



Jon Batiste at Boston Pops
Photo by Hilary Scott, courtesy of the Boston Symphony Orchestra

Boston Pops Presents Jon Batiste

Jon Batiste, an eight-time Grammy winner who led his band Stay Human as musical director of The Late Show with Stephen Colbert on CBS from 2015 until 2022, was the guest artist for the Boston Pops, joined the Boston Symphony Orchestra and its conductor, Keith Lockhart from May 12 to 14 for three sold-out shows at Symphony Hall. On Thursday night, Batiste arrived on stage attired in a sequin-studded black tux and accompanied by his ensemble, saxophonist Marcus G. Miller, bassist Reginald Veal, drummer Herlin Riley, and vocalist Desz, (Desiree Washington), who gained fame on Season 19 of NBC's The Voice.

A classically trained pianist raised on the African-American music of his New Orleans upbringing, Batiste brought to the Pops both his virtuoso musicianship and his infectious capacity to draw audiences into a high spirited, exalting musical community rooted in the abiding power of jazz, blues and R&B.

A singer, songwriter, composer, and pianist born into a musical dynasty in Louisiana, Batiste lives in the town where he was raised, Kenner, La., bordering New Orleans. At age eight a drummer with the family band, he moved to New York nine years later to attend the Juilliard School.

All this was demonstrated in his opening piece, “5th Symphony in Congo Square,” its title a tribute to the square in New Orleans where enslaved Africans were allowed to gather on the Sabbath and sing, dance—creating African-American music that grew into jazz, tap, gospel and blues. At the grand piano, Batiste took the Beethoven classic apart, alternating delicate filigrees of notes with a gradual ascent to rapid fury accompanied by bassist Veal and rising to a surging refrain by the orchestra.

Batiste first recorded the piece on his 2024 solo piano album “Beethoven Blues” which topped Billboard’s Classical Albums chart for nine weeks. On the album, Batiste combines his own compositions with inventive renderings of works by Beethoven that explore their polyrhythmic innovations, which Batiste regards as influenced by Africa.

Highlights of the evening included his orchestration of a classic by another New Orleans artist, Louis Armstrong, “What A Wonderful World.” His cinematic treatment of the 1967 ballad drew on-stage performers and the audience into a soaring, exultant benediction that encompassed Batiste’s solo piano segments and falsetto vocals, wails from Desz, and symphonic passages that expressed the ballad’s hymn to joy.

Another masterful blend of collective and individual voices was Batiste’s treatment of his composition “Freedom.” Rising from the piano to his feet he picked up the melody with one of his favorite handheld instruments, a melodica, a wind-powered cross between a harmonica and a keyboard. Striding across the stage and then down into the audience, who were all on their feet, he turned the instrument so that its keyboard was visible to people unfamiliar with it while Desz poured out her powerful vocals and a percussionist standing in the last row on stage shook castanets. Somehow such singular contributions were not lost in the all-out wave of sound.

After this panoramic performance, the tenderness of Batiste’s soulful, spare piano version of Paul McCartney’s “Blackbird” was all the more palpable.

After a 20-minute intermission, Batiste again drew the entire hall—musicians and audience members—into a performance of his composition “Cry,” its rhythmic lyrics and instrumentation showcasing Desz as she complimented Batiste’s falsetto scat with its repetitive chorus of “cry, cry, cry.” As the percussion took on a life of its own, even Lockwood joined in the chant.

Following this cascade of sound and movement—Batiste was dancing in place—was a welcome piano solo of Beethoven’s Für Elise. His keyboard soliloquy was articulate in its silences as well

as in its gradual ecstatic ascent, joined by a torrent of symphonic accompaniment that concluded with a solo piano line by Batiste from Leonard Cohen's "Alleluia." Perhaps this was a tribute by Batiste, an avowedly faithful follower of his Catholic and Baptist upbringing, to Ascension Thursday, the celebration of Jesus Christ's ascent to heaven.

Without pausing, Batiste moved into a grand, horn-rich finale of Curtis Mayfield's 1963 R&B hit "It's All Right," again sweeping all to their feet in soaring unison.

--Susan Saccoccia