

Keeping the Music Alive

by Mike McCoy, WI Rep

A number of Four Freshmen fans are concerned about the future of the music we love so much, and struggle with identifying ways to find the new fans that will be needed to ensure the group's continuation for many years to come. Fans of some other musical genres also face the same problem, for much the same reason.

The two concerns came together in mid-April in two music columns in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and in some thoughts in response to the columnist from a Four Freshmen fan. Here's that interchange, for the information of those FF fans interested in new directions that might be taken - and how they may be able to help.

A music columnist for the Journal Sentinel recently devoted two columns to the financial pressures that the Milwaukee Symphony and other orchestras in the Midwest and beyond are facing. Specifically, he reported that interest in a former mainstay of programming - "Pops" concerts - has been declining. "Conventional wisdom on Pops holds that stars drive sales," wrote Tom Strini. "But which stars who begin to fit the format are still breathing?...Names that have marquee value and are right for Pops are too pricey for Pops... Pops grew up when crossover stars of recording, Broadway and Hollywood worked in musical idioms not that distant from Western classical tradition. That was a long time ago; several generations of folk and rock and now a generation of rap stand between 2003 and the good old days."

Strini offered several ideas, including a plan for a "Great Orchestras of the Greater Midwest" round-robin tour for the Milwaukee Symphony, the St. Louis Symphony and the Minnesota Orchestra. Another idea was to make use of "big band" swing because it "translates well to orchestra."

"The late Morton Gould wrote some terrific arrangements and compositions for orchestra, and plenty of capable arrangers are out there. Programs devoted to the great jazzmen of swing - Basie, Ellington, Goodman, the Dorseys, and so on - could be marketed in a way that's comprehensible. The music would be engaging and challenging for the musicians as well as the audience."

The column prompted this reply from Freshmen fan Wayne Corey of Madison, in an e-mail to Strini:

"As a reader who loves much music (and as someone who appreciates the Milwaukee Symphony, albeit from a distance), I appreciated today's column by Tom Strini.

"As an older music fan (60) who still spends a significant amount of my disposable income on music and the arts every year, I recognize that we are fighting a difficult battle right now.

"Some of the problem, as Mr. Strini points out, is with the orchestras (and the venue bookers, etc.) that do not show sufficient respect for the potential audience and/or don't make a significant enough effort to understand what may actually 'sell' to the music fans in any given market.

"Another part of the problem, in my opinion, is that too many of us older arts 'consumers' make too little effort to discover that there are still performances and CDs available with 'our' music. Much of that is a marketing problem for the music industry which, for reasons that escape me, values the money of very young people more than the money of older folks. And while I know the kids have money these days, us older folks still have a lot more that we are willing...and able...to spend.

"Now in the 55th year of their existence, The Four Freshmen continue to tour and appear with both symphony orchestras and major jazz orchestras across the country, in Japan and in Scandinavia. The current ensemble (Group #22, if you are counting) is extraordinarily talented. They have the Stan Kenton charts from the historic 'Road Show' tour plus many other historic and contemporary arrangements for use by symphony orchestras. The current group is young and is, in the opinion of many, the finest Four Freshmen group yet. The Freshmen continue to be owned and managed by Bob Flanigan, the original lead singer. The Freshmen are supported by The Four Freshmen Society, demographically the oldest (but most enthusiastic) fan club in the world.

"The Four Freshmen bring great musical virtuosity, enthusiasm and vigor to the stage. They have a name that attracts an audience and leaves that audience wanting more. They have developed a significant fan base in Wisconsin. Granted, I am on the board of directors of The Four Freshmen Society (ditto John Bangs in Oshkosh) and bring a strong bias to any discussion. But I appreciate the problems Mr. Strini has addressed. And I believe that the Milwaukee Symphony would be well served if it reviewed the FF performances with symphony orchestras across our country.

"I believe this is a really good concert just waiting to happen!"

For the complete text of "As Pops loses luster, overhaul needed," the second of two columns and published April 29, go to

<http://www.jsonline.com/onwisconsin/arts/apr03/136888.asp>

The first part, on April 18, may be found at

<http://www.jsonline.com/onwisconsin/arts/apr03/134440.asp>