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Bugs Bunny and the NSO come to Wolf Trap

By Roger Catlin



Warner Bros. - Still image from the 1950's Merrie Melodies short, "What's Opera, Doc?"

For a generation of Americans, the earliest love of classical music came not through shared family symphony experiences or early childhood music appreciation classes, but through mayhem-laced TV cartoons, often involving a bunny in drag.

Walt Disney may have taken the high road to classical music interpretation through some early Silly Symphony cartoons and "Fantasia" (which in its first run was a flop). But it was Warner Bros. and particularly the animators behind Bugs Bunny who may have been the most successful in drumming key classical passages into the heads of impressionable audiences when the studio's theatrical cartoons of the 1940s and '50s were incessantly replayed on TV in the '60s.

Even today, the most serious gray-haired music lover, sitting in the world's most august concert halls, may be listening to the timeless refrains of Rossini or Wagner only to have the phrase "Kill the Wabbit!" come to mind.

Conductor George Daugherty has embraced this meld of classical knowledge and pop-culture conditioning and celebrates it in his "Bugs Bunny at the Symphony." Its first tour, in 1990, was such a success that it spawned, as most successes in Hollywood do, a sequel.

"Bugs Bunny at the Symphony II" comes to Wolf Trap on Thursday and Friday, with Daugherty conducting the National Symphony Orchestra.

In its honor, we pause to hail the greatest uses of classical music by Warner Bros. cartoons (incorporating a couple from Tom and Jerry over at MGM that are often part of the program).

Not all the cartoons listed here are part of "Bugs Bunny at the Symphony II," which screens the cartoons as the symphony plays.



(Warner Bros.) - Still image from the Warner Bros. short "Rhapsody Rabbit."

"What's Opera, Doc?," a 1957 short directed by Chuck Jones, is, according to some polls, the greatest cartoon ever made. Largely using themes from Richard Wagner's Ring cycle, it begins with Elmer Fudd in a Viking helmet instead of a hunting hat, singing "Kill the wabbit!" to the tune of "Ride of the Valkyries." The wily Bugs Bunny tries to save himself disguised as the bewitching Brunnhilde. Spoiler alert: It's one of the few Bugs cartoons where the hunter is victorious. Bugs lifts his head up at the end as he's carried off, saying, "Well what did you expect in an opera, a happy ending?"

"Long-Haired Hare," released in 1949, directed by Jones, begins with an opera singer's practice, which is interrupted by ditties sung by Bugs Bunny nearby, accompanying himself on banjo, harp and finally tuba. When the singer responds violently, Bugs sabotages his concert at the Hollywood Bowl, eventually appearing in drag as a bobby-soxed autograph hunter before becoming the maestro, cutting the figure of Leopold Stokowski. In that position, he makes the singer keep a high note so

long that he changes many colors before the amphitheater collapses.

"Pigs in a Polka," a Merrie Melodies cartoon from 1943 by Friz Freleng, retells the Three Little Pigs tale to Brahms's Hungarian Dances, Nos. 5, 7, 6 and 17, in that order. The Big Bad Wolf pretends at one point to be a gypsy dancer, and later, a poor violinist-beggar seeking shelter. He's not really playing the violin, though, just a record on a player hidden under his clothes and tied to his back. When one of the pigs discovers the record, he flips it, and the wolf begins involuntarily dancing. Oscar-nominated as best animated short.

"Rabbit of Seville," 1950, from Jones, begins with an audience filing into the Hollywood Bowl to hear "The Barber of Seville." Elmer Fudd is hunting Bugs Bunny again in the nearby hills, with the chase tumbling into the backstage of the production. Bugs takes up the barber's coat and begins shaving Fudd on stage to Rossini's overture. Bugs tricks him again by dressing in drag, and Fudd is back in the barber's chair. By the end, Fudd is done up as a bride and dropped into a cake.

"Baton Bunny," a 1959 cartoon directed by Jones, doesn't have Bugs crash the conductor's podium at the Hollywood Bowl; instead, he is the scheduled conductor. His performance of Franz von Suppe's "Ein Morgen, ein Mittag und ein Abend in Wien" ("A Morning, Noon and Night in Vienna") is fraught with many problems, though, including a guy coughing in the audience and a sprung collar. But the biggest problems come when a pesky fly buzzes him. When he jabs at it, the orchestra follows his cue, even when it escalates to war.

“A Corny Concerto,” a 1943 cartoon directed by Bob Clampett, considered a parody of “Fantasia,” has a disheveled Elmer Fudd as the introducing conductor (“Gweetings, music wovers!”) adapting two Johann Strauss II waltzes. The tale of “The Ugly Duckling” (possibly using an infant Daffy Duck) unfolds to the tune of “The Blue Danube.” And another hunter’s pursuit of Bugs Bunny, this time by Porky Pig in the hunter’s hat and with a gun, is done to “Tales From the Vienna Woods,” in which the rabbit escapes wearing a tutu.

“Bugs and Daffy’s Carnival of the Animals,” from 1976, is the most unusual and rarely seen of this group. It was devised as a prime-time animated special directed by Jones that blended a live-action orchestra directed by Michael Tilson Thomas with Bugs and Daffy honing their dueling showbiz personalities. Porky Pig makes an appearance in a tux, but mostly Bugs and Daffy keep to the written narration by Ogden Nash as Jones uses the movements of the creatures in Camille Saint-Saens’s piece for impressionistic animation.

“Rhapsody Rabbit,” a 1946 cartoon short from Freleng, first put Bugs Bunny in a tux at a grand piano for a classical concert. After much fuss, involving glove adjustment and dealing with a cougher in the audience (who is promptly shot), he begins to play. But as he continues Liszt’s “Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2,” a mouse in the instrument begins to butt in and play along, initiating a boogie-woogie at one point.

“The Cat Concerto,” an MGM Tom and Jerry cartoon from William Hanna and Joseph Barbera (the later TV animation kings) also was made in 1946 and was just about identical to “Rhapsody Rabbit.” This time, it’s the tuxedoed Tom’s performance of the same Liszt piece that is interrupted by a mouse in the piano, Jerry. Who copied whom? It was never determined. But it was Tom and Jerry’s MGM cartoon that picked up the 1946 Oscar for best animated short.

“Johann Mouse,” released in 1953 by Hanna and Barbera for MGM, was a more fully realized classical combination, with a story about the house cat of Johann Strauss II and the mouse it sought, which would only come out when it heard a waltz. Tom learns to play waltzes — mostly “The Blue Danube” — to lure his prey, and he and Jerry end up with a royal invitation to perform “Tritsch-Tratsch-Polka.” The Oscar winner is part of “Bugs Bunny at the Symphony II” this week. “The Cat Concerto,” “Pigs in a Polka,” “A Corny Concerto” and “Carnival of the Animals” are not.

Catlin is a freelance writer.

**The National Symphony Orchestra:
Bugs Bunny at the Symphony II**

Thursday and Friday at 8:30 p.m.

at Wolf Trap Filene Center, Vienna. Tickets are \$22 to \$55. Information at 877-965-3872 or wolftrap.org.