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MUSIC AMONG THE TREES...AND TOWERS

Cal Phil opens its summer season at LA County Arboretum and Disney Hall with a musical tour of “America the Beautiful” on June 28 and 29

Featured artists include pianist Norman Krieger – applauded by the New York Times for his “lovely, velvety touch” – in a performance of Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue – and James Tormé, son of legendary performer, Mel Tormé, presenting his father’s rarely performed but critically acclaimed California Suite for singer, jazz trio and orchestra

Calendar summary:

June 28: America the Beautiful

Featured soloists: pianist Norman Krieger and jazz vocalist James Tormé

Program includes: Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue, Mel Tormé’s California Suite, Copland’s Appalachian Spring, New York New York, and excerpts from Chicago

The Arboretum

301 N. Baldwin Ave in Arcadia

Gates open at 5:30 p.m; concert begins at 7:30 p.m.

626.300.8200 or purchase online, www.calphil.org

Tickets start at \$20

June 29: America the Beautiful

Featured soloists: pianist Norman Krieger and jazz vocalist James Tormé

Program includes: Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue, Mel Tormé’s California Suite, Copland’s Appalachian Spring, New York New York, and excerpts from Chicago

Walt Disney Concert Hall

111 South Grand Avenue in Los Angeles

Concert begins at 2 p.m.

For tickets, call 213.365.3500 or purchase online, www.ticketmaster.com

Tickets start at \$25

SAN MARINO, Calif. It is perhaps only fitting that an orchestra named after one of the greatest states in America, the California Philharmonic, presents its summer season at two venues. Cal Phil’s Saturday evening concerts at the Los Angeles County Arboretum & Botanical Gardens in Arcadia reflect the nation’s breathtaking, wide-open spaces while its Sunday matinee performances at Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles take place at an architectural and acoustic gem crowning one of America’s greatest cities.

Cal Phil's opening weekend of concerts on Saturday, June 28, at 7:30 p.m. at The Arboretum and Sunday, June 29, at 2 p.m. at Disney Hall will further underscore this theme by presenting a musical tour of "America the Beautiful."

'Stops' on the popular orchestra's itinerary include: George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue, with world renowned pianist Norman Krieger; Grand Canyon Suite by Ferde Grofé; excerpts from the Tony and Academy Award winning musical Chicago by John Kander and Fred Ebb, as well as a swinging rendition of the team's New York, New York; Aaron Copland's Appalachian Spring; and California Suite by Mel Tormé, featuring the renowned jazz vocalist's son, James Tormé.

"As the lyrics to 'America the Beautiful' promise, we'll travel from sea to shining sea," says Cal Phil music director and founder, Dr. Victor Vener. "East, west, north, south – there's no section of our great country we won't visit. And we'll meet some amazing composers and artists along the way."

Pianist Norman Krieger first performed Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue with the venerable Boston Pops when he was only 17 years old. Given one week to master the work, Krieger practiced into the wee hours of the morning on a silent keyboard provided by his teacher so he wouldn't disturb the neighbors.

"Since then, I've performed Rhapsody in Blue at least once every season," says Krieger, who today is hailed by the Washington Post as "an artist of unusual sensitivity with the technical control to do absolutely anything he wants" and by the New York Times for his "lovely, velvety touch."

Krieger, who has performed the concerto worldwide – from Shanghai, China to Mexico and Canada – finds the work "forever refreshing and inspiring to play."

"I'm constantly excited by the rhythm and melody," the pianist adds. "Rhapsody in Blue is the bridge between classical music and jazz, although it isn't really jazz. It represents America in the 1920s – you can even hear the trains in the background – and reflects the unique genius of Gershwin, who is at the heart of American music and culture.

"America the Beautiful" will also include a work by the composer who scored Rhapsody in Blue – originally written in 1924 for piano and band – for orchestra, Ferde Grofé.

"Grand Canyon Suite is by far the most popular of Grofé's works," says Vener. "There are wonderful musical effects throughout the piece; you'll actually feel at times like you're riding a mule along narrow paths through the canyon."

Scheduled too is a springtime stop at a Pennsylvanian farmhouse to hear excerpts from Aaron Copland's Appalachian Spring. The score, with its famous Shaker melody – "Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free" -- was commissioned by dancer Martha Graham for a ballet of the same name and received the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1945.

"We'll meet a young farmer and his bride as they explore their new home, which the community has just built for them as a wedding gift," explains Vener. "Copland himself said

that he wanted the music to reflect not only the young couple's joy but what he termed 'the strange and terrible aspects of fate.' Appalachian Spring is a very popular work; the audience will recognize much of it. But it is also very powerful emotionally. The music speaks to all of us."

Also on Cal Phil's "America the Beautiful" 'tour' are visits to Chicago and New York, New York, courtesy of the acclaimed songwriting duo John Kander and Fred Ebb. "We're visiting Chicago for obvious reasons. The music is fabulous and audiences love it," says Vener. "As of this past March, the 1996 Broadway revival has presented over 4700 performances and is still going strong."

Kander and Ebb have acknowledged actor Robert DeNiro as the guiding spirit behind the success of the theme song from the 1977 film, New York, New York.

