



Minneapolis-based rapper and singer Dessa reaching out to the audience during her April 2017 concerts with the Minnesota Orchestra.



Audra McDonald in 2011 performance with the New York Philharmonic, led by then-Music Director Alan Gilbert, at Carnegie Hall. She returns to the Philharmonic in May 2018.

# Star Search

**They galvanize audiences, connect with classical musicians, and give pops concerts that extra jolt. What's it like for the headliners who take center stage to perform pops concerts with orchestras? Six stellar soloists and one conductor tell the inside story.**

by Steven Brown

## PATTI AUSTIN

Veteran R&B/pop/jazz singer Patti Austin is spending much of this year celebrating Ella Fitzgerald's centennial, performing a tribute program with orchestras in the United States, Europe, and Asia. Austin's first moments in front of each group always give her a special frisson. "After they've done their run-through, I come in and run everything with the orchestra," she explains. "Hearing those first few notes is mind-



Vocalist Patti Austin with Utah Symphony substitute saxophone player David Halliday at a July 2017 performance.

blowing. It's the best feeling on earth."

Austin's schedule takes her from jazz clubs to concert halls to sprawling outdoor venues to recording studios. Making herself at home in each of them is a matter of "different hats and different gears," she says. That points up "another reason I love to perform with orchestras. The audience is there with one purpose in mind: to listen to that music. Their eyeballs are on *you*." Austin acknowledges



Chris Lee  
Michael Blanchard

Melissa Etheridge in concert with the Boston Pops, July 4, 2017



Artis-Naples

Jack Everly with the Naples Philharmonic in Florida, one of several orchestras where he is principal pops conductor

that performing with orchestras brings pressure alongside excitement. “It’s a very empowering feeling as an artist to stand there with all of those people behind you,” she says. “It’s also nerve-wracking to a degree, because you have a lot to stand up to. But you know how to survive.”

Austin has been singing since she was a child, and she began her career surrounded by show-business veterans who cut their teeth in vaudeville. “They knew how to do it all,” she says. “They knew how to sing. They knew how to tell a story. They knew how to act.” She looks at musical versatility as an extension of that all-embracing view of performing. “It’s the same when you do a song in front of an entire orchestra. You are trying to make one piece of music cohesive. Part of that, when you’re singing from the American songbook, is to kind of float within the construct of the orchestra. You can’t do that when you’re singing in front of a trio. When you’re with an orchestra, the painting is already there. All you have to do is step in.”

### DESSA

When the Minnesota Orchestra invited Minneapolis-based singer-songwriter Dessa to collaborate for a concert this past April, she jumped at the chance. “The orchestra was genuinely committed to artistic risk-taking,” she recalls. “They went above and beyond what I might have

imagined they’d do, to make sure I had the resources to pull off something really spectacular. And I think we did.”

The writer, rapper, and performance artist began her year of preparations with a question: “Where does romantic love live in the brain?” she asks. “If the relationship were to end, but the love were to continue, is there anything you could do to weed that love out of your brain?” Neurological researchers from the University of Minnesota pitched in by taking MRI images of Dessa’s brain. She wove those into a spoken narrative that linked the songs she and her backup singers performed with the orchestra. “What we ended up with was a hybrid symphonic performance, rap show, and TED-style presentation of the neurological context about romance,” Dessa says.

Drawing on songs she had performed for years and a few new ones, Dessa and arranger Andy Thompson “really wanted to burn the songs to the ground and rebuild them using the tools at the disposal of an orchestra,” she says. Thompson produced scores and orchestral parts. For Dessa’s “The Chaconne,” describing a woman in love with a violinist, Thompson had a



Bill Preatts

“The orchestra was genuinely committed to artistic risk-taking,” says rapper and singer Dessa of her April 2017 collaboration with the Minnesota Orchestra. “They went above and beyond what I might have imagined.”

violinist perform a passage from J.S. Bach’s Chaconne in D minor—which inspired the song—as a middle section. “Hearing it, I felt like I was an audience member with the best seat in the house,” Dessa recalls. “It was chilling. It was fantastic.”

