

Kendra Meinert column: Symphony Orchestra will meet Beatles with 'Pepper' concert

Green Bay Press Gazette - Green Bay, Wis.

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Date: Feb 17, 2011

Start Page: n/a

Section: GPG

Text Word Count: 1230

Document Text

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Get ready for "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" played live in its entirety -- perhaps even with a tuba or oboe solo.

Do it

* Who: Green Bay Symphony Orchestra, with Jeans 'n Classics and the Dudley Birder Chorale

* When: 7:30 p.m. Feb. 26

* Where: Weidner Center, UWGB

* Tickets: \$15 and up, with \$6 student tickets; www.ticketstaronline.com or (800) 895-0071

It's been a long and winding road, but the British Invasion is catching up with the Green Bay Symphony Orchestra at last. The orchestra's "The Music of The Beatles!" pops concert on Feb. 26 at the Weidner Center will feature the Canada-based rock group Jeans 'n Classics as guest artists for a program that includes the Fab Four's 1967 classic album played start to finish as well as a generous helping of other Beatles songs.

"We don't clone The Beatles. We don't come out and try to move like them or wear wigs. We just try and make it a very, very interpretive evening," said Jean Meilleur, a Madison native living in Canada who has been a vocalist with the eight-piece band for 15 years.

"We like to run 'Sgt. Pepper's' like the album. In other words, we run it like a suite without any interruption between songs. ... It's just like going back and putting on the vinyl and turning the record over and listening to it."

Jeans 'n Classics has been teaming up with orchestras across the United States and Canada for the better part of 20 years, putting a classic rock spin on symphony concerts that find themselves energized not only by the music but the first-timers and younger audiences they often attract. The music of Elton John, Pink Floyd, Billy Joel, The Eagles, KISS and Led Zeppelin have all been given the symphonic rock treatment by Jeans 'n Classics to rousing applause.

"You name it, over the years, we've done it," Meilleur said.

Everybody, that is, but Meat Loaf. Despite many requests via e-mail, the band's British leader/arranger Peter Brennan, who has scored orchestral arrangements to hundreds of pop and rock songs, has taken a pass on "Bat Out of Hell."

"He will not, for whatever reason, do a Meat Loaf show," Meilleur said. "That's the only one. Anything else, he's game."

This won't be the first time Jeans 'n Classics, which has several groups out on the road, has done "Sgt. Pepper's" in full. But it will be the first time they've done it in Green Bay, and for Meilleur, a huge Green Bay Packers fan, the timing couldn't be better. So excited by the Super Bowl XLV victory, he's bringing his wife, a Canadian Packers convert, along for the show. They plan to spend an extra three days in Green Bay soaking in all that is Packers-related.

"I don't think you know how thrilled I am," said Meilleur, pointing out that he has been performing music professionally longer than Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers has been alive. "We're going to take full advantage. I'm going to spend every last cent I have at the (Packers) Pro Shop. This is gonna be great."

Jeans 'n Classics will arrive the day before the concert and do a rehearsal with the symphony on the day of for what tend to be seamless collaborations.

"The orchestras are so professional and we know our stuff, so it works well -- without a hitch," Meilleur said.

Boosted by the popularity of such touring acts at Trans-Siberian Orchestra, Meilleur has seen more and more orchestras take on classic rock as a way to expand audiences and broaden musical horizons.

"It's become a very viable thing for the symphony orchestras, because it does do well," he said. "You want to keep the integrity of the song. You don't want to go too ... schmaltzy. You don't want to make it too syrupy. Conversely, you do need to incorporate classical instruments, because there are a bunch of them back there.

"Peter has a very, very deft way of making arrangements so the orchestra is there and the rock band is there. And they really do work harmoniously. ... It's not just a rock band up there, and you might hear a bit of violin or a bit of flute. Peter does tuba solos. He'll do oboe solos. All kinds of things one wouldn't normally see in the confines of rock 'n' roll.

For the classically trained musicians he'll be sharing the stage with at the Weidner, Meilleur is betting they're looking forward to the concert as much as he is.

"We really find that they enjoy these shows, because it does indeed give them a break from the serious side of what they do. It gives them the chance to really let loose and play rock 'n' roll."