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Princeton Festival Presents "Broadway POPS!" Starring Sierra Boggess; Milanov, PSO Join the "Phantom" Star in Offering Vocal, Orchestral Delights



"BROADWAY POPS!": Princeton Festival has presented "Broadway POPS!" Above: Broadway and West End star Sierra Boggess, left, joined the PSO in a program of highlights from musical theater. The concert was conducted by Rossen Milanov, right. (Photo by Carolo Pascale.)

By Donald H. Sanborn III

Princeton Festival has presented *Broadway POPS!* Broadway and West End star Sierra Boggess joined the Princeton Symphony Orchestra in a program of highlights from musical theater. The June 24 concert was conducted by the orchestra's Edward T. Cone Music Director Rossen Milanov.

Boggess made her Broadway debut in the 2007 stage version of Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. She has portrayed Christine Daaé in multiple productions of Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* (including the 25th anniversary concert at Royal Albert Hall), as well as the West End premiere of its sequel, *Love Never Dies*. With Julian Ovenden she has released an album of duets, *Together at a Distance*.

Broadway POPS! marks Boggess' third collaboration with the PSO, following appearances in 2017 and 2018. The Olivier Award nominee also starred in *The Age of Innocence* (2018) at McCarter Theatre.

Boggess and Milanov created a selection that alternated between orchestral and vocal pieces, letting most of the featured composers be represented by at least one of each. The resulting program delighted the audience that packed the Festival's performance tent on the grounds of Morven Museum & Garden. Boggess remarked that she chose pieces that she wanted to hear the orchestra perform.

The concert opened with an orchestral selection: "*The Music Man: Symphonic Impressions*," crafted by Richard Hayman from Meredith Willson's score. The woodwinds, especially the flutes, shone with the strings in the lush ballad "Till There Was You." The piece closes with the rousing "76 Trombones." A Broadway revival of the show opened this past February.

Boggess entered, sporting a bright red dress. Despite her long association with Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera*, she chose as her first selection "Home," a song from a different stage adaptation of the Gaston Leroux novel. *Phantom* (1991) has a book by Arthur Kopit; the music and lyrics are by Maury Yeston. "Home" is a number that opens delicately and ends operatically — a progression often favored by Boggess — waiting until the end to let the singer reveal her high soprano.

Frank Loesser's score for *Guys and Dolls* (1950) was represented both by a vocal selection and an orchestral medley. Boggess sang the buoyant "If I Were A Bell," which she performed (as the character of Sarah Brown) in a 2014 concert presentation at Carnegie Hall. In accompanying her, the PSO used the orchestrations by the musical's original Broadway arrangers, George Bassman and Ted Royal. The subsequent instrumental potpourri is arranged by Calvin Custer.

Boggess' next selection was from *She Loves Me* (1963), a musical that Princeton Festival presented in 2019. The show's score is by composer Jerry Bock and lyricist Sheldon Harnick (who wrote the songs for *Fiddler on the Roof* the following year). The eager but introspective "Will He Like Me?" displayed Boggess' gift for sensitive musical phrasing. The orchestrations were by Don Walker and Frank Matosich Jr.

An orchestral "*Beauty and the Beast Suite*" is arranged by Michael Kosarin, a longtime collaborator of composer Alan Menken. The medley highlights the 1991 animated film's story arc by jumping from the Prologue — which evokes the "Aquarium" movement of Saint-Saens' *Carnival of the Animals* — to the music that underscores the Beast's transformation back to a prince. The selection also includes "How Does a Moment Last Forever" (from the 2017 remake), and ends with a soaring restatement of the title melody.

Boggess spoke glowingly of the "uplifting" and "hopeful" music of Disney films, particularly those composed by Menken. She then performed "Part of Your World," which Menken and lyricist Howard Ashman wrote for *The Little Mermaid* (1989). The song displayed Boggess' acting talents, as the title character's mood is by turns eagerly fascinated, amused, and frustrated.

The first half closed with the title song from *Love Never Dies* (2010), which Lloyd Webber wrote with lyricist Glenn Slater. The plot (crafted by Frederick Forsyth, Ben Elton, Lloyd Webber, and Slater) requires Christine to again choose between Raoul (now her husband, whose gambling debts have strained the marriage) and the Phantom. The singing of the title number — which the Phantom composes for Christine to sing at a Coney Island venue he now owns — signifies that choice.

"Love Never Dies" begins reflectively and swells to a soaring climax, as the lyrics guide Christine from ambivalence to certainty. It opens with an extended instrumental introduction, during which Boggess respectfully faced the orchestra. Not until right before her entrance did she turn toward the audience. Of the experience of singing in London, Boggess quipped, "You feel *posh* in the West End!"

The orchestra opened the second half with the Overture to *My Fair Lady* (1956), arranged by André Previn. Boggess entered (having changed into a light blush pink dress) and led the audience in a sing-along of that musical's jubilant signature number, "I Could Have Danced All Night" (lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner, music by Frederick Loewe). Midway through the song Boggess breezily pointed out, "You're singing with the Princeton Symphony Orchestra!"

This was followed by "My White Night," Marian's first solo from *The Music Man* (1957), orchestrated by Walker. (Born in Lambertville, Walker spent the end of his life in New Hope, Pa.) Audiences who only know the 1962 film version might not immediately recognize the number, which was replaced by "Being in Love." However, the two songs share material in the middle.

The orchestra played a "Symphonic Suite from *Into the Woods*," crafted by Don Sebesky from Stephen Sondheim's 1987 score. Sebesky gives much of the jaunty title tune to the flutes and

piccolos, punctuating it with string pizzicatos and drum beats that suggest footsteps taken by the giants in "Jack and the Beanstalk." Boggess starred as Cinderella in the 2019 Hollywood Bowl production of the show.

The Secret Garden (1991) has a book and lyrics by Marsha Norman, and music by Lucy Simon. From that show Boggess sang the poignant ballad "How Could I Ever Know." Boggess revealed that when she was younger she wore out her copy of the original cast recording, which she had on a "cassette tape!" In 2016 Boggess herself portrayed Lily in a concert production at Lincoln Center. Boggess paid tribute to Rebecca Luker, who died in 2020. Luker starred as Lily in the 1992 Broadway production, and played Marian in the 2000 revival of *The Music Man*.

The comparatively somber note continued with Boggess singing "Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again" from *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986). The number was presented as it is in the show: an intricate, jittery violin solo and a brief reprise of the title song preface it. Some critics have chided Lloyd Webber for repeating melodies too often. But as Christine sings about ceasing to mourn her dead father, the melody more subtly evokes an earlier number, "Angel of Music." It is effective because the moment underlines a shift in Christine's attitude toward the Phantom.

Both this number and "How Could I Ever Know" examine the need of a bereaved character to overcome their grief and start a new life. The final scene of *Into the Woods* also explores that theme, as a father (the Baker) must raise his son without his dead wife. Boggess closed with the cautionary lullaby "No One is Alone." She punctuated the line "Things will come out right now; we can make it so" by gesturing with crossed fingers. She also paid tribute to Sondheim, who died last November.

Boggess and Milanov have a wonderful rapport. This was palpable in the blend of Boggess' voice with the orchestra, and in the way the singer and the conductor looked at each other appreciatively in between selections. The result was a well-balanced concert of exquisitely performed music. The concert let Princeton Festival's post-pandemic audience revel in being, as Yeston's lyrics say, "Home, where music fills the air."

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