

LivingArts

By **W. Anthony Sheppard**
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

LENOX — Once again, Tanglewood has displayed an unrivaled talent for producing musical tributes. Friday night's Boston Pops concert was devoted to "Remembering Stephen Sondheim," an honorary Berkshire native son given his 1950 graduation from Williams College. This concert was conceived by maestro Keith Lockhart and Broadway actor Jason Daniele. Lockhart conveyed his devotion to Sondheim in the program, referring to the late Broadway legend as "the only true genius I ever met."

Multiple elaborate revues of Sondheim's music have been produced over the decades. However, for this concert Lockhart and Daniele simply selected numbers from the core of the Sondheim canon, spanning 1970 to 1987. Lockhart offered brief plot summaries, referring to "A Little Night Music" as a musical of "whipped cream and knives" and to Mrs. Lovett's pie shop "supply chain problem" in "Sweeney Todd."

Things got off to an awkward start with an abbreviated overture and seated rendition of "You Could Drive a Person Crazy" from "Company," which lacked its requisite twisted Andrews Sisters vibe. Nikki Renée Daniels brought the evening to life with "Another Hundred People," selling the song as she moved across the stage. Her later flawless delivery as Dot in "Sunday in the Park with George" nearly stole the show. Entering with arms crossed and head lowered and a breathy vocal timbre, Conrad Ricamora successfully projected vulnerability in "Being Alive," particularly when the orchestra dropped out leaving only a delicate harp and flute to accompany "somebody hold me too close" at the song's midpoint. Though the full orchestra got us there, Ricamora was never quite strong or desperate enough to achieve the emotional climax. However, Ricamora's later exuberant performance as Jack, of beanstalk fame in "Into the Woods," elicited smiles even from the orchestra.

The "Follies" songs showcased Daniels and Alton Fitzgerald White as Sally and Ben — the next Broadway revival might well embrace this inspired casting. The set kicked off with "You're Gonna Love Tomorrow," Sondheim's homage to Jerome Kern. The large Pops orchestra seemed somewhat superfluous in these numbers and the selections smoothed over the musical's edgy elements of psychological terror and bitterness.

"Night Waltz" offered a welcomed instrumental breather, continuing the trend of starting each set with a pastiche number. Here, the full orchestration revealed Sondheim's fondness for Ravel. Daniele and Emily Skinner, both currently appearing in the Barrington Stage Company production of "A Little Night Music," delivered a polished "You Must Meet My Wife," with Skinner serving as a sharp foil. I was less enamored with Skinner's rendition of "Send in the Clowns," as she turned up the vibrato and adopted a somewhat too-slow tempo, presumably to express her character's maturity. However, the audience responded warmly to this most beloved of Sondheim songs. Two other members of the Barrington cast, Sophie Mings and Noah Wolfe, joined the four principals to close the first half with the joyride of "A Weekend in the Country."



PHOTOS BY HILARY SCOTT

At Tanglewood, evocative tributes to two titans: Sondheim and Williams



John Williams (top) took a bow at his 90th birthday celebration at Tanglewood. Keith Lockhart (above) led the "Remembering Stephen Sondheim" salute.

During intermission I heard a French hornist enjoying the majestic lick from "Sunday in the Park with George" — in general, the second half offered the orchestra more opportunities to shine. Dramatic red lighting and the shrill, dissonant opening chord certainly grabbed our attention after intermission, but the fragmentary excerpts from the opening sections of "Sweeney Todd" proved a stuttered start. Skinner nailed "A Little Priest," and the decision to have her and White sit on stools aptly suggested that Mrs. Lovett and Sweeney relish their rhyming game.

"Children Will Listen" (from "Into the Woods") didn't quite work as an 11 o'clock number in this revue, but "Old Friends," from Sondheim's unjustly neglected "Merrily We Roll Along," ended the evening on a warm, congenial note, with Lockhart joining in the singing.

Over the years, Tanglewood has presented multiple salutes to John Williams, the Pops' conductor from 1980-1993. This weekend's 90th birthday concert was an apotheosis. By 4:30 p.m. the line of cars on West Street backed up to the center of Lenox as 18,000 people made their way to the grounds for the 8 p.m. concert which, understandably, started more

than 20 minutes late. But no matter, the crowd was in a celebratory mood, giving a standing ovation to the birthday boy as he took his seat and heartily singing "Happy Birthday" with full orchestral accompaniment near the concert's end.

The event was punctuated by video recorded greetings from Andris Nelsons, Gustavo Dudamel, Anne-Sophie Mutter, and Steven Spielberg, who noted his 50-year collaborative career with Williams and then introduced surprise guest Itzhak Perlman, otherwise in town for Sunday's BSO performance of Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1. Perlman reprised the haunting, achingly beautiful theme from "Schindler's List."

