

# Grand Rapids Symphony, Canadian ensemble stir things up with James Bond tunes

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Adam Bird | The Grand Rapids Press  
Neil Donell wowed the audience with tunes such as "Thunderball" and "Let's Get it On."

**GRAND RAPIDS** — Grand Rapids Symphony's season-opening pops concert was titled "James Bond: Shaken Not Stirred," but it was an Austin Powers film tune that shook the audience of 1,238 Friday night in DeVos Performance Hall when guest vocalist Neil Donell remarkably channeled Marvin Gaye in "Let's Get It On."

A member of the talented and versatile Canadian ensemble Jeans 'n' Classics, Donell drew enthusiastic applause with the first high tenor bars of the song used in "The Spy Who Shagged Me" and provided one of many high points of an evening full of memorable spy-movie tunes. The orchestra and guests "got it on," all night.

The main attraction, of course, was the patented sound of James Bond cinema, and the orchestra under John Varineau performed the engaging arrangements of Jeans 'n' Classics leader Peter Brennan with smooth, confident power — swinging when called for, swaggering when needed, seducing as required.

Thanks to an artful set of charts by Brennan, a visibly warm collaboration between the orchestra and guests, and a retinue of familiar and immensely popular songs.

It was a night of nostalgic joy.

With all films in the Bond body of work, the repetition of favorite lines, sights and sounds was expected by the viewing audience.

Brennan and company made sure Friday night the concert audience also got all the gratification of the familiar it wanted.

Lead vocals traded by Donell and soprano Rique Franks were consistently delivered with high quality and dynamic appeal, while the arrangements kept the orchestra busy and the audience involved.

From the opening strains of the patented James Bond theme to the sweeping chords of perhaps the most definitive 007 sound — the encore "Goldfinger" — the program was universally strong and punctuated by the introductions of pianist John Regan.



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Escorted to the stage by two suggestively clad beauties (not too stirring, but enough to recall the film series' Bond and Austin Powers girls), Regan quipped, "That's my ArtPrize right there," then praised the international art competition under way around Grand Rapids.

"Thank you for putting on ArtPrize for us — that's fabulous."

He then kicked off "You Only Live Twice," with Franks displaying a big, lusty mid-range vocal to go with the orchestra's lush string sound.

Of the 18 numbers performed, many featured the vocalists, and Donell favored the audience with credible sounds of Tom Jones on "Thunderball," and Louis Armstrong on "We Have All the Time in the World" and the Monkees on "Daydream Believer," another of several Powers' film songs, before scoring his second-half touchdown with Gaye's "Let's Get It On."

Franks, meanwhile, crooned poignantly on "For Your Eyes Only," was hot and torchy on "The Look of Love" and belted authoritatively on "Nobody Does It Better."

She was at her best, meanwhile, on the encore, not trying to imitate Shirley Bassey's distinctive voice but putting dramatic punch into the well-known "Goldfinger," ending on a sustained stratospheric note well beyond any she hit earlier in the evening.

It was a fitting high note to end an evening of high entertainment.

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