Dessa, who performs with the Minneapolis hip-hop collective Doomtree, said the orchestra immersed her in sound in a way that never happens with amplified groups. “Being in the middle of a sound storm is an emotional place to be,” she says, “and the continuum is infinite. Being able

to swing very quickly from delicate and beautiful to enormous and powerful and ominous—it felt like each side of my dial had more numbers on it,” she says. “To have done something that takes so many people with a shared vision was a rare experience for me. It’s not often where you have 80 people all focused on creating the same outcome. It’s a moving experience.”

### MELISSA ETHERIDGE

The teenage Melissa Etheridge was a budding rock-and-roller who performed with her school ensembles and adult country-music groups. But she also had other



Robert Mueller

Melissa Etheridge rehearses with the Cleveland-based Contemporary Youth Orchestra for their June 2017 joint concert.

sounds in her ears. “When I was growing up, one of my most influential albums was the London Symphony Orchestra’s version of *Tommy*,” the Grammy-winning singer-songwriter recalls. “I would come home from school every day and listen to it. The blend of rock-’n’-roll and orchestra was *so* powerful to me.”

Now, Etheridge helps create that blend. She and her band celebrated last July 4 with the Boston Pops in the orchestra’s annual patriotic concert on the Esplanade, and she will help the Kansas City Symphony launch its 2017-18 pops series.

Performing with an orchestra “is a musical experience like nothing else,” Etheridge says by phone from a tour stop in Edmonton, Canada. “When you have 60 to 70 musicians behind you, creating music at the same time, it’s like the biggest wave you can imagine. It’s thrilling.” But Etheridge was “a nervous wreck” before her first orchestral date, about three years ago. “I’ve been playing for over 40 years,” she says. “I knew that I had the capability of making a beautiful piece of music. But I also had the capability of driving the train off the track.” Boston Pops Conductor Keith Lockhart, during a rehearsal, gave her the key to staying on course. “He was looking at me, and he said, ‘You’re not following *me*, are you?’ I said, ‘Is that not what I’m supposed to do?’ He said, ‘No, no, no. I follow *you*.’ I thought, ‘Oh. All I have to do is connect with him, and he will bring the orchestra along.’ It’s really cool.”

Etheridge relishes the impact that orchestras add to her music, such as “The

Way I Do,” “which is this huge rock song. To hear it go deeper with the orchestra is thrilling. It’s like hearing all the things I heard in my head when I wrote it.” Another of her hits comes to mind. “How many times have I sung ‘Come to My Window’? But every time I do it with an orchestra, the last chorus that the horn section takes gives me chills. It’s dream-come-true stuff.”

Most of the orchestrations come from arrangers who have studied her recordings and live performances. But Etheridge occasionally gets a surprise, as she did last spring when she performed with Cleveland’s Contemporary Youth Orchestra. In her emotional “Meet Me in the Dark,” “instead of a piano solo with the orchestra, they had a young harpist. It was extraordinary, what she played. I would never have thought of putting a harp on one of my songs. It was a bring-a-tear-to-your-eye sort of thing, very touching.”

### JACK EVERLY

As principal pops conductor of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Naples Philharmonic, and Canada’s National Arts Centre Orchestra, and a regular guest with orchestras nationwide, Jack Everly works with a procession of big-name headliners. And as leader of the National Symphony Orchestra’s annual *National Memorial Day*

*Concert* and *A Capitol Fourth* broadcasts on PBS, he has worked with artists ranging from the Beach Boys and country singer Trace Adkins to soprano Renée Fleming and pop diva Vanessa Williams. “That’s quite a mélange of backgrounds,” Everly says. The *Memorial Day Concert* and *Capitol Fourth* often feature artists who are appearing with orchestra for their first time. “I must say, they’re very eager to learn,” Everly continues. “There they are, thrust in front of a gigantic audience and TV cameras, and the orchestra is behind them.” He adds with a laugh: “We couldn’t possibly throw anything more at them.” Does he offer the neophytes any tips before the first rehearsal? “No, I tend not to scare them with that,” he says, chuckling again.

