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The Michigan Daily

Michigan Pops Orchestra brings eclectic tunes to Power Center

By Emily Lambert
Daily Arts Writer

Steven Bizub remembers when a friend first pitched him the idea for a campus pops orchestra. The proposed orchestra, he recalled, was to be entirely student-run, play a wide variety of works and debut in the Michigan Theater.

"I have to say I thought he had really lofty aspirations for a while," said Bizub, now a School of Music senior and music director of the Michigan Pops Orchestra, which opens its third season this Saturday. "People would come to the Michigan Theater and pay to hear us? I knew what the music scene was like."

What the Ann Arbor scene was like, he explained, was "congested." Rehearsal space was at a premium. Many musicians preferred to play for pay. The cultured city did not seem to have room for another performing group.

When the 65-member pops orchestra performed for the first time in the spring of 1996, "every major hall had something going on." Despite this, about 1,000 pops lovers turned out at the Michigan Theater to hear music from "West Side Story," "Phantom of the Opera," "Batman" and "Jurassic Park." Ann Arbor made room for pops.

The next year, the orchestra scraped together enough money to put on a March concert featuring opera classics and music by John Williams. Composed of music and non-music majors, the group received support from a number of campus organizations, but its future remained uncertain.

This summer, to Bizub's elation, the orchestra became part of the University Activities Committee. With the orchestra's funding more secure, Bizub will spend less time lobbying for money and more time preparing scores. Joining UAC, he noted, also made it possible to add a fall concert to the schedule.

PREVIEW	
✕	Michigan Pops Orchestra Power Center-\$5 Saturday night at 8

Bizub made his conducting debut in front of the Michigan Pops. He has since conducted other ensembles, but feels close to this one and wants to see it flourish. The orchestra now has a constitution and governing board, and about a quarter of the players receive compensation.

"It was important for me to make sure some things were definitely in place for the organization before I left," said Bizub who, along with the orchestra's artistic director, will graduate this May.

By the end of this season, the orchestra will have four concerts to its credit. It boasts pleased audiences and loyal members, some of whom have played with the orchestra since its inception. The players, Bizub said, are pleased with their success.

"We were quite surprised our little pops orchestra found its way into the scene."

Pops has a funny reputation in the classical music world, and one Bizub thinks a lot about. After attending a panel discussion with the nation's leading pops conductors, he discovered that pops concerts mainly exist to fund classical concerts. The audiences, he noted, often differ. At the Michigan Pops' first concert, many audience members told him they had never attended an orchestra concert before.

"Orchestral music can be very stale, uncomfortable or boring at times," Bizub said. "What we really want to do with the orchestra is showcase orchestral music but, by doing that, attract a wider audience to the concert hall."

Changing people's opinions toward orchestral music, he said, brings him satisfaction.

"That's what it's about for me."

Whether pops' audiences develop a liking for classical is a matter of debate. But Bizub acknowledged that pops is about more than changing opinions. It is also, he said, about the music - that audiences like to hear and musicians like to play.

This weekend's concert promises to please all parties. The eclectic program includes music from two Hitchcock scores, Beatles tunes along with recognizable orchestral classics. Music Professor Donald Sinta will join on one piece as a saxophone soloist.

Posters advertise the concert as having "No Theme."

"Themes put the music director in a box," Bizub said. "They restrict and presuppose that the pops repertoire can only stay in one area or genre."

But pops is as varied as its listeners, he said. Think of a record store and of every category there: classical, rock, soundtracks

"Pops is all of that," Bizub said. "It draws from every bin."

10-31-97

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