The concert reminded us that celebration has long been this composer's musical forte. Williams has succeeded Aaron Copland as the go-to composer for American ceremonial music. This concert featured his tributes to other Tanglewood luminaries and to the institution itself. "To Lenny! To Lenny! (For New York)," composed for Leonard Bernstein's 70th birthday concert at Tanglewood in 1988, riffed on Bernstein's "New York, New York" and "America" themes. "JUST DOWN WEST STREET . . . on the left," which Williams wrote to commemorate the Tanglewood Music Center's 75th year in 2015, kicks off with a fanfare and Coplandesque passages — Copland served as first head of the TMC faculty. In much of his concert music, Wil-

liams has walked through stylistic doors Copland and Bernstein opened decades ago.

"Tributes (for Seiji!)," Williams's 1999 homage to the BSO's longest-serving music director, Seiji Ozawa, attested to the composer's chameleon-like ability to inhabit markedly different personalities. In this piece, Williams offers a nod to Ozawa's Japanese heritage with the brass section's big bell simulations, but more intriguingly channels the type of large-scale, densely textured, coloristic orchestral works that Ozawa specialized in. I heard echoes of Olivier Messiaen's "Turangalila-Symphonie," a work commissioned by Koussevitzky for the BSO, premiered by Bernstein with the orchestra in 1948, and championed by Ozawa. Tanglewood's ghosts sounded out throughout the concert.

Williams composed "Highwood's Ghost" to commemorate Bernstein's centenary in 2018 and to feature BSO principal harpist Jessica Zhou and Yo-Yo Ma. A rather expressionistic and spooky exposed opening for the viola section, followed by a gesture reminiscent of Béla Bartók's "Bluebeard's Castle," sets the tone for a piece featuring extended sections for harp and cello alone. This opening resembled Williams's Duo Concertante for violin and viola, performed on the Friday Prelude Concert by BSO musicians Victor Romanul and Michael Zaretsky, which opens with meandering lines echoing c. 1900 Vi-

enna and draws on rhythmic gestures from the world of Bartók's quartets in its third movement. Ma clearly relished every musical nuance of "Highwood's Ghost," both while playing and during the orchestral sections.

The piece that most clearly demonstrated Williams's full stylistic range was "Escapades," a three-movement orchestral score drawing on music from the 2002 Spielberg film "Catch Me If You Can" and featuring solo alto saxophone with vibraphone and double bass, performed here by Branford Marsalis, the BSO percussionist J. William Hudgins, and the jazz double bassist Eric Revis. The orchestral musicians' snapping fingers near the start could not help but recall Bernstein's "West Side Story" and the asymmetrical dance rhythm played by the full orchestra in the third movement was fully in Bernstein's idiom. Marsalis delivered a consistently beautiful tone, and the audience responded with its loudest applause yet.

James Taylor then took the stage to perform the Rodgers and Hammerstein chestnut "Getting to Know You." What might have gone down as an odd concert experience was energized by Taylor's prefatory joke inviting us to imagine FBI agents singing this song during their recent search at Mar-a-Lago. Taylor was then joined by that other Tanglewood titan, Yo-Yo Ma, to perform "Sweet Baby James," which he quipped the by-laws of Stockbridge and Lenox stipulated he perform any time he's around Tanglewood. The audience fully appreciated Taylor's tweak to the lyrics: "Now the top of John Williams is covered with snow, so was the turnpike from Stockbridge to Boston."

And then the moment arrived. The brass delivered the iconic "da-da-da Dum Dum," children on the lawn awoke, and this critic and others in the audience of a certain age once again felt that involuntary visceral response to Williams's liftoff to "Star Wars." I noted with new hope for American orchestras that many members of the BSO were likely not yet born when the movie entered American popular culture at warp speed in 1977. Born that very year, guest conductor Ken-David Masur milked every ounce of romantic grandeur from the sweeping string lines and signaled each assertive articulation from the brass. The brass particularly shined in the subsequent performance of Williams's "Superman" march, which accompanied a slide show of images and video clips from throughout Williams's career, repeating a 2021 Pops Tanglewood tribute.

What could top that? Williams mounted the podium to lead a vigorous rendition of the "Indiana Jones" march, with Ma, Perlman, Taylor, Marsalis, and Masur beaming affectionately from the side of the stage.

Though the Berkshires certainly "seemed dreamlike" and it was a marvelously musical "weekend in the country" all around, I felt bittersweet late Saturday night as I braved the parking lot exodus. Memories of previous Tanglewood tributes — to Copland, to Bernstein, and to Williams himself — filled my mind with elegiac echoes.

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Burr brings his A game to Fenway

By **James Sullivan**
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"I know you're not supposed to say this," said Bill Burr midway through his historic stand-up comedy set at Fenway Park on Sunday.