He credits the arrangers with building orchestrations around the sounds the performers are accustomed to hearing—guitars or drums, for instance. That way “the artists aren’t left at sea,” Everly says. He and the orchestra listen to the soloist and respond, just as they might to the pianist in a Mozart concerto. “We always



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Conductor Jack Everly with pop singer Vanessa Williams at a rehearsal for the 2017 National Memorial Day Concert with the National Symphony Orchestra.

try to make them feel welcome and at ease,” Everly says. “I know that if this is a new milieu to them, they are going to feel tense and perhaps a little frightened at being—as they might think—a fish out of water. But in reality, we’re there to support them as artists. And they always rise to the occasion. They’re really pretty brilliant about adapting to this sudden



Wynonna Judd in performance with the San Diego Symphony at the orchestra's July 4, 2017 concert at Embarcadero Marina Park South.

difference of sound that is the symphony orchestra.”

Some performers reveal new facets when they step in front of an orchestra. Everly points to Broadway performers such as Kristin Chenoweth: ‘They’ve gotten acquainted with conductors and pit orchestras in the theater, and the move to the concert hall can liberate them. “They are in their element,” Everly says. “And everything they bring to the musical stage is enhanced. Everything is larger, everything is more elegant, because of the musicality and sheer numbers of musicians you have. They usually revel in it. Kristin is just a brilliant talent. To watch her blossom on-stage with a symphony orchestra behind her is a very special thing to see. She’s freed of the stage character. She’s becomes more herself. It’s great to watch.”

**WYNONNA JUDD**

Wynonna Judd has a favorite example of going after a dream. It comes from when the Kentucky-born country singer followed through on her urge to perform with orchestra. “I didn’t really think it would happen,” she says. “but all I did was pick up my phone, call my manager, and say, ‘You know what? I think I want to sing with a symphony.’ A couple of calls are made, and the next thing I know, it’s happening.”

Judd thinks back to her most recent orchestral date, on July 4, 2017 with the San Diego Symphony. “The venue was on the water,” she says. “It was a glorious day, 70

degrees. I showed up for the sound check, and it wasn’t even like work. It was just getting together with people who are *so* gifted. I felt like I was in a classroom with kids smarter than me. I was a student, and I stood there and listened to every note.”

Judd rose to fame in a country duo with her mother. But she credits her grandparents with introducing her to the sounds of the orchestra. “These instruments are so lush and so beautiful,” she says. “They remind me of my mamaw and papaw, of things I grew up on. When I’m up there, for me it’s almost like the sounds of heaven.”

In her concerts with her own band, Judd says, she may prod the audience to sing along or giggle when she forgets words. Togetherness with her fans is the point. When she stands in front of an orchestra, there’s a different dynamic: “I’m an instrument myself. I go into this hypersensitive thing about the notes and my voice—how to bend the note a certain way, or how to make a note matter. It’s a microscopic approach. I have to stand there and really hunker down. I have to be still and focus the notes. Because I’m singing to the best of my ability to fit in with the excellence of the instruments.”

Judd takes extra pride when a conduc-

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Hilary Scott

"I want to *be* an orchestra," says vocalist Brian Stokes Mitchell, shown here at a 2012 concert with the Boston Pops, Conductor Keith Lockhart, and Principal Pops Bassist Larry Wolfe.

tor compliments her orchestral arrangements. One of her favorites goes with her 1993 hit "Is It Over Yet," a bittersweet song about a breakup. "There's a moment when the strings come in, and they get louder, louder, louder," she says. "It's almost like I feel my right hand lifting up in a fist, then opening like a flower. I know that's a cliché, but that's how I feel. The musicians support me. There's a little pause before the second verse, and then the orchestra comes in. It's almost like they're lifting me up off the ground. It's so romantic and so emotional."

**BRIAN STOKES MITCHELL**

Starting piano lessons as a six-year-old set Brian Stokes Mitchell on an artistic path. When he wasn't busy discovering the stage in school and at San Diego Junior Theatre, he also learned to play the trombone,

Headliners appearing with orchestras come from multiple musical worlds, from rock headbangers to Motown favorites to avatars of the American Songbook to the newest forces in the field, rappers.



Eric Williams

Boyz II Men bring their R&B sounds to the Kansas City Symphony, October 2016.



Michael Blanchard

Leslie Odom Jr., seen here with the Boston Pops on July 4, 2017, won a 2016 Tony Award in the rap musical *Hamilton*—but he's a cool, soulful crooner with orchestras.

