

MAY 22, 2015

## WUVWY MUSIC

BY SARAH LARSON

*Four New York Philharmonic shows saluting Bugs Bunny and Looney Tunes sold out quickly.*

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY CHRIS LEE



Last weekend, Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd, who in their heyday often ended up in concert halls through chaotic means ([https://www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXCULR2wO-A)

[/watch?v=nXCULR2wO-A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXCULR2wO-A)), shared a stage with the New York Philharmonic. This time, they went deliberately. The conductor George Daugherty, who has conducted his program “Bugs Bunny at the Symphony” with various orchestras worldwide since 1989, pairs original Warner Bros. cartoons like “What’s Opera, Doc?” and “Corny Concerto” with live, synchronous performances of their music, by Carl Stalling and Milt Franklyn. This was the program’s first outing with the Philharmonic, and the four shows at Avery Fisher Hall had sold out quickly. Before the Friday-night concert, in the lobby, people of all ages, some in ball gowns, some in Viking helmets, lined up to pose with an energetic Bugs Bunny. He was probably excited to be back in town: though people associate him with Albuquerque (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8TUwHTfOOU>), Bugs is a New Yorker (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fps3sa4caO0>).

Recently, Daugherty told me how Looney Tunes came to the symphony hall. “Back in 1989, I was doing a lot of what we like to refer to as ‘normal’ conducting,” he said—for ballets, opera companies, and symphony orchestras. Even then, attracting new audiences was a concern. “I wanted to find ways to pull people into the concert hall who didn’t normally come, and at the same time celebrate varieties of American symphonic and film music that didn’t normally get put on a concert stage,” he said. “I had loved these cartoons as a child, and I had no idea at the time that I was listening to Wagner and Rossini and von Suppé and Smetana and Tchaikovsky and Liszt and Strauss—all of the classical composers that were borrowed from.”

That’s a common experience, even for classical musicians: often enough, Bugs came first. “I’ve seen the same thing everywhere,” Daugherty said. “I look at this serious, world-renowned orchestra and I see musicians singing, ‘Oh, Brunhilde, you’re so wuv-wy, yes I know it, I can’t help it.’ They grew up on this music, too.”

When Daugherty brought the cartoons-and-live-music idea to Warner Bros., in 1989, it was met with enthusiasm; the studio opened its archives. But the logistics were challenging. For one, Daugherty and his team discovered that many of the scores hadn’t been saved. “We had bits and pieces of some, we had almost complete versions of others,” he said. “We had a team of eleven music transcribers in the graduate film-scoring program at U.S.C., working for months with headphones and Walkmen.” They wanted to keep the original dialogue and sound effects but remove the music, but because the tracks were recorded in mono, on 35-mm. magnetic film, there was no easy way to separate them. Daugherty and his colleagues came up with crude methods involving phasing and shaving.

“Daffy cartoons are one of our biggest challenges,” Daugherty said. “Bugs Bunny’s voice and Elmer Fudd’s voice fall into a sonic area that’s not even near the music. Daffy has a higher-pitched voice—I don’t want to say it’s abrasive, but it’s very

abrasive—that falls right between the woodwinds and the brass. And so when we start shaving the music away under Daffy, we start shaving Daffy’s voice away. We had to come up with some alternate techniques to deal with Daffy. Conservatory did not prepare me for any of this.”

Merrie Melodies and Looney Tunes cartoons were originally created to be shown before movies, “with two thousand other people cheering and laughing and applauding,” Daugherty said. “They’re trying for an audience reaction.” They were musically cinematic, too. Stalling, the cartoons’ composer, and Franklyn, their orchestrator (and composer, after Stalling’s retirement), both grew up playing the piano for silent movies in their home towns. “In the small towns, somebody was just sitting down at the piano or the organ and improvising the scores—adding classical things and their own music,” Daugherty said. That style took symphonic form in Stalling’s Warner Bros. compositions.

Because so many musicians had fled prewar Europe and come to the United States, the classical-music scene in Hollywood in the thirties and forties, Daugherty told me, was the second-best in the world. “If musicians couldn’t get into the Metropolitan Opera orchestra or the New York Philharmonic, they headed for Hollywood,” he said. “Every studio had a phenomenal symphony orchestra. At the same time, Erich Korngold and Bernard Herrmann (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYPu4zWLWzs>) were composing scores.” At Warner Bros., Daugherty said, “the same orchestra that played for ‘Casablanca’ and ‘Now, Voyager’ and ‘The Maltese Falcon’ played for the cartoons.”

At Avery Fisher Hall, Elmer Fudd told everybody to turn off their cell phones. When the orchestra played the Warner Bros. theme, the audience cheered. (Daugherty had told me, “The first time the slide guitar plays—you know, *wroiiing!* Ba-ba-da-ba ba (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jTHNBKjMBU>)!—the audience becomes electrified. It’s like the opening note of a violin concerto played by Josh Bell or something.”) The first cartoon was “Baton Bunny,” (<https://vimeo.com/117371897>) from 1959, in which Bugs is a conductor in a bright-yellow coat. When a man coughs, Bugs holds up a sign that says “THROW THE BUM OUT!” Onstage and off, when Bugs tapped his baton, percussion mallets were raised; in the cartoon, they had marshmallows on the ends. When Bugs raised his arms dramatically, folding his hands down just so, Daugherty did it, too. In the cartoon, a fly buzzed around and enraged the conductor, whose limbs became a wild scribble. Onstage, the musicians reacted in kind.

