

Symphony guest calls show an orchestral homage to legendary rock band
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by [Monica Orosz](#)



Courtesy photo

Shotten says audiences shouldn't expect a note-for-note tribute to the band so much as a reworking of its oeuvre in a powerful new setting.

CHARLESTON, W.Va. - The short answer is that, yes, Michael Shotten is the Freddie Mercury of the ensemble that will play the music of Queen this weekend with the West Virginia Symphony.

"I am the Freddie Mercury, minus the teeth," the Toronto musician said, noting the distinctive toothy grin of the late singer-songwriter.

Shotten may have an impressive vocal range that compares with that of Mercury, but he also knows he can't really be Mercury - nor can his fellow musicians with Jeans 'n Classics.

"I love singing the material," he said. "But it's not a tribute show."

So no look-alike musicians, no attempts to mimic every sound of Queen. Instead, Jean 'n Classics strives to bring popular music with orchestral arrangements to the stage - a rock-meets-pop effort designed to attract younger audiences to symphony halls.

Shotten said because it's not billed as a tribute, audiences understand they should expect a different experience.

"And I've never heard anybody say (accusingly), 'You didn't sound like Freddie Mercury,'" Shotten added. "I want the audiences to feel like we're going down these roads together. This is the stuff we grew up listening to."

Jeans 'n Classics has a large contingent of musicians, many, like Shotten, who are noted singers and songwriters with separate careers. Creator Peter Brennan has put together a series of shows that pay homage to the music of U2, Elton John, ABBA, Michael Jackson, Led Zeppelin, Sting, the Beatles, the Beach Boys and more.

Shotten, who has performed with Boston, Guns N' Roses and led several bands of his own, joined Jeans 'n Classics about 15 years ago. It's essentially a weekend job that allows him time for his own projects, but Shotten loves the weekend job, whether he is singing Queen or U2, another one of his regular rotations with the group. (He sings Bono.)

"I get to do these gigs where I walk in front of an orchestra and sing," he said. "Believe me, I think about all the big stars that don't get to do that. I'm very fortunate."

"I've always had a great group of guys. Every one of them is great and fun and we're all connected. It's like a mini-holiday on the weekends."

Shotten said the concerts also take him back to some of his favorite music.

"As many times as I've done this show, no two Queen shows are the same," he said. "I'll be singing a song and I'll think, 'Man, do I ever love this line, or I love this chorus.' "

With Queen, of course, the range of songs is an interesting one, from the simple beat of "We will Rock You," to the lush orchestration with "Bohemian Rhapsody."

"What makes this show fun is we do it with a choir; our whole second set is with a choir," Shotten said.

Grant Cooper, the symphony's conductor, said he was asked to assemble a small group for the vocal parts in such songs as "Somebody to Love." He assembled six students from West Virginia State University.

"I originally was going to hire six solo professionals," he said. "But Jeans 'n Classics suggested a college choir might be the way to go."

Shotten, who also is a studio engineer and a sound technician, said he likes to snoop around a bit at venues where he performs to check out the sound equipment.

"I love to go out and see what the crew guys are doing. At a lot of places where we work, there are severely trained professionals who are great at what they do. I'm into all that stuff," he said. "I can learn something."