



Celebrating Hope, Joy, and Resilience with Princeton Symphony Orchestra's Holiday POPS! Concert

By [Christopher Benincasa, JerseyArts.com](#)

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Princeton Symphony Orchestra's [Holiday POPS! concert series](#) is one annual tradition that will not be cancelled because of COVID-19. This year, the concert will be available virtually, free of charge, every weekend before Christmas.

The program features holiday favorites performed by pianists Christina and Michelle Naughton, selections from *The Nutcracker* Suite performed by dancers from American Repertory Ballet, PSO musicians led by Rossen Milanov, the Princeton High School Choir, a carol sing-along, and more.



Director of American Repertory Ballet, about keeping the holiday spirit alive through the arts.



Rossen Milanov conducting "Sleigh Ride" in Princeton's Palmer Square 2020. Photo by PSO Staff

Jersey Arts: This is our first holiday season since the COVID-19 pandemic began. And, this year, your audience will be experiencing these holiday concerts from their homes. How will this experience be different for the performers? I'm curious to hear about how the orchestra and the dancers – and everybody else involved with this



of our musicians are really happy, because they're getting to see the concert for the first time. So, they can be part of the audience. I try to find the positives and that's definitely one of them.

Rossen Milanov: Normally, because of various restrictions, contractual restrictions, we could never really observe our performances in a video format. I think it's a great opportunity for us to perhaps stay a little bit more permanent with what we do, because, in the past, you present the concert once, and then it's over. It just travels in space - it's all linear. And now we can go back and enjoy ourselves on TV, which is rare for us. So, it brings a sense of a little bit more permanency to what we do, which I think is wonderful.



American Repertory Ballet dancers



interesting to see what all these organizations and artists have come up with. Julie, how about you? How has this holiday season been different for you and your team?

Julie Diane Hench: Well, this is the first year since 1963 that American Repertory Ballet has not presented a production of *The Nutcracker*. So, clearly there is a tremendous void without that full experience this year – for our dancers and audiences. And to have this collaboration with the PSO, and bring our dancers in to perform with an incredible trio of musicians, it just lifted our spirits in so many ways. I really look forward to having the opportunity to share that with our audiences. It's just tremendously uplifting.

MU: And it was quite an emotional moment for us when the musicians played the first notes rehearsing for that. Because there we were, not without *The Nutcracker*.

JDH: Right, absolutely. I think all of us got a little bit teary in the room. That first moment, when the dancers were able to take their masks off and dance with one another was... You know, I have that five-second clip on my phone and it just makes me smile every time I watch it.

JA: I was very sad to learn about ARB not being able to present *The Nutcracker* this year, but think it's so great that your dancers still get to go out there and perform and celebrate the season.



production – a smaller version that was completely reworked for the COVID era. So, we're trying to find different and creative ways to still have some kind of a taste of the holidays as we traditionally do. But, we're always looking to partner with the PSO in whatever way possible - during this time and beyond. So, again, we're just grateful for this experience.

MU: It just felt like the perfect way to do it in this strange season, in this strange year. It's really important for us to maintain that kind of normalcy in these strange times, to present our partners – ARB, and the wonderful Princeton High School Choir.



Princeton High School Choir Members lead the PSO's annual carol sing-along. Photo by PSO Staff



RM: Well, the most important thing to know is that Christmas is here. And for people that are used to celebrating with the PSO, our holiday concerts are here, and will meet and exceed all expectations. Because, in the past, the only way you could experience this was to come to the concert hall, but now you can watch it on your computer, on your TV, at home. You can watch it ten times during the entire holiday season. You can share it with your family. You can invite the children in your home to watch it with you. And there will also be some great pre-recorded segments, like the performance of Leroy Anderson's *Sleigh Ride* we did in Palmer Square, right in the center of Princeton, using drones and a professional camera and sound team. So, that is going to be something quite interesting and quite unique.

JA: Mark, we should point out that this holiday showcase is free to everyone – and I would imagine that this is the first time your Holiday POPS! concerts are free. Is that right?

MU: Yes. This is the first time it's free for absolutely everyone. Every year, we do give a number of tickets away to various groups, because it's really important to us for this program to be available to everyone. But this is the first time that we have unlimited seats in our concert hall! And so we decided to make it free for everyone, and that's



JA: Any audio tips for folks at home who want the best possible experience?

MU: Yes. Once you sign up for your free concerts, you will get an email from us, and it has some buttons you can click based on your particular setup, with some suggestions and guides on how to, for instance, connect your computer to your large screen TV or your Bose system, or even your phone. We have a whole set of guides that will help you, and, if none of that works for you, just call the office and someone will help you.



JA: Despite everything that's going on in the world – everything that we're all going through with the COVID-19



more than ever. There are so few things that are unaffected by the pandemic. It's made this holiday season particularly difficult. Many people are not going to be able to be with their family this year. So, we hope that providing this program will be comforting for our audience, knowing that they're watching it with so many other people.

MU: I'm so happy that we're ending 2020 on this very positive note. We certainly all hope that so much more will be possible next year.

JDH: This is such a wonderful way to celebrate the holidays, despite all of the challenges 2020 has presented us with. We're feeling incredibly optimistic about 2021. We recently announced a new artistic director, Ethan Stiefel, who will be joining us in the new year. So, we're heading into 2021 with tremendous enthusiasm and hope.

Enjoy performances of Princeton Symphony Orchestra's Holiday POPS! concert every weekend December. Learn more at princetonsymphony.org.

originally published: 12/09/2020

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