In “Show Biz Bugs,” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeLgfhTuKeo>) Bugs was the co-star and antagonist to Daffy Duck. In purple tuxes and top hats, they tap-danced—paws and flippers—to “Tea for Two.” Here, and throughout, there was plenty of TNT. (“If you strike this note, instead of a xylophone you’ll be playing a harp!” Daffy Duck growls.) In “Rhapsody Rabbit,” (<https://vimeo.com/107663636>) Bugs answers a ringing phone, says, “What’s up, Doc? Who? Franz Liszt? Never heard of him,” and plays “Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2” and boogie-woogie while he’s bedevilled by a mouse. (He tries TNT under the keys.)

Daugherty then introduced the band. “Ladies and gentlemen, the New York Philharmonic!” he yelled. He was briefly distracted by a family in one of the front rows. “This little kid is putting earplugs in,” he said. (Later, he told me, of the same family, “During ‘The Ride of the Valkyries,’ a woman got up and passed out little Cheerios treats to her kids, in Tupperware, and popped the lid off, and shook them, and then she poured milk on them.” He was flummoxed. It was as if Daffy had come to pester Bugs on his big night.)

When I was a kid, I tended to find the Road Runner-and-Wile E. Coyote cartoons tedious. But when their cartoon “Zoom and Bored” (<https://vimeo.com/75596951>)

came on, I found myself laughing hard. Now I understand: sometimes, when you try to drop an anvil on somebody, you drag yourself down with it and crash through the pavement, and your enemy still eats the birdseed. Other adults in the audience, I felt, were laughing with the same sense of recognition.

There were cartoons featuring Porky Pig and Pepé Le Pew—and even, “through the magic of corporate mergers,” Tom and Jerry—but the stars of the night were Bugs and Elmer. In “The Rabbit of Seville,” Elmer Fudd chased Bugs into the concert hall, where they proceeded to take part in an opera. “Let me cut your mop, let me shave your crop,” Bugs sang. (It hadn’t occurred to me before how funny it was that Elmer Fudd, the customer, is bald and clean-shaven.) Bugs massaged his head, then made a salad on it (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNE0CBucljg>) and showed him the hand mirror. Fudd was enraged, and we were delighted. (Especially those of us who have had to perform the post-haircut feign-joy-at-the-hand-mirror ritual many dozens of times.) Later, Bugs put Figaro Fertilizer on Elmer’s head, and flowers grew out of it. Later, they got married: “The Marriage of Figaro.”

Daugherty told the crowd about the distinctive cartoon-opening “*boiing!*” When he was trying to reconstruct the music, he said, he knew that noise came from a slide guitar but couldn’t find one that sounded right—not Hawaiian, not country-and-Western. “One day at the Warner Bros. music department, we found this,” he said. A musician held up a wooden guitar. “This is the nineteen-thirties original Warner Bros. slide guitar,” Daugherty said, and the crowd oohed. He said they’d also found a document in the archives on which the ingenious director Chuck Jones had written out, in crayon, all eight of the Wagner operas used in “What’s Opera, Doc?,” which blasts through them in a wildly un-Wagnerian six minutes and twenty-three seconds.

“Corny Concerto,” ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRcctLL\\_3FQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRcctLL_3FQ)) a 1943 slapstick parody of “Fantasia,” ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l\\_EDBM1tOEo&list=RDtzCUEQxOT3U&index=2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_EDBM1tOEo&list=RDtzCUEQxOT3U&index=2)) has a frame in which Elmer Fudd conducts the Strauss waltzes “Tales from the Vienna Woods” and “Blue Danube,” at Corny-Gie Hall. As gorgeous strings cascade and the “wippwing wefwain of the woodwind wolls awound and awound,” Porky Pig, in a Fudd-ian hunter role, races around trying to kill Bugs, who outsmarts him and then dances into the sunset in a tutu. “Blue Danube” features swans, a vulture, TNT, and a harp.

The final two were heavy hitters. The crowd favorite “Long-Haired Hare” (<https://vimeo.com/101367774>) begins with Bugs playing the banjo and singing outside the house of the famous tenor Giovanni Jones, whose “Largo al factotum” turns into “Rainy Night in Rio.” (“What do they do in Mississippi when skies are drippy?” he sings, dancing around his living room.) War ensues (“Music hater!” Bugs says, wearing his broken banjo around his neck), culminating in a face off at the Hollywood Bowl. Disguised as Leopold, the great conductor, Bugs exacts operatic revenge, then plays a victory tune on his banjo.

The grand finale was “What’s Opera, Doc?” (<https://vimeo.com/105781176>) As Daugherty had told me, the power of the music from those eight Wagner operas is part of its wit. “They didn’t make the music cartoony,” he said. “All of the themes from ‘Die Walküre’ and ‘Tannhäuser’ and ‘The Flying Dutchman’ are gigantic orchestrations. They kept the Wagnerian grandeur of the music, and when Bugs and Elmer start singing along with it, it’s absolutely side-splitting.” The direction, by Chuck Jones, visually contrasts massive, powerful forms with puny ones, as well. Few warriors are less intimidating than Elmer Fudd in a Viking helmet; few sights are as pleasing as Bugs as Brünnhilde, lithe and batting his eyelashes atop a white horse with a pink mane. “Oh, Brünnhilde, you’re so wuvwy,” Fudd sang. The Philharmonic played with precision and thunderous power; in the audience, several



Sarah Larson is a roving cultural correspondent (<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/sarah-larson>) for newyorker.com.

---

## RELATED STORIES



SARAH LARSON

UPTOWN RAPTURE: DEBBIE HARRY AT THE CARLYLE

BY SARAH LARSON



SARAH LARSON

THE 2015 GRAMMYS AND KEEPING IT REAL

BY SARAH LARSON

---