

Entertainment

## Breaking boxes and playing slide whistle for the California Pops

Percussionist David Dieni talks about what makes this group special; they play on Sunday



Percussionist David Dieni, left, and conductor Kim Venaas (also a percussionist) slap a high five during a California Pops concert. (Sam Huie / California Pops)

By **JOHN ORR** | [jorr@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:jorr@bayareanewsgroup.com) | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: May 17, 2017 at 10:44 pm | UPDATED: May 18, 2017 at 1:46 am

Percussionist David Dieni is a professional musician who has played with all kinds of symphonies and orchestras in Northern California, but some of the most fun, and intense, work he's done is with the Palo Alto-based California Pops.

"It's very different from what most people think," Dieni said in an interview. "Lots of people remember the Boston Pops. ... California Pops is a little different. Our model is like a movie pit orchestra, or a radio/TV orchestra. We prepare music for that week, then it's gone.

"For me, as a percussionist, I do things for the Pops I often wouldn't do in a traditional, European-music-based symphony. Xylophone and bells, going back and forth between them — a lot more jazz, a different feel than classical.

"I could be doing anything — soft shoe on a wood block for old vaudeville dance routines, often seen in musicals from the '20s through the '40s. Use a wood block to recreate the tap-dance sound, which comes up so often in our charts. Or playing a slide whistle. Or dumping junk on the ground, or breaking cardboard boxes.

"It's fun."

And intense, because while other groups, such as Napa Symphony or Sacramento Philharmonic — both of which Dieni has served — might have four or five rehearsals before a performance, Cal Pops usually just has one.

And such music, in concerts Cal Pops Music Director Kim Venaas programs from audience requests, and also from fascinating old charts he has saved from forgotten warehouses.

"Kim is actually preserving all kinds of music," Dieni said. "There's just tons of stuff in warehouses that is just going to get dumped. We save some of it."

That's how, for instance, Cal Pops ended up playing the original music from "Singing in the Rain," with the music cues from the movie studio.

"The original conductor's notes from when Gene Kelly got to this lamp or the other," said Dieni.

“When we play something from back in that period, it feels like it really is the 1940s.”

While some of the Cal Pops musicians have other-than-music day jobs, Dieni is a fulltime musician and music teacher who instructs at a drum school in San Francisco and out of his home.

“I used to play in a rock band,” he said. “It was fun, but we made, like, \$5.”

He grew up in Massachusetts, the son of a drummer, and got to see the Boston Pops on more than one occasion.

“My first drum teacher was in the Boston Pops,” said Dieni, “so even from a young age I had that sensibility.

“Sometimes you get a gift, and don’t realize it till later,” he said of that first drum teacher, Warren Myers, who also “conducted my youth symphony, just like the Boston Pops was under Arthur Fiedler.”

---

## Music

**Who:** California Pops Orchestra, guest artist pianist Frederick Hodges

**What:** Best of the Pops”

**When:** 3 p.m. Sunday, May 21, 2017

**Where:** Flint Center, 21250 Stevens Creek Blvd., Cupertino

**Tickets:** \$20-\$55, [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com) or 650-856-8432

---

---

Tags: [Music](#)



**John Orr** John Orr edits and writes for Daily News feature pages, including arts and entertainment. He also reports on the Town of Atherton and some other communities.

**SUBSCRIBE TODAY!**

ALL ACCESS DIGITAL OFFER FOR JUST 99 CENTS!