Bernadette Peters, here with the San Diego Symphony in 2016, injects a dash of Broadway glamour to her appearances with orchestras.



Gales Photography



Stephanie Berger

Musical-theater and cabaret icon Barbara Cook with the New York Philharmonic.



Audra McDonald with conductor John Williams and the Boston Pops, 2013

French horn, and clarinet—“not brilliantly well, but enough to get familiar with them,” he recalls. He went on to study film scoring, orchestration, and arranging, and as his acting career took hold, Mitchell

also composed soundtracks for TV shows. “I think what I mostly want is—I want to *be* an orchestra,” Mitchell says. “I love the colors.” The Tony-winning leading man has blended his husky baritone with those

colors in orchestral dates reaching back more than a decade. This season, he performs with the Kansas City Symphony.

“What I love about performing with orchestras most is this grand collaboration that’s going on onstage,” Mitchell says. “There’s a great power that comes from being onstage with 90 or 100 other musicians, and with a conductor who’s playing the orchestra—the conductor’s instrument. All of that joins together, and all of that sound comes out and hits the audience. I can watch the delight on their faces and see how the music is impacting them.”

Mitchell’s pops appearances include a few orchestral arrangements of his own. The demands of Broadway, television, and other projects leave him scant time for creating more, though. So he often turns to Ted Firth, his pianist and “a brilliant orchestrator.” Mitchell’s vision is usually the guide. “When I’m thinking about orchestrations, they come almost as visual ideas to me, like a movie in my head,” Mitchell says. “I see a scene unfolding—the beginning, the middle, and the end. I have a color

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in mind, a feeling, an emotion. I'll say, 'This should be stark. This should be like a Bergman film. We're in overcast Sweden here.' Ted knows exactly what I'm talking about."

In most of his concerts, Mitchell says, he uses a bit of his chitchat between numbers to clue in the audience about the feats of musicianship and efficiency that are on display. "A lot of people don't know what goes into pops concerts, because they're generally so polished," Mitchell says. "It's really incredible, and I think it's a testament to the artistry of the musicians and the conductors in pops orchestras around the country. I always have a comfortable vocal bed to lie in. It's quite amazing."

### AUDRA MCDONALD

When it comes to performing, what hasn't Audra McDonald done? She shuttles among television, movies, recordings, and Broadway, where she has won a record-breaking six Tony Awards. And yes, she collaborates with orchestras. "The energy of an orchestral concert is incredibly unique," she says. "In a theatrical perfor-

mance, you play one of several characters in the show, which tells a singular story over the course of the evening. In an orchestral concert, there are several different pieces and characters, and you are making music with almost 100 other people. I bring the same energy and vocalism to orchestral concerts, but there's a specific kind of attentiveness required for all of us to make music together."

Studying opera at the Juilliard School helped lay the groundwork. Even though McDonald realized as a student that musical theater would be her touchstone—she took time out from Juilliard for a national tour of *The Secret Garden*—she finished her opera degree nonetheless. She portrayed an aspiring opera singer in one of her earliest music-theater successes, Terrence McNally's *Master Class*. Houston Grand Opera and Los Angeles Opera have enticed her back to the opera world, and McDonald returns regularly to the concert hall: the coming season will take her to orchestras from Boston to Kansas City to Utah to San Francisco, sharing the

stage with a battalion of collaborators each night.

"It can be intimidating to make music with that many strangers—especially when the rehearsal and performance are on the same day!" McDonald says. "Since each orchestra has its own sound, you have to be flexible and react to their colors and gestures in order to create something special." Every program lets McDonald and the orchestra tell a series of stories. "Each piece is a completely different character who finds themselves in a very specific moment in time. With practice, changing gears or 'quick changing' becomes pretty routine. Although repertoire selection is not a science, we want there to be a varied yet balanced range of narrative, emotion, and styles. But ultimately, we want to perform pieces that will speak to people." **S**

STEVEN BROWN, a Houston-based writer specializing in classical music and the arts, is the former classical music critic of the *Orlando Sentinel*, *Charlotte Observer*, and *Houston Chronicle*.

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