

# The First Lady of Song

BY DINA HERNANDEZ

Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra's Pop Series celebrates Ella Fitzgerald's 100th birthday with a tribute concert performing some of the jazz great's most memorable songs.

"There was never an Ella before her, and there hasn't been an Ella after her," singer Capathia Jenkins says about the First Lady of Song.

Ella Fitzgerald (1917-1996) was a self-taught singer with perfect pitch, renowned versatility and a three-octave range. Her career opened at a 1934 Apollo Theater amateur-night contest and closed with a 1991 performance at Carnegie Hall. In between, she sold more than 40 million albums and won 13 Grammys. Fitzgerald's iconic status renders both noteworthy and daunting the task of Jenkins, fellow vocalists Harolyn Blackwell and Aisha de Haas, and the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra (OPO): paying homage in song to Fitzgerald on April 21 at the Bob Carr Theater.

"Ella could sing jazz and scat, and then she could turn around and do a Gershwin standard like 'S Wonderful,' and she could do it with the best of them," says Larry Blank, who serves as guest conductor for "A Tribute to Ella!" a concert honoring the centennial of Fitzgerald's birth. "She was equally comfortable singing the Great American Songbook [standards] and singing jazz in Harlem." He quips, "We needed three singers to do what one could do."

Those three singers embrace sharing billing in "Ella!" each one recognizing that she brings her specialty to the stage. Blackwell is a coloratura soprano who has sung with opera companies and orchestras worldwide, including New York City's Metropolitan Opera, where she has performed in *Die Fledermaus*, *La Fille du Regiment*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Manon*, *Un Ballo in Maschera* and *Werther*.

She says, "This is a fantastic idea: three different singers, each singer really coming from their vantage point of being in their particular milieu — jazz, Broadway, classical — but we've all done a little bit of everything."

Blackwell's numbers include "Summertime" from *Porgy and Bess*, George and Ira Gershwin's "Someone to Watch Over Me," and "Over the Rainbow." The latter features a new arrangement by Blank; Blackwell declares it "gorgeous."

De Haas, whose résumé includes performing on Broadway, acting in movies and television, and singing in Chicago jazz clubs, contributes the jazz component to the program.



Capathia Jenkins



Harolyn Blackwell



Aisha de Haas

COURTESY OPO (3)



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Ella Fitzgerald

"I'm the only one who scats, so technically speaking, that's what I bring to the show," she says, showcasing songs including "Blue Skies," "The Lady Is a Tramp" and "How High the Moon." Her favorite number can change from one performance to the next, but she says she typically most enjoys singing "Mr. Paganini."

"Ella's one of my favorite singers of all time," says de Haas, who played Medda Larkin in the 2017 movie of the Broadway musical *Newsies*. "I grew up in a jazz household and grew up listening to her. Performing her music with a symphony is outstanding."

Jenkins is also a *Newsies* alumna, having played Medda in the original Broadway cast in 2012. Among the songs she sings in "Ella!" are "A-Tisket, a-Tasket" — Fitzgerald's first hit recording in 1938 — "The Man I Love" and "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered."

"When she performed, she sang with such aban-

don and pure joy," Jenkins says. "That is what I think I bring to the table. For me, it is pure joy to be on stage. I think I'm happiest when I'm on stage singing and sharing my God-given gifts."

Jenkins' additional Broadway credits include *Caroline, or Change*; *The Civil War*; *The Look of Love*; and *Martin Short: Fame Becomes Me*.

Regarding "Ella!," OPO Music Director Eric Jacobsen says, "I can't wait for them to come to Orlando. ... Ella is one of the greatest artistic forces of the 20th century, and celebrating her is not something we'll only do when she would have turned 100."

"A Tribute to Ella!" is part of OPO's Pop Series, with a matinee at 2 p.m. and an evening performance at 8 p.m. To purchase tickets, visit [orlandophil.org](http://orlandophil.org). **OAM**

*Writer Dina Hernandez is an amazing singer when alone in her car.*