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Preview: Bugs Bunny is What's Up this Weekend at Blossom

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by Daniel Hathaway

Those of us who were born in the mid-forties grew up right alongside a multitude of quintessentially American cartoon icons invented by the Disney & Warner studios, and throughout our childhoods, Donald Duck and Bugs Bunny were vying for dominance over the cartoon shorts market.

Bugs seems to have won out, at least in the eyes of TV Guide, who named the sarcastic, carrot-chewing rabbit with the Brooklyn accent (he was supposedly born there in 1940) the number one cartoon character of all time in its 50th Anniversary issue in 2002.

He also seems to have charmed the classical music audience, both originally in theaters (yes, children, cartoon shorts came on before the feature in those days) and since 1990, when conductor George Daugherty created the long-running symphonic show, "Bugs Bunny on Broadway" and took it on a world tour which included the Blossom Music Festival.

The Wabbit comes back to Cuyahoga Falls this Saturday and Sunday in "Bugs Bunny at Blossom", a multi-media performance with the Blossom Festival Orchestra conducted by Daugherty featuring some of Bugs' most memorable encounters with the world of opera and symphonic music.

The evening begins with Max Steiner's Warner Brothers Fanfare, followed by 'The Merrie Melodies Theme', orchestrated by Carl W. Stalling, who wrote or arranged many soundtracks for animated cartoons.

Stalling began his career at 12 as a pianist in a silent movie house in Lexington, MO, later meeting Walt Disney in Kansas City and forming a relationship which would produce the 'Silly Symphonies' series, a music-came first process in which Disney's animators — still based in Kansas City — worked from a completed musical score. Stalling later parted company with Disney, working as a freelancer in Los Angeles until he came into the Warner Bros. camp in the mid-30's with Leon Schlesinger, the original creator of Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies. This gave Stalling the

opportunity to create sound tracks with the rich resource of a full symphony orchestra, and so he did until retiring in 1958.

The Blossom audience will hear a number of Stalling's original tracks this weekend, including Duck Amuck (1957) and Jumpin' Jupiter (1955) as well as his masterful arrangements of music by Johann Strauss (A Corny Concerto, 1943), Wagner, Donizetti & Rossini (Long-Haired Hare, 1949), Wagner (What's Opera, Doc?, 1957, after Milt Franklyn) and Liszt (Rhapsody Rabbit).

Also on the playlist: Franklyn's orchestration of music by Franz von Suppé (Baton Bunny, 1959), Stalling & Franklyn's Zoom and Bored (1957), an excerpt from Franklyn's This is a Life (1955) and original scores by von Suppé (an excerpt from Shake Your Powderpuff, 1934) and Offenbach (Bedrock Ballet).

Cartoons which combined a high level of musical sophistication with such improbable comedic antics as we all enjoyed in Warner Bros. shorts undoubtedly made a big impression on young audiences (as did such full-length combinations of animation and symphonic music as Disney's & Leopold Stokowski's Fantasia, featuring the Philadelphia Orchestra). One has to wonder if any episodes of South Park will eventually be declared "culturally significant" by the Library of Congress and admitted to the National Film Registry, as was the 1957 Warner cartoon 'What's Opera, Doc?'.

Blossom patrons who enjoy this weekend's performances will have more to look forward to: Daugherty and his producing partner David La Lik Wong are busy at work on "Bugs Bunny at the Symphony", a new touring show due to be launched in 2010.

George Daugherty conducts The Blossom Festival Orchestra in "Bugs Bunny at Blossom" on Saturday and Sunday at 8:30 at the Blossom Music Center, with Bugs Bunny himself on the big screen.