

GB Symphony Orchestra gets by with a little help from the Beatles

February 28, 2011 — By Warren Gerds



photo by Denis Germain

GREEN BAY — The lasting qualities of symphony orchestras, the Beatles and the Green Bay Packers combined Saturday night in the nearly sold-out Weidner Center.

Imagine, as John Lennon might say, the Beatles' entire "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" album reproduced with a live orchestra and band in a wonderful hall. At its most exotic, the concert found George Harrison's "Within You Without You" ricocheting from India to recesses of 1,800 or so minds.

Music from the late 1960s didn't sound old at all. The songs expressing everyday life with soul and humor — "She's Leaving Home," "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite," "When I'm Sixty-Four," "With a Little Help from My Friends," etc. — remain exploratory, original and vital.

The voices of Lennon, Harrison, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr weren't imitated but interpreted by Jean Meilleur, who put the concert over the top with his enthusiasm.

Meilleur has sung for 15 years in Jeans 'n Classics, based in Ontario, Canada. Being from Madison and a Packers fan forever, Meilleur called the concert "a dream." For the encore, he wore a Packers jersey he's worn while jogging for nine years. There was icing on his cake.

"Look at this hall. It's awesome," he said. "We're impressed."

In singing, Meilleur carefully reaches for meaning in lyrics — found in abundance with the Beatles.

Behind this all is Peter Brennan, the eight-member Classics 'n Jeans' founder and guitarist. He has created 45 programs blending rock music and orchestras. He has a touch.

Brennan's arrangements put spring in the step of the Green Bay Symphony Orchestra, with Andrew Sewell of the Madison Symphony on the podium. "Energy" was Sewell's middle name Saturday.

Ninety singers from the Dudley Birder Chorale added depth in the second half to such songs as "Eleanor Rigby," "Woman," "The Long and Winding Road" and "Let It Be."

Folks leaving the hall were heard saying of Classics 'n Jeans, "I'd like to hear them again." OK, GBSO, let it be.

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