"DeNiro asked Kander and Ebb to rewrite their original tune because he thought it was 'too weak.' At the time, they weren't happy to hear that but, since then, the revision has been immortalized by artists like Liza Minnelli and Frank Sinatra and, to this day, is played over the loudspeakers at the end of every Yankee home game," Vener says. "Our orchestra is looking forward to hitting a home run musically when we play it at The Arboretum and Disney Hall. Feel free," Vener adds with a smile, "to cheer us on."

Despite its busy concert 'itinerary', Cal Phil will not neglect its home state. California Suite, a rarely performed jazz orchestral work by legendary musician Mel Tormé, will feature noted jazz artists Ryan Cross on bass; Brandon Coleman on piano; Gene Coye on drums; soprano Ariana Hall, alto Sandy Howell, tenor Fletcher Sheridan and bass-baritone Eric Bradley appearing as the new Mel-Tones...and Mel Tormé's son, James Tormé, on lead vocals.

"James Tormé is a chip off the old block," said Playboy Jazz Festival founder, Hugh Hefner. "And a mighty cool block it is. His daddy would be proud."

Tormé's father would be especially proud because his 33-year old son is determined to share the joys of jazz with a new generation. "I want to leave my father's legacy with my own generation," explains Tormé. The fast-rising singer will also perform such songs from the American Song Book as "What Are You Doing The Rest Of Your Life?" and "It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)".

"The minute I realized people my age and younger could be interested in music like my father's, it was all the excuse I needed," Tormé adds. "California Suite is an incredible work that never received the exposure it deserved. As Billboard wrote, the Suite contains some of the best songs of my father's career."

California Suite, a work composed in 1949 when Mel Tormé was only 24 years old, was the first 12-inch LP ever to be released by Capitol Records. "The original Suite was recorded at Capitol Records and was only 39 minutes long, but fans so enjoyed it that my dad teamed up with West Coast arranger Marty Paich to re-record it 8 years later," Tormé explains. "Paich was the greatest of the jazz arrangers, in my opinion...and in the eyes of my father before me."

Today, only a few other recordings of California Suite exist. These include the aforementioned 1957 version arranged by Paich and a 1960s rendition by Sammy Davis Jr., also re-worked by Paich. Cal Phil audiences will hear excerpts from the condensed version of the work, which Tormé calls “The Suite Express.” In this ‘express’ version Tormé and his collaborator, the Grammy-award winning composer David Paich – Marty Paich’s son – incorporated what they felt were the best aspects of all three recordings.

“California Suite is some of the most sophisticated music of that period,” says Vener. “It seamlessly combines classical symphonic elements with west coast jazz.”

Joining this “seamless” team is yet another member of the Tormé family, jazz radio and television personality Daisy Tormé. Daisy Tormé– the sister of James and daughter of Mel – will make a cameo appearance in the onstage role of ‘The Easterner.’

“My father wrote California Suite, in part, as an answer to Manhattan Tower, Gordon Jenkins’ work celebrating the East Coast,” says James Tormé. “It’s a truly masterful musical tribute to the great Golden State as it was then, with orange groves and bean fields as far as the eyes could see. And no traffic...”

The gates will open at The Arboretum on June 28 at 5:30 p.m. for dining and live jazz from the redwhite+bluezz Jazz Stage, with the performance beginning at 7:30 p.m. Tickets start at just \$20 and can be purchased by calling the Cal Phil box office at 1120 Huntington Drive in San Marino at 626.300.8200 from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday or by visiting the website, www.calphil.org. The Arboretum is located at 301 No. Baldwin Avenue in Arcadia. Gates open at 5:30 p.m. for picnicking.

Tickets for the performance at 2 p.m. on June 29 are available by calling TicketMaster at 213.363.3500, Tuesday through Friday, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. or online at www.ticketmaster.com. Prices range from \$35 to \$95/person. Walt Disney Concert Hall is located at 111 South Grand Avenue in Los Angeles.

In 1995, Music Director and Conductor Victor Vener and a small group of enthusiastic, dedicated music lovers based in Pasadena, California founded The CalPhil Foundation. The Foundation, a nonprofit community benefit organization, supports the California Philharmonic in its quest to expand awareness of classical music, thus increasing the interest and support for great timeless music with wide audience appeal, from the classical and operatic repertoire to diverse genres of jazz, pops, Hollywood and Broadway. Also, with a strong commitment to new music and to expanding the symphonic repertoire, the California Philharmonic has presented numerous world premieres of both orchestral and chamber works.

The California Philharmonic began in 1997 with a five-concert inaugural summer season of Cal Phil Festival on the Green on the grounds of the Los Angeles County Arboretum & Botanic Garden in Arcadia. Now, Cal Phil presents twenty-four concerts per year in five different, but equally impressive, venues throughout Los Angeles County. These series include Cal Phil at Walt Disney Concert Hall (downtown Los Angeles), Cal Phil at the Ambassador (Pasadena), Cal Phil Music, Martinis and the Maestro (Castle Green Hotel in Pasadena), Cal Phil Festival on the Green, and Cal Phil at The Mill (The Old Mill in San Marino). For more information, visit www.calphil.org or call 626.300.8200.