

Canucks, KWS dazzle in tribute to Abbey Road

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The scope and variety of the Beatles' musical output is breathtaking.

The band that started off by covering songs like A Taste of Honey and Twist and Shout, while writing such foot-tapping classics as I Saw Her Standing there, evolved alongside the decade that they helped to shape.

The experimentalism of their later recordings helped lead popular music in a variety of fresh directions, introducing new sounds, styles and formats in song while still managing to produce groovy hits that had the albums flying off the shelves.

The Music of Abbey Road is the latest in the Electric Thursdays concerts, a lively variety of collaborative performances between the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony and the Jeans 'n Classics band, featuring orchestral adaptations impressively scored by Peter Brennan and conducted by Daniel Warren.

A tribute to the music of the Beatles, the concert last night featured a number of big names from the Canadian music scene, including Alan Frew of Glass Tiger, Canadian Rock Hall of Fame artist Rik Emmett and Jim Witter, who wowed audiences last month in An Innocent Man, the Jeans 'n Classics tribute to the music of Billy Joel.

Jean Meilleur rounded out the lineup, displaying his impressive vocal range, including a confident falsetto, on such classics as Martha My Dear and the Taxman, while his gracious and humorous anecdotal style drew us into the laid back mood of the evening.

The first half of the program led us through a whirlwind tour of the Beatles' pre-Abbey Road career, touching on a diverse variety of songs from the 60's -- their illustrious decade of musical supremacy--with a deft clarity.

Leah Salomaa and Rique Franks displayed impressive range in their backup vocals, while John Regan on keyboards, Peter Brennan on guitar, Mitchell Tyler on bass and Jeff Christmas on drums presented a tightly-integrated sound.

Highlights included Frew's rendition of The Long and Winding Road, a

song perfectly suited to his voice and his vocal range, and Witter's A Day in the Life, that hauntingly hybrid song that shifts between contrasting states of mind: the one contemplative and poignant, the other caught in the rush and bustle of the moment.

Brennan's adaptation brought out the marvelous dissonances of the transitions--and it was a treat to hear them played live.

But the latter portion of the concert presented the real treasure of the evening: the Abbey Road album, played in its entirety from beginning to end.

The album itself is so well-integrated that I've often found it difficult to listen to just one or two tracks.

In some ways, it plays as a single, long narrative, thanks to its recurring musical motifs and cross-referential lyrics.

It also features a wonderful tangle of moods and narrative threads that transition with a kind of dream-logic, beginning with the tribal, rhythmic Come Together, which guides us into the psychedelic landscape of the album that follows.

Meilleur's full, rough-edged vocals added an earthy depth to John Lennon's dark, creepy lyrics.

This is the album that first introduced us to the unforgettably misanthropic Maxwell Edison of Maxwell's Silver Hammer, Mr. Mustard, whose meanness is now the stuff of legend--and the surreal fun of the Octopus's Garden.

Other motifs also recur and transform.

The exquisite yearning of Something later morphs into the more urgent, edgier desire of I Want You. The fuller orchestration of last night's rendition added sinuous themes to the performance, which also featured an incandescent guitar solo by Rik Emmett that drew a spontaneous standing ovation from the audience.

By playing the album in its entirety -- to the vocal appreciation of the audience -- the talented performers paid a fitting tribute to Abbey Road and its unique musical odyssey, by embarking upon an eminently enjoyable musical journey of their own.

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