

During a gig at Cleveland's Nighttown in 2003, not long after Helen Welch had moved from London to Northeast Ohio, the world-renowned singer decided to try a Carpenters song.

She had never performed a Carpenters number publicly, and no one in her band could imagine a tune by the epitome of easy-listening duos would go over well with this evening's particularly noisy audience.

"I said, 'Well, nobody's listening, so we may as well,' " Welch said. "So we did it, and in about a minute, you could hear a pin drop."

The next night, the band found themselves performing in a venue before a group of bikers.

"I thought, 'We're just going to get thrown out,' " Welch said. "And the band jokingly said, 'Why don't we do a Carpenters tune?' So I said, 'All right then, we may as well.' And within 30 seconds, not only could you hear a pin drop, but all the bikers started to sing along."

The song that mesmerized Nighttown and a biker bar was "I Won't Last a Day Without You."

Growing up listening to her mother's Carpenters cassettes, Welch became, what she calls, a "CCF" — a Closet Carpenters Fan.

"I never told people I liked the Carpenters, because that would not be cool," Welch said.

But after those two performances in 2003, she realized she wasn't the only "CCF," and in 2010, she started developing a docu-musical.

"Superstar: The Songs. The Stories. The Carpenters." — a show supported by Richard Carpenter — is currently touring, and on Sunday at 3 p.m., Welch will make a stop at the Robert M. and Janet L. Archer Auditorium.

"We have given the songs a little coat of paint," Welch said. "On one or two of them, we felt like we could inject a little bit of our own ingredients into them."

"But the audiences don't even know we've done it. They just kind of go, 'Wow.' It's so cool, it's so fun. And we still kept many of the important, traditional things, like the rocking guitar solo in 'Goodbye To Love.' That could not be eliminated, and we wouldn't want it to be."

Welch's Sunday performance serves a dual purpose: honoring the No. 1 selling act of the 1970s with fresh arrangements and rare backstage stories, and benefiting the Ashland Symphony Orchestra.

While the orchestra is not performing at this concert, proceeds will go to the Ashland Symphony Orchestra's Podium Endowment Fund in honor of Maestro Arie Lipsky, who recently vacated his position.

"I think Ashland is incredible that a community of its size still has an orchestra," Welch said. "It's phenomenal that they've managed to maintain a very effective and very popular orchestra, doing a wonderful, eclectic program of music."

Welch has played Ashland often. Most recently, she sang at the Guy C. Myers Memorial Band Shell with the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra in August 2018.

She also performed with the Ashland Symphony Orchestra in 2016 and 2012, and became friends with the orchestra's executive director, Martha Buckner.

"What's awesome about Martha is, she came to see some of the shows I was doing, separate from the Ashland Symphony, and became a real fan and a friend," Welch said. "So that was very special. Relationships are very important in all walks of life. And there are many presenters I have good relationships with, but Martha is very special."

The admiration is mutual. Buckner has seen "Superstar" twice, and asked Welch to bring her show to Ashland.

"Helen loves to interact with the audience," Buckner said. "She has the ability to make you feel like a friend, whether you're part of an audience of 50 or 1,000."

Welch also has released a soundtrack album of the "Superstar" show, which fans can purchase at the Ashland performance.

So how did a Grammy-nominated singer and producer, who has starred on Broadway and headlined shows around the world, end up living in the Kent area?

While en route from a show in Alabama to an airport, Welch — who hadn't slept in a couple of days at that point — shared her story.

Years ago, when she was performing in the French Alps, Welch went on a skiing trip that would change her life.

During the excursion, she met two American men, and they asked her to dinner.

"I joined them and it was like a bad Hallmark movie," Welch said. "I had a holiday romance with Doug."

The pair continued seeing each other, and for a couple of years, they divided their time between London and Ohio.

But after Doug Wirt asked Welch's father for her hand in marriage, they had to decide where to make their home.

"I was ready for a change," Welch said. "One or two things happened in England, including I lost my songwriting partner in a terrible car accident, which was a big full stop. But it kind of redirected me. And I really liked it here, so I said, 'I'll move.' "

She relocated to Northeast Ohio in 2003, and became a United States citizen in 2009.

The Norwich, England, native playfully refers to herself as an unofficial ambassador to Northeast Ohio.

Not only does she appreciate the area's many bands and orchestras, but coming from the crowded streets of London, the avid equestrian loves the undeveloped nature Northeast Ohio has to offer.

"None of it's really spoiled," she said. "In London, if you went to a bike or hike trail, you wouldn't be able to move for the people. There are just so many things here you can enjoy for a reasonable sum of money. You can have space, you can buy land."

Tickets for Sunday's show are \$24 for adults, \$21 for seniors and \$5 for children and students. They can be purchased through the orchestra's office at (419) 289-5115 or the Ashland University box office at (419) 289-5125, both located at 331 College Ave., or online at ashland_symphony.org.

"Superstar" is sponsored by a donor family at the Ashland County Community Foundation, who wish to remain anonymous.