

# NOW WE'RE TALKIN'

By Helen Marketti

## A Conversation with Cleveland Pops Maestro Carl Topilow

Maestro Carl Topilow is the conductor for the Cleveland Pops Orchestra. On Friday, February 21, 8:00 PM at Severance Hall, the Cleveland Pops Orchestra will be performing a tribute to the work of the late composer, pianist, and conductor Marvin Hamlisch. In addition to his work with the Pops, Maestro Topilow is the Conductor and Director of the Orchestral Program at the Cleveland Institute of Music, and Music Director and Conductor of the Firelands Symphony Orchestra in Sandusky, Ohio.

Carl Topilow seemed to have had music on his mind from a very early age. "I started playing the clarinet when I was nine years old. I like playing the clarinet because you can play so many different kinds of music, such as jazz, swing, classical and Klezmer music. There is a lot of versatility. I played in a community orchestra when I was eleven years old and in a jazz band and in dance combos while in high school. That is basically how I got started, playing symphonic music as well as popular music, and learning to love both."

Carl is noted for playing his signature red clarinet, and now also plays a blue, a white, or a green clarinet according to the occasion. "I saw the movie, *The Red Violin* and thought to myself, 'Why not a red clarinet?' It was such deep philosophical thinking." (laughs)

Carl and his wife, Shirley are the founders of the Cleveland Pops Orchestra, having started the orchestra eighteen years ago. Shirley serves as President and CEO. "Shirley had seen me conduct Pops programs before and suggested we try to start our own orchestra. We have received a lot of support and have a solid subscription base. I feel people really enjoy coming to Severance Hall and listening to the music we play."

Conducting is something that has seemed to appeal to Carl even before he realized. "Actually, that's very funny, because I was recently going through some old boxes in our basement and found a report I had written about conducting when I was a senior in high school. It went back

further than I had given credit. I remember buying scores of symphonies by Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and others, and playing along with recordings of these pieces on the clarinet. I was always interested in the big picture of the orchestra. I remember conducting the band for the Star Spangled Banner at one of the basketball games during high school. Conducting is something that I have always found very attractive. It's being in a position to make all sorts of decisions, including repertoire, musical interpretations, personnel, relating to the orchestra and relating to the audience. There are so many different levels."

"As a Pops orchestra, our principal repertoire is Broadway, Hollywood, light classics, and jazz. It's rare that we play a piece that is more than five minutes long. We play mostly what I call American classical music, whether it's by Bernstein, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Sondheim or whomever. We also play light classics from the basic symphonic repertoire."

On Friday, February 21, the Cleveland Pops Orchestra will be performing a tribute to the work of the late Marvin Hamlisch. Hamlisch's work is well known and very extensive but the job of choosing which songs to play was simplified. "It was made very easy for us," said Carl. "John Such, executive director of a company called Bravo Broadway, has assembled a wonderful cross section of Hamlisch's music. The Pops will be joined by vocalists Jodi Benson, the original *Little Mermaid*, Donna McKechnie, the original Cassie from *A Chorus Line*, and Doug LaBrecque, one of my favorite Broadway performers. It is a terrific lineup."

"Marvin did a benefit concert a few years ago with the Cleveland Institute of Music Orchestra. I had the privilege of ferrying him around in my car. He was very nice, a true gentleman who was genuinely interested in what you had to say. He was not self absorbed in any way."

Carl shares what goes into choosing the concerts that will be done in the coming year. "The hardest part is the planning, coming up with and developing the various themes, the specific selections to be played, and so forth. Sometimes the planning can be difficult. You have to keep in mind the general pacing of the concert, balancing tempos, duration of each piece, the role of the soloists and the selections that the orchestra plays on its own. It's all a balancing act to make it work. I'm the one who basically decides what we do, but Shirley also has a lot of input."

In his 34<sup>th</sup> year as Conductor and Director for the Cleveland Institute of Music, Carl enjoys working with aspiring students. "In some respects, it's similar to working with the Cleveland Pops, but in other respects you take on more of a teaching role when you are rehearsing. What I try to instill in young people is making sure they understand the proper procedures of orchestra routine, such as preparation, dependability, and understanding what is expected of them when they get out into the orchestral field."

For ticket information on upcoming concerts for the Cleveland Pops Orchestra: [www.clevelandorchestra.com](http://www.clevelandorchestra.com)

For more information on Carl Topilow and the Cleveland Pops Orchestra: [www.carltopilow.com](http://www.carltopilow.com) [www.clevelandpops.com](http://www.clevelandpops.com)



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