What he was saying in the moment doesn't particularly matter here. Rest assured that he was offending someone.

That's what Burr — the cantankerous 54-year-old comedian, actor, podcaster, and now filmmaker who hails from the mean streets of Canton — does best. In fact, that's pretty much all he does, and riotously so, at a time when outrage has become our most popular amateur sport.

Billed as his "Slight Return" (a nod to Jimi Hendrix; Burr, a devoted drummer, loves hard rock music), the show made the local guy the first comedian ever to headline Fenway. The ballpark has hosted major rock and pop acts for two decades.

Taking into account several sections of empty seats that would have resulted in obstructed views (as well as the empty bleacher seating, behind the center-field stage), the show was essentially a sell-out. If you're curious, it was not close to a record: According to Guinness World Records, German comedian

COMEDY REVIEW

BILL BURR
At Fenway Park, Sunday

Mario Barth drew 67,000 in a Berlin stadium in 2008.

An incomplete inventory of the people Burr needed (or skewered, take your pick of sharp objects) included feminists, men without money, plastic surgery patients, short guys with big watches, Madonna, his own wife, folks with tattoos of life-affirming platitudes, both the current president and the last one ("Neither side will admit how stupid their guy is!"), self-proclaimed patriots who dress "like every day is the Fourth of July," and those who still believe in "a god that cares."

Burr, who lives in LA, might be the present day's preeminent exporter of the acute Boston accent and the locals' propensity for reveling in our own absurd posturing. With his voice booming off the facade behind home plate like a profane, high-pitched Sherm Feller, he noted how he and his fellow Bostonians have a unique habit of using a certain gerund beginning with the letter F as

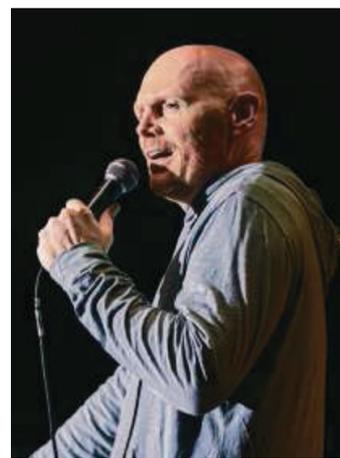
an opportunity "to pause and collect your thoughts." ("So true!" yelped a laughing young woman near me.)

Burr has plenty of material about the war between the sexes, and his go-to voice for anything that seems excessively sensitive is old-school prissy.

Grousing that "you can't get away with [anything] anymore" in the age of social media — ticket holders were required to put their cellphones into locking pouches to prevent any unauthorized videos — he went on an extended romp through his own wayward years as a young incorrigible. Every few weeks, he joked, he and his buddies would light one of their rattletrap cars on fire, then call the cops and report it stolen.

With spotlights enhancing the Green Monster behind him, Burr prowled a large stage, backed by an array of rigging towers lit red and blue. Squeezing the microphone in his right hand, he dangled his left wrist over the mic stand, like a guy leaning on a buddy's shoulder to shout a joke in his ear inside a crowded bar.

"It's [bleepin'] insane that I'm here," he said upon taking the stage about where Kike Hernandez would position himself for a dead pull hitter.



KOURY ANGELO

Bill Burr, shown in his 2022 Netflix special, "Live at Red Rocks."

Burr himself is not off-limits as a target of Burr the comedian. He recalled one of his many boozy visits to Fenway Park, when he passed out for a few innings, then woke up with mustard all over his shirt.

After an hour or so of Gatling-gun delivery, he unspooled a shaggy-dog story, a sequel to the magic mushroom episode he recounts in his latest special, "Live at Red Rocks." This one involved a Utah vacation, a phantom cowboy, and the death of Bob Saget.

He took time to credit the local comedy institutions that helped him get his start, from Nick's Comedy Stop and the late Dick Doherty to the Wilbur's Bill Blumenreich. He also thanked his opening act, the local comedy veteran Tony V, for teaching him the ropes.

In his short opener, Tony V made hay out of the city's transportation woes. After wondering whether anyone took the Green Line, a pedicab, or "a donkey" to get to the ballpark, he suggested his hometown needs a new slogan: "Boston — We're Not Quite Finished."

Even in a huge arena, Burr is a master of detail. His description of trying to watch a football game during his latest psychedelic trip was outrageous. And when he needed to reference a department store, he called up Lechmere and Caldor, two bygone chains familiar to Mass. souls of a certain age.

As he described a woman on his recent cross-country flight, he insisted with an impish grin that he was not "body shaming."

"I'm trying to paint a picture here," he squawked. "I'm an artist!"

He was joking, of course. He'd be loath to admit it, but in fact that's exactly what he is.

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