

Review: SSO Pops series tackles MJ

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By Janet French



Some pop music is so naturally lyrical you can almost imagine the strings humming in the background. Despite his vast career, from the sugary '60s sounds of the Jackson 5 to '90s power ballads with a conscience, Michael Jackson's music doesn't spring to mind as easy to orchestrate.

But it works. On Saturday, Ontario-based group Jeans' n Classics joined the Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra for the last instalment of this season's Pops Series to add more depth to the late King of Pop's repertoire.

Fronted by musical theatre showman Gavin Hope, For Michael — the music of Michael Jackson predictably included some of Jackson's biggest smashes such as Billie Jean, Beat It and Thriller. Although the set list stretched back to the Jackson 5 days, including ABC and I Want You Back, the repertoire hit a wall at 1988, with none of Jackson's more modern offerings included. Perhaps the newer songs were too tricky to orchestrate, or maybe his later work just wouldn't sound familiar to a general audience.

Hope's vocal range — hitting all those falsetto notes Jackson loved — is stunning, and the man, who has more energy than a chocolate-fuelled toddler, can bust a move. His colourful between-song banter about spraying the front row of the audience with spit and sweat and an endless stream of suggestive jokes perhaps prompted a few too many anatomical visuals to spring to mind.

The symphony (were they on stage, too? Hope was quite an attention hog) was marvellous and, in fact, too understated. The arrangement revealed beautiful melodies and harmonies to Jackson's music, but the sound balance overemphasized the rock band and those gorgeous strings were often lost in the din. Also losing out in the balance were backup singers Kathryn Rose, Katalin Kiss and Lis Soderberg. It would have been nice to hear a little more of what they could do.

Acoustics aside, For Michael was a lot of fun to hear and see — even the oboe players got into the spirit, propping Jackson's patented silver glove atop their instruments and bringing a stuffed version of the star's monkey, Bubbles, to sit on the risers.

You haven't really lived until you've heard Thriller and Beat It with a full orchestra.