

# California Pops swings into the Flint in Cupertino

Orchestra, based in Palo Alto, moves into a larger auditorium



California Pops Orchestra handles that Big Band sound with the help of trumpet players such as, from left, Dean Boysen, Bob Runnels and Noel Weidkemp, seen in 2014. Photograph courtesy of Sam Huie

By **PAUL FREEMAN**

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## HIGHLIGHTS ▾

“All the big symphony orchestras are preserving the European heritage. And that’s lovely,” says Palo Alto resident Kim Venaas, music director and conductor of the California Pops Orchestra. “Who’s protecting American musical heritage? That’s where we come in ... Of course, our main purpose is entertainment.”

Sure to be highly entertaining is the orchestra's Sunday show, "Swing! Swing! Swing! Big Band Tribute." It reenergizes rousing music of such greats as Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Artie Shaw, Count Basie, Harry James, the Dorseys and Charlie Barnet. Barnet's granddaughter attends California Pops Orchestra shows, says Venaas. Relatives of George Gershwin and John Philip Sousa have also attended past events.

Also included in this program is a swing version of Verdi's "Anvil Chorus." There's always a sing-along, says Venaas, and this time it will be Glenn Miller's "Pennsylvania 6-5000."

The Orchestra will be enhanced for this concert by another group led by Venaas — The Black Tie Band. So players will total 75, about 10 more than usual.

Venaas' music, business and life partner, Alicia Wilmunder, the organization's executive director and gifted principal cellist, says, "When big band music is done right, it's so much fun. It was just amazing at our first rehearsal, to see the big smiles on the musicians' faces. They're all excited and energized about Flint Center and they're working their hearts out."

This is the orchestra's first performance at Cupertino's Flint Center. Several locales were previously used as the orchestra's base. The Pops started at Gunn High School's Spangenberg Theatre, 28 years ago. They sold out 1,000 seats and turned away many more who wanted to attend. At Flint, capacity is 1,800 on the ground floor alone. Venaas and Wilmunder, who rave about the venue's acoustics, hope it will serve as a long-term home.

"One of our goals is to make these shows completely family-friendly," Venaas says. "We just do stuff that we like and that the audience likes. Our tagline is, 'Your kind of music, your kind of orchestra.' We want them to realize that they own this orchestra. ... And we understand that the only reason we're on stage is because of them."

Venaas, who emcees the shows, as well as conducting, says the Pops is the country's only all-request pops orchestra. Attendees phone in, email and text requests between shows. At one performance, a toddler ran up to the stage and requested "Let It Go" from the animated movie "Frozen." It was featured in the next program.

Even in a large venue, a homey atmosphere is created, as Venaas announces audience members' birthdays and reads jokes sent in by the faithful. Ticket prices are kept at a reasonable level, so families can afford to attend.

Venaas and the orchestra's lead trumpet player, Bob Runnels, handle most of the arrangements. But they also have amassed a huge library — more than

30,000 arrangements — from which to draw.

The California Pops Orchestra is comprised partly of full-time musicians, partly of passionate, talented players who have other careers, including a Stanford University brain researcher.

Wilmunder points out the brilliance of all the players. “We pride ourselves on the fact that our arrangements require skilled musicianship. When we have new, classically trained musicians come on board, they are made fully aware of the challenges of learning all these different, fast rhythms and understanding pops phrasing and interpretations.”

The company has welcomed, over the years, guest artists ranging from the juggling Flying Karamazov Brothers to Carol Channing (Venaas was her musical director).

Venaas and Wilmunder devote many hours to fundraising. “It’s hard in an area that’s so technologically focused to get philanthropic support for the arts,” he says.

Nonetheless, the company has operated in the black, right from the beginning. Venaas says, “We’re artistically daring, but we’re also fiscally responsible. So we have a level of trust with our donors that few orchestras have. At every single show, they can see the result of what they’re donating.”



Alicia Wilmunder, executive director of the California Pops Orchestra, and her husband Kim Venaas, musical director of the Pops. “She was a 15-year-old cellist and I was an 18-year-old music director at a music

camp,” Venaas says. “We’ve been together ever since.” They are seen in their Palo Alto home on Monday, March 16, 2015. Photo by John Orr / Daily News

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It was in the De Anza parking lot, adjacent to Flint Center, awaiting buses to music camp, that Venaas, then 18, and Wilmunder, 15, first met.

Venaas, whose dad was a big band piano player, graduated with honors from San Francisco State University with a degree in conducting and musical performance. He has worked with Carmen Dragon and Ernst Bacon and conducted at Davies Symphony Hall.

Wilmunder graduated in cello performance from the Conservatory of Music at University of the Pacific. She has recorded with such artists as Tony Bennett and Beverly Sills. When Wilmunder was growing up, her father took her to usher at the San Francisco Symphony. She loved watching Arthur Fiedler conduct the Pops concerts.

“The Symphony dropped the Pops concerts,” she says. “The only time symphony orchestras do a pop concert in the area is for fundraisers. And it’s really a shame. We’ve lost the ability to bring a whole family to a concert. And that’s what started us on this path.”

Venaas says, “The other thing is, since we were always in orchestras, we would hear other players saying, ‘Man, it sure would be great if we could play some Gershwin or Cole Porter or Irving Berlin.’ When I formed my big band, they said, ‘Can’t you do that with an orchestra, as well?’”

California Pops Orchestra is doing it quite nicely, thank you, presenting diverse programs for all ages. Upcoming shows feature movie music, holiday favorites and Broadway show tunes.

Venaas says, “Young people come up and tell us, ‘I had no idea an orchestra concert could be so much fun.’”

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## Music

What: California Pops Orchestra Presents “Swing! Swing! Swing! Big Band Tribute”

Where: Flint Center, 21250 Stevens Creek Blvd., Cupertino

When: 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 25