

WSO's take on Pink Floyd is rock with substance

03/26/2011 — By Gwenda Nemerofsky

WINNIPEG — The Jeans 'n' Classics Band is a rock group based out of London, Ontario whose website claims they “understand orchestra culture and are committed to help in the building of younger, loyal and sustainable audiences for symphony orchestras.”

This may be why they're back performing this weekend with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra for the ninth time. And while some older WSO Pops subscribers seem to have given away or traded in their tickets for tamer stuff, the newcomers who moved into their seats thoroughly enjoyed Friday night's tribute to British band Pink Floyd and a host of other '70s classic rock icons.

Lead singer Jean Meilleur, singers Katalin Kiss and Leah Salomaa, guitarist David Dunlop, electric bass Kevin Muir, drummer Jeff Christmas and Don Paulton on keyboard put together an exciting evening of music from the long-gone days of the rock concept album.

Arrangements by the band's founder, Peter Brennan, incorporated the orchestra more than in some performances in this genre.

We were transported back to the era of synthesizers and stage fog, and as various familiar hits were announced, there were appreciative calls of “yeah” from the audience.

The first half of the program primed our palettes with numbers like Proco Harum's Conquistador, with some glorious trumpet playing. Unfortunately, Meilleur's rough-edged voice was all but drowned out by his bandmates.

Salomaa provided a strong rendition of Kate Bush's Wuthering Heights, her powerful, piercing voice climbing to its own impressive vocal heights, giving it an appropriate sense of wonder and passion.

Who knew principal flute, Jan Kocman, was such a rocker? He lent a great funky/jazzy touch to Jethro Tull's Living in the Past, its syncopated rhythms enhanced by a tone far purer than most jazz flutists can muster.

Also great was the vintage synthesizer played by Paulton in Emerson Lake and Palmer's Lucky Man, its eerie reediness shaking us in our seats. Guitarist Dunlop ruled in Wish You Were Here, and while Meilleur's voice may not have pleased purists, the entire ensemble truly achieved the winsome nature of the song.

The audience clapped and even sang along to Another Brick in the Wall, which stuck to a wooden four-four time, lacking the appealing subtleties of the original. Dunlap was the saving grace with another stellar solo.

The second half of the evening was entirely devoted to the album Dark Side of the Moon, opening with the compelling heartbeat intro of Speak to Me/Breathe in the Air -- wonderfully laid-back.

The satisfying whine of the guitar ringing through the hall and the strains of the orchestra made for an agreeable mix. This is rock with substance -- and no one can take this away. And the synthesizer is just plain cool. Paulton mesmerized us with it in On the Run, sounding like a train rushing by over and over again, then closing with the sound of wind chimes.

At press time, Kiss was wailing her way through Great Gig in the Sky and we wondered why we hadn't heard more of her.

The show repeats Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m.



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