

Friday and Saturday night's alright

Jeans 'n Classics joins KSO for Elton John tribute show



Jean Meilleur

By Jason Hewlett
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In the immortal words of Monty Python's John Cleese, "And now for something completely different:"

How different? Take the classical sound of the Kamloops Symphony Orchestra, add the melodic vocals of the KSO Chorus and have them join the Jeans 'n Classics Band in a rock 'n' roll tribute to Elton John.

Jeans 'n Classics is a concept band out of London, Ont., that combines rock musicians and a headline star with a symphony orchestra.

In the case of *Madmen Across the Water*, pianist Don Paulton, bassist Mitch Tyler, drummer Paul DeLong and singer Jean Meilleur perform a variety of songs from Elton John's 50-years-and-counting career.

For the KSO, this pop show is a bit of a departure. Music director and conductor Bruce Dunn said the symphony has done jazz, Celtic, Broadway and country in the past, but not rock 'n' roll.

"It's new from that point of view, but the idea of it is not new," said Dunn.

Jeans 'n Classics has been mixing rock and symphonic music for more than 20 years under the guidance of

founder Peter Brennan.

A producer and studio arranger, Brennan moved into the concept business after Orchestra London asked him to write a rock show.

He had no idea how to do it, but had a history of playing in garage bands, so he said yes.

"I had no idea how to score for a full orchestra," said Brennan. "I went with fear and trepidation and jumped into the deep end of the pool."

The show was successful enough that he was asked to do it again the next year. Before Brennan knew it, Jeans 'n Classics was born.

Now, with several concept shows in the canon — including Queen, The Beatles and KISS — Jeans 'n Classics performs 45 different acts 84 nights a year.

"It's kind of found a niche that we had no idea would happen. It just kind of was a one-off ask that resonated with people who were maybe frustrated with what they weren't getting off radio anymore or from the record industry," he said.

What can the Kamloops audience expect?

Brennan said the first half of the show includes the four-piece Jeans 'n Classics Band and the KSO performing Elton John's classic songs.

The second half adds the 50- to 60-piece choir. All told there will be more than 100 people on stage, said Brennan.

"Elton's show is very, very cool," he said. "We went for the earthy, early album kind of sound."

Songs will include Someone Saved My Life Tonight, Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me, Take Me To the Pilot, Saturday Night's Alright (for Fighting) and tracks from The Lion King.

Rock and classical music blend far better than some music fans might think. Brennan composes so the string instruments become the guitars, percussion the drums, and so on.

"Across the board, the whole balance is to make it really orchestra friendly. The last thing we want is for the orchestra to be a back-up band or wallpaperish," said Brennan.

"It's that balance between keeping it really, really interesting musically for them, and therefore the audience, and not destroy what was just a beautiful pop song in the first place."

Dunn said his choir is getting into the rhythm of the show. The singers traditionally stand still while singing, but he is encouraging them to bop, move and groove to the music.

He said it helps that most of the choir grew up listening to Elton John and know the songs.

"They're all singing the words and singing the tunes. They know exactly when to join in with the choir bits," said Dunn.

Musically, he has no doubt that Madmen Across the Water will be a hit. Dunn just hopes the show won't be too loud for some people.

"We'll have to see how it works," he said.