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Not a Thriller, but Michael sounded pretty good

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Those of a certain age -- or not -- may fondly recall the first time they cranked up the volume of Michael Jackson's Billie Jean or Thriller, secretly practicing their moonwalks or donning sequined gloves in emulation of their pop hero.

The Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra paid its own tribute to the late King of Pop Friday night with its latest pops show For Michael: The Music of Michael Jackson, featuring touring band Jeans 'N' Classics with lead vocalist Gavin Hope. The first of three weekend shows showcased 18 of Jackson's greatest hits with the orchestra led by WSO resident conductor Richard Lee.

CONCERT REVIEW

Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra Pops

For Michael: The Music of Michael Jackson

- Centennial Concert Hall
- Friday, February 10
- Attendance: 1,529
- Three stars out of five

A slightly sluggish Billy Jean provided the first taste of Hope backed by spot-on vocalists Kathryn Rose, Lis Soderberg and Katalin Kiss, as well as the four-piece JNC band, including Brennan, Donald Paulton (keyboard), Mitch Tyler (bass) and Jeff Christmas (drums).

Hope is a naturally gifted performer with a real knack for engaging his audience. The mixed-aged crowd responded to his every high-spirited woo-hoo with a few of their own. His smooth delivery and shimmering vibrato -- not to mention an impressive falsetto that never wavered -- at times did sound like Jackson, particularly during the early Jackson 5 set including I Want You Back, ABC and the night's first ballad, Never Can Say Goodbye.

Still, there is something unsettling about these shows that are, essentially, formulaic. There were so many opportunities to highlight the band -- or the orchestra, for that matter -- with more solos given to individual players. The ever-poignant ballad Ben, gorgeous even if meant to be sung to a rodent, could easily have been performed as a duet or solo. Most of the arrangements were the same band configuration with, all too often, WSO players sitting patiently awaiting their turn to play. There were also balance problems, with Hope's vocals often sounding muddy in a sea of overly ambitious reverb effects.

However, the show had its highlights. Rockin' Robin kicked up the energy with the singers clearly having a great time. The band also showed they could funk it up with Workin' Day and Night, which also included some mean guitar licks by Brennan.

The concert also included Beat It, The Way You Make Me Feel, P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing), as well

as iconic Thriller before closing with inspirational call-to-arms ballad Man in the Mirror.

These programs are not meant to present impersonators (although parallels will be made) but to celebrate music that is normally not heard in the concert hall. The players must stamp the tunes as their own, and for the most part, JNC succeeded.

For Michael: The Music of Michael Jackson repeats tonight at 8 p.m., and Sunday, 2 p.m.

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