



Symphony creates musical blast

By Heather Persson, The StarPhoenix November 19, 2012

If Mathieu Pouliot picks a Queen song to mark his conducting debut with the Saskatoon Symphony it should be We Are The Champions - and definitely not Under Pressure.

Pouliot took over the podium for the SSO's pops series concert dedicated to Queen's hits. In fact, he was acting almost as a party planner, bringing together a large and varied collection of people with the goal of having a musical blast.

He pulled it off, with the help of more than 100 high school choir singers, guest musicians, a full audience and even the Saskatoon Hilltops.

The principal percussionist for the SSO, Pouliot displayed great promise in his new leadership role. Poised, charismatic and confident, he appeared to enjoy every second of the night. His vibrant, relaxed style is clearly influenced by his mentor Maestro Victor Sawa.

Jeans 'n Classics, a musical company that works with symphonies on rock performances, was called in for duty. Michael Shotton played the key role of lead singer and master of ceremonies.

Wisely, Shotton did not try to closely imitate Queen's legendary and singular front-man, the late Freddie Mercury. He has a more classic rock style - imagine Loverboy's Mike Reno doing a tribute - but has the range to pull off much of this vocally challenging music. The emotive way he sang Love Of My Life was memorable.

Adam Martin was exceptional playing distinctive Queen riffs on electric guitar, and keyboardist John Regan offered a slick performance and comic relief.

Three high school choirs, from Centennial Collegiate, Tommy Douglas Collegiate and St. Joseph High School, were a welcome addition to the second half. Their young, pure voices brought songs like Don't Stop Me Now, Somebody To Love and Bohemian Rhapsody to life. The first encore, Fat Bottomed Girls, was an irreverent high point of the night.

Pops concerts are all about making the symphony accessible to new audiences. One of the highlights of the night was watching the young singers enjoy a formative musical experience in front of a crowd of 3,000 people. One young woman, Erica Hartman, drew happy comment from the audience as she threw herself into singing with pure joy and a little head banging. This is what making music should feel like.

A row of