

Thursday, August 26, 1982 O&E

2 worlds of music fill Louis Clark's life

By Kathy Parriah
staff writer

PLAYING KEYBOARDS with the Electric Light Orchestra is a much different gig than conducting the Royal Philharmonic.

But for arranger-composer Louis Clark, moving between two music worlds is as easy as slipping out of his white ELO European Tour T-shirt and into a rented black tux.

"Too much is made of the difference between musicians," said the longhaired Englishman, whose disco treatment of the classics packed Meadow Brook Music Festival last weekend.

"There's as much difference between Bach and Stravinsky as there is between Stravinsky and a rock band."

WITH SALES of his best-selling "Hooked on Classics" at between 6 and 7 million worldwide, the rock musician is booked solid this year to conduct great orchestras performing his arrangements.

Starting July 4 on the beach at Atlantic City with members of the American Symphony Orchestra, he's been jetting back and forth from England to appear with musicians from the Oakland Symphony, Winnipeg Symphony and Detroit Symphony — which he calls "one of the best." The tour winds up with halftime at the Orange Bowl on New Year's Day.

Between rehearsals here, he holed up in his Northfield Hillton room writing music for the rock group Queen. Today he was due back in England to record classical arrangements of rock songs with the London Philharmonic.

"Everybody expects me to turn up in a suit and be about 70," said the 35-year-old Clark, whose own music listening runs from Sibelius to rock.

"Most people expect symphony musicians to be stuffy and they're really aren't. They're just like us."

WHILE MOST of the musicians he conducts have had years of formal training, much of Clark's has been "on the road."

Raised by his aunt in a small English town, he used to "mess about with the piano," teaching himself to play by ear. At 12, he started taking piano lessons and studying classical music.

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'Hooked on Classics' arranger

When he was in high school, the Beatles were the rage. So all his friends formed music groups — whether they could play instruments or not.

"Someone said 'You be the bass guitarist,'" recalled Clark, who even in the 1960s was intrigued by the possibility of bringing a classical style to rock music.

He enjoyed playing so much that he took jobs as an accountant and computer programmer so that he could move from the country to Birmingham, England, and join a group.

At 24, he got "got sick of it and decided to fill in all the gaps" by returning to school. Broke and out of work, he won a free three-year education at Leeds College of Music, where he earned a degree in arranging.

HOOKING UP with his friend Jeff Lynne of Electric Light Orchestra, Clark arranged the rock group's album, "Eldorado," and worked on all their records after 1974 with the exception of the most recent, "Time."

The composer-arranger's reputation grew rapidly as he worked with singers Elton John, Abba, Queen and even the flamboyant Ozzy Osbourne, who he says "is crazy" — he's from Birmingham as well.

But when ELO decided to try a new sound with "Time," Clark was out of a job.

Fortunately, K-Tel record producer Don Freedman wanted to cash in on British "medleymania" with a single of disco classics. Working with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Clark put together the single which led to the first "Hooked on Classics" album.

The biggest selling disc of the Christmas season led to "Hooked on Classics II" and there will probably be another. "It just sounded like a good fun idea," recalled Clark, who tackled the original single onto the end of a Royal

Philharmonic recording session. "And when they heard it, everyone went wild."

WHILE THERE are many who prefer their Bach slow and easy, Clark said the only negative comments he's heard came during a radio appearance with a classical conductor.

"And the conductor was on my side," he added with a smile.

"I've gotten loads of letters from people saying how much they enjoy the music. People think I'm ruining composers' music, but if it's making people happy that's what it's all about."

Clark said classical departments of record stores reported "a bit of a boom" during peak sales of "Hooked on Classics."

"People were going out and buying the proper versions," explained the arranger, who said the album's biggest success was in South Africa, Australia and Canada. "It was pretty big in Argentina, but they withdrew them all," he quipped, adding that sales were great in Germany but the "French were useless — they're still carrying a grudge."

While he was on stage playing keyboards with the ELO last summer on a tour which included Joe Louis Arena, being out in front of an orchestra is a new experience for the quiet musician.

But his college conducting classes pulled him through.

"The best way is just to jump into the deep end," said Clark, who has found the pace more hectic than touring with a rock band.

"WE'D SPEND a couple of weeks rehearsing before the tour and that was it. Now I have to rehearse every time," he explained.

One big difference is the audience, which is a cross-section, drawing lots of little kids and old ladies and every



DAVID FRANK/staff photographer

Arranger-composer Louis Clark has worked on both the 'Hooked on Classics' albums and the Electric Light Orchestra's rock recordings.

variety in between."

His Detroit area performance was unique because of the addition of a laser show. "I'm looking forward to seeing it," he said. "I hope I concentrate on what I'm doing."

Wearing a rented black tux to contrast with the white tuxes worn by members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra who played "Hooked on Classics" at Meadow Brook, Clark moved efficiently through a varied repertoire. The program included songs from the two albums and orchestral arrangements of rock hits by Queen and the Four Tops.

"IF YOU FEEL like clapping your hands, stomping feet or just going crazy, feel free to do so," he told the audience, which responded wildly to his new "Hooked on America" selection.

While they usually don't play with lasers shooting out around them and smoke billowing over their music stands, the musicians responded well to the conductor, whose white patent leather shoes looked like sneakers.

Violinist Bruce Smith, who was working harder than he would in a pop concert, admitted he didn't know what to expect from Louis Clark.

"Frankly, I didn't know who he was," said the Farmington Hills resident whose kids know more about ELO than he does.

"The rhythms are distorted because it has to fit a disco beat. And I'm more conscious of what I'm playing because I'm right on top of a mike," the musician explained.

"But I don't mind it."

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