

Pirates' walk-up music: the classical version

By Elizabeth Bloom / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Walk-up music — the quick burst of a tune that accompanies a baseball player as he strolls to the plate for an at-bat — has become a classic part of America's national pastime.

The entrance song represents myriad genres, including rock, rap, pop, Latin and oldies. But classical music is left in the dust of the on-deck circle.

It's time for that to change.

The tradition that has given us the Western world's most enduring pieces of music deserves a spot in the lineup. More than any other art form, music captures the striving quality of the human condition, and who wouldn't want that shot of adrenaline while heading to the plate? No sport is more classic than baseball, so classical music is an obvious choice for walk-up greatness.

Few players seem to have taken up this opportunity, although Prince Fielder previously availed himself of Mozart's "Requiem."

As the Post-Gazette's classical music critic and an avid sports fan outside the concert hall, I decided to reimagine the Pittsburgh Pirates' walk-up songs. Using a music list posted on the Pirates' website as of Aug. 5 and an unscientific formula explained below, I came up with classical replacements for players' walk-up and entrance songs. Then I interviewed five players about their walk-up music — and the classical proxies — to see what they thought.

Check out what your favorite players look like when accompanied by the likes of Bach instead of Beck in an interactive presentation featuring samples of walk-up music, recorded interviews with players and more at www.post-gazette.com.

FRANCISCO CERVELLI, #29

Dean Martin's "That's Amore" vs. "La donna e mobile" from Giuseppe Verdi's "Rigoletto"

Of all the songs that accompany Pittsburgh Pirates as they walk up to bat, Francisco Cervelli's selection is the most surprising.

Surprising, "especially with a guy so electric like me," Mr. Cervelli said, tongue-in-cheek, in the dugout before a home game against the Chicago Cubs.

"That's Amore," Dean Martin's 1952 classic, cradles the stadium rather than rocks it. Judging from his musical choices, Mr. Cervelli appreciates the human voice, sans auto-tune. "In New York, when I had a chance, I went to Broadway shows," he said, listing Andrea Bocelli, Tony Bennett, Latin music and Mr. Martin among his favorites.

"It's kind of an old-school, romantic thing, and the way Dean Martin sounds is typically like a New York style, like Frank Sinatra," he said. "It's kind of voices from the past. And I think those kinds of music, they never end, you know? It's not for six months and people forget about it. It's going to be forever."

"That's Amore" begs for a selection drawn from the Italian operatic tradition, and the aria "La donna e mobile" from Verdi's "Rigoletto" fits the bill.

When I played the aria for Mr. Cervelli, he knowingly asked, "Pavarotti?" and started to hum along.

But would he swap it out for “That’s Amore”? Don’t count on it: The song has become a trademark for the Pirates catcher, and in June, mlb.com listed it among the best tunes MLB players have used in the current season. “I think that the people really like ‘That’s Amore,’ so I’m not going to change it,” Mr. Cervelli said. “It’s a perfect song for the city.”

ANDREW McCUTCHEN, #22

Taylor Swift’s “Bad Blood” vs. St. Hildegard of Bingen’s “O rubor sanguinis”

“Bad Blood” is not, in fact, Mr. McCutchen’s current walk-up song, but it’s hard to keep track of what is. “I’m the type of person that gets tired of the same song pretty fast, so I want to say every series I change my walk-up music, and it’s more than one song. It’s normally three per game,” he said in the clubhouse. “I take a lot of pride in coming out to a song and actually enjoying the song when I come out to it, so if I’m not too satisfied with it, I just change it.”

Earlier this month, he was using three songs from the trap music genre, which is “a little like dubstep,” he explained. “It’s basically just instrumental. I like anything that pumps me up a little bit, so if it has a lot of bass in it, a lot of hi-hats and all that, I like it.”

We’ll stick with “Bad Blood,” which the star center fielder used “for probably two or three series.” On a recent Pirates’ music list, Mr. McCutchen was the only player whose walk-up song featured a solo female artist. In that spirit, I chose St. Hildegard of Bingen’s “O rubor sanguinis,” which conveniently translates as “O redness of blood.” St. Hildegard, a composer and abbess who lived in the 12th century, wrote this Latin chant to commemorate a group of female martyrs killed by the Huns.

