



John Orr / Daily News

California Pops Music Director and Conductor Kim Venaas at the keyboard of his 9-foot Yamaha grand piano, on Monday. The other piano is a 7-foot Kimball grand that used to belong to Ruth Spangenberg. Her family donated it when Spangenberg died.

## Key to success for California Pops? Popularity

While many other arts groups struggle, this Palo Alto-based ensemble is paying most of its bills by selling tickets

BY JOHN ORR  
Daily News Staff Writer

It's a little hard to know if Kim Venaas, conductor of the California Pops Orchestra, is bragging or complaining about the fiscal woes of other arts organizations, compared to the Pops.

"It's one of those things where we keep doing really good, then I watch these other big arts organizations just screw the pooch, then get bailed out."

On his mind was Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley, which, as Venaas points out, "was going to go belly up, and now they have 600 grand coming.

"That'd be three years of expenses for us," he pointed out on Monday.

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### MUSIC

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**What:** California Pops Orchestra

**When:** 3 p.m. March 29

**Where:** Smithwick Theatre, Foothill College 12345 El Monte Road, Los Altos Hills

**Tickets:** \$15-\$47; 650-856-8432 or [www.calpops.org](http://www.calpops.org)

**Parking:** Free in lots 5 and 6

Bragging? Maybe. After all, his Palo Alto-based orchestra has a concert coming up on March 29 at Smithwick Theatre in Los Altos Hills, and as of Monday, only 99 seats were left unsold in the 1,000-seat venue.

That's not to say that that Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley and the California Pops have similar financial

situations. They don't. Still, the Pops' success is not to be discounted.

The Pops, as Venaas explains, is a semi-pro group. "Some musicians volunteer their time and talent, which is lovely, but definitely, the majority are paid. It's part of the stuff needed to put on a good, high-quality show."

Not that the pay is great. "It's certainly nothing they can live off of," Venaas says.

But the Pops draw on the huge supply of freelance musicians in the Bay Area, putting on popular, fun shows, playing nothing but audience requests, and peppering the performances with plenty of goofy jokes sent in by fans and delivered by Venaas, who makes a tall and handsome maestro with a definitely goofy bent.

"We play what people want to hear, not what we think is good for them," Venaas says, "Diametrically opposite a

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**Author:** A talk with Joyce Carol Oates, who's coming to Kepler's Books.

## FUSION

## POPS

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classical orchestra.”

The March 29 “Swing Time!!!” show, for instance, is to include the tune “Leap Frog,” which was the theme song for Les Brown and his Band of Renown. Someone saw Les Brown perform the song in the 1963 Jerry Lewis comedy, “The Nutty Professor,” and asked the Pops to play it. They will.

The March 29 show, in addition to the usual, huge Pops Orchestra, will be joined on stage by another Venaas ensemble, the 17-piece Black Tie Orchestra, which before the recession, used to play at a lot of big-deal society events — a trade that dropped off during the recession and has yet to recover.

Part of the fun on March 29 will be the two groups combining to perform Glenn Miller’s 1940 version of “Anvil Chorus,” from Verdi’s 1853 opera, “Il Trovatore.” Big fun.

Also on the program, Artie Shaw’s “Dancing in the Dark,” a Duke Ellington medley, a couple of tunes by Cuban trumpeter Arturo Sandoval, and tunes by Benny Goodman, Woody Herman, Count Basie and Doc Severinsen.

In the Pops’ season-ending May 17 show, Venaas says, they will perform a medley of Tijuana Brass tunes, because of a postcard he got from a fan.

The orchestra usually rehearses at either Cubberly Theater in Palo Alto, or at Spangenberg Auditorium on the Gunn High School campus, which once was also its performance space.

“Our rehearsal schedules range from three to six three-hour rehearsals, depending on the difficulty of the upcoming program,” Venaas said. “Since the arrangements we perform are usually authentic movie, Broadway and other pop pieces, most of the time the arrangements are new to the players, and so require much more intense work than a typical classical thing they’ve played a hundred times since high school.”

In general, Venaas says, it costs the Pops about \$25,000 to put on any one show, with a yearly budget running from about \$180,000 to \$200,000.

The bragging part of his



Photos by John Orr / Daily News

Alicia Wilmunder, executive director of the California Pops Orchestra, and her husband Kim Venaas, musical director of the Pops. “She was a 15-year-old cellist and I was an 18-year-old music director at a music camp,” Venaas says. “We’ve been together ever since.” They are seen in their Palo Alto home on Monday.

thoughts about Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley? The Pops funds about 90 percent of its budget from ticket sales. The rest comes from donations.

He’d like to get the Pops’s budget up to “a million and a half, then we could play Flint Center in Cupertino, the California Theatre in San Jose, do the advertising. All of that would require philanthropic help.”

That’s a weakness for the Pops, which has a small board of directors, some of whom are actually Pops members who don’t happen to be dot-com billionaires.

He concedes he hasn’t been successful at reaching out to philanthropists.

“I don’t, personally have the network of the more well-to-do,” he says. “That becomes a problem. ...

“The way the big orchestras started, as amateur organizations, they all at one point had one high-net-worth individual say, ‘I’d like to help out,’ then that person got their friends to contribute.

“We have yet to get that one angel, to get us over the hump.”

Once upon a time the Pops did have some philanthropic support, Venaas points out, enough that the decision was made to go from being an amateur to a professional group. But then the recession hit, and the Pops lost 90 percent of its philanthropic support, which has not come back. “The recession is not yet over for the arts,” he points out.

But, at least, the California Pops is paying its way.

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Venaas plays and sings “Invitation to the Blues,” by Arthur Gershwin (brother to Ira and George) and Doris Fisher, from the original 1944 sheet music, on Monday. Venaas and wife Alicia Wilmunder have collected thousands of sheets of original music, most of which they keep in a climate-controlled storage site.