to audiences of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s — and still is today. They established an unmistakably distinct "*Looney Tunes* sound," and although movie fans might not have been able to define it, they instantly knew it (and loved it) when they heard it.

Born in 1891 in Lexington, Missouri, Carl Stalling, a piano prodigy at age six, cut his musical teeth on that new invention known as "moving pictures." He was composing music for "the movies" before "the movies" actually even had music — or, at least, actual soundtracks. By the age of 12 he was the principal theater pianist of his hometown's little silent movie house, improvising scores day after day to the flickering black and white image on the silver screen. By his early 20s he moved to the big city, where his improvised film scores became much more complex thanks to the grand theater organs found in Kansas City's and St. Louis's elaborate new movie palaces. He expanded his talents to composing and conducting for an actual orchestra at Kansas City's Isis Theatre.

In a twist of fate that would change the direction of the rest of his life, Stalling made friends with a young, unknown Kansas City animator — a penniless guy named Walt Disney — and discovered the world of animation. Stalling and Disney ended up in Hollywood, and after two years of working with Disney (as well as with the innovative Ub Iwerks) young Stalling moved over to Warner Bros., where he would spend his entire career.

After starting out as Stalling's arranger and orchestrator at Warner Bros., Milt Franklyn took on more and more compositional duties. Upon Stalling's retirement in 1958, Franklyn assumed the mantle of *Looney Tunes* composer. Together, the two of them — working under visionary animation directors like Chuck Jones, Friz Freleng, Tex Avery, and Bob Clampett — composed scores that were every bit as evocative as the cartoons they accompanied.

Looney Tunes and *Merrie Melodies* were always populated with hit songs of the day; that was by design, to push the vast Warner Bros. song catalog to audiences and sheet music buyers, a sort of 1940s You-Tube. But it was Stalling's and Franklyn's purely orchestral scores that truly dazzled. A *Road Runner* cartoon would almost become a ballet, full of orchestral sound and fury that would inevitably cascade (and decrescendo) down to the whisper of an alto flute's tritone as *Wile E. Coyote* almost silently hit the bottom of yet another Painted Desert crevasse, way, way below. *The Rabbit of Seville* was composed completely in the style and orchestral fabric of Rossini, while the gigantic *What's Opera, Doc?* — with a full-bore Wagnerian-sized instrumentation — combined not only the major leitmotifs of all four *Ring Cycle* operas, but also elements of *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *The Flying Dutchman*, and *Rienzi*. Eight Wagner operas in 6 minutes and 48 seconds.

So, in reality, it is no surprise to find the genius of Carl Stalling and Milt Franklyn coming to the New York Philharmonic, because these two composers have earned their moment in the limelight, and their place upon the hallowed concert stage of Avery Fisher Hall.

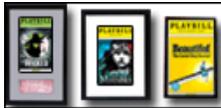
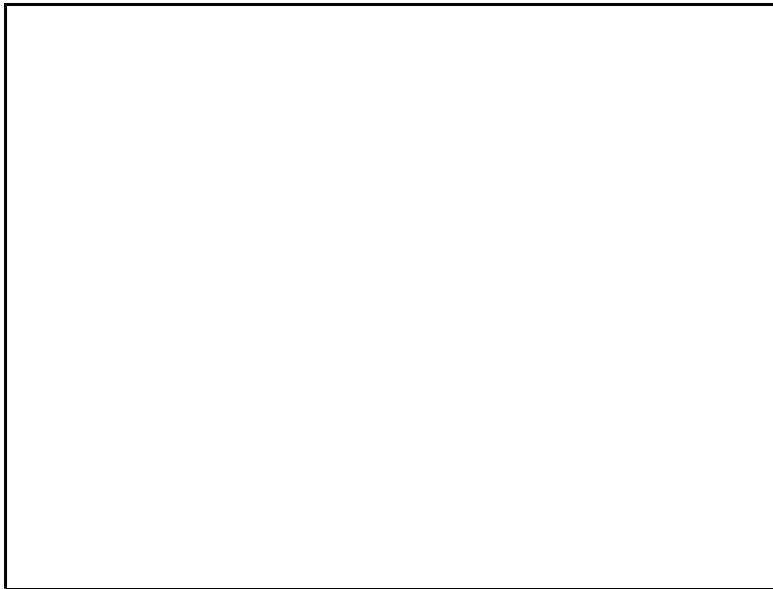
When my partner-in-crime David Ka Lik Wong and I concocted these concerts — *Bugs Bunny On Broadway* in 1990, and then *Bugs Bunny at the Symphony* in 2010 and 2013 — we had no idea that they (and we) would tour almost continuously for 25 years, playing to millions of concertgoers worldwide, and (for us) with a breathtaking array of world-class symphony orchestras in venues ranging from the Hollywood Bowl to the Sydney Opera House and, now, Lincoln Center. We thought our debut 1990 sold-out run at The Gershwin Theatre was a fluke that would not be replicated anywhere else. We were wrong.

I guess we should not have been surprised, because the classic *Looney Tunes* projected in these concerts, up on the big screen above the orchestra, are indeed brilliant. But, more importantly, so is the music. Audiences everywhere love Stalling's and Franklyn's scores. Orchestral musicians love playing them too. Stalling and Franklyn were the real deal. Although they oftentimes took their musical cues from European composers, their mini-masterpieces were (and still are) quintessentially American. Brash, fresh, exciting, fantastically bombastic, in your face. The perfect accompaniment for *Bugs Bunny* and his friends.

And so ... maybe Elaine really had it wrong. Perhaps it's not such a sad thing that so many of us first experienced classical music (and high art) in *Bugs Bunny* cartoons. Because for millions, the music of the *Looney Tunes* is also the music of our youth ... our childhood ... and, in so many ways, the music of our imaginations.

George Daugherty's conducting career has included performances with more than 150 major orchestras, opera houses, and ballet companies, plus a Primetime Emmy Award and five Emmy

nominations.



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