“It’s really dark,” Mr. McCutchen said, laughing, upon listening to the chant. “It definitely sounds like, I’d be watching ‘300’ right now, and it’s right as they’re about to go into battle or something.”

He pulled out his iPad to play “Protectors of the Earth,” a previous walk-up song that had a symphonic personality. “The name of the group is Two Steps from Hell, so all their songs are pretty much like that type of battle music,” he said.

NEIL WALKER, #18

The White Stripes’ “Astro” vs. “Mars, the Bringer of War” from Gustav Holst’s “The Planets”

Jack White is the man behind both of Neil Walker’s walk-up songs.

“I think his music is really interesting, but more than that, I just like the way it sounds. I used two of his songs this year, and I’ve used some of his songs in the past,” the second baseman said.

No classical work immediately came to mind when I listened to “Astro,” but one name certainly did: Gustav Holst’s “The Planets,” a fixture in orchestra halls. “Mars, the Bringer of War,” the work’s pounding first movement, would inspire any player walking up to the plate. As Mr. Walker listened to the piece, he nodded his head in apparent agreement.

“I could come out to that,” he said.

“Yeah?” I responded.

“Oh yeah,” he said, laughing. “This is just what you’re going for. You gotta have a strong beat.”

“If I need to change up my music, I’ll have to consider that,” he said.

Success!

SEAN RODRIGUEZ, #3

Derek Minor’s “Last Forever” (feat. B Cooper and Leah Smith) vs. Ravel’s “Bolero”

Sean Rodriguez started listening to classical music when his wife was pregnant. “If you kinda play that on her belly, it’s supposed to help the brain and what not, but I just got into listening to it trying to go to sleep,” he said.

Now, he listens to “mostly just a lot of old-school stuff,” he said. “I basically just look up Mozart and just kinda play that.”

The utility player opts for songs by Derek Minor and Juan Luis Guerra when he walks up to the plate. “I guess they both play to who I am. I’m Cuban-American, so kinda a little bit of both,” he said.

The name “Last Forever” reminded me of a feeling that sets in while listening to Ravel’s “Bolero,” an orchestral standby characterized by its repeating snare drum line and somewhat maddening melody that crescendos throughout the whole work.

When I explained my logic to Mr. Rodriguez, he said, “That’s good to know. That’s the song you get from my song? You don’t want to listen to it anymore?” It was nothing personal, I assured him. The piece, originally written as a ballet, also mirrors the toe-tapping feel of Mr. Minor’s song. The snare drum stuck out to Mr. Rodriguez, reminding him of a military-style drumming.

“It definitely sounds like something I’ve heard in a movie,” he said.

“I mean, just classical music, man, I know it’s definitely something that more people should definitely get into.”

MARK MELANCON, #35

AC/DC’s “Thunderstruck” vs. Steve Reich’s “Piano Phase,” performed by harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani

Mark Melancon is last but not least, and as a closer, he's used to that.

The soft-spoken flamethrower takes to the pitcher's mound alongside AC/DC's "Thunderstruck," which has inspired countless athletes across the world since 1990.* (*Unconfirmed, but very likely.)

"I think it's a good song. I've always liked it," Mr. Melancon said. "I feel like it would strike a chord with the audience."

Is he a classical music fan? "Years ago, I would've laughed at you and said, 'Heck no,' but I think there's a time and place it, for sure."

AC/DC's electric guitars resemble a much older instrument: the harpsichord, a plucky, metallic-sounding keyboard that preceded the modern piano and is associated with the Renaissance and Baroque eras.

The fast licks of "Thunderstruck" reminded me of an unusual recording of Steve Reich's "Piano Phase" by the harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani, whose diabolical evenness embodies the electric character of the guitars.

"It's awesome," Mr. Melancon said, listening intently to the piece. "I feel like it'd be really cool if then it went into 'Thunderstruck.' I see the similarities. It's really neat."

Mr. Melancon was keen to observe that Mr. Reich's music, known as minimalism, doesn't have frequent harmonic shifts: "It's gonna change, I assume?" Yes, but those shifts happen slowly, as is typical of minimalism, a style associated with American composers, including Mr. Reich. "I kind of was curious to see if it would," he said. "Because it seems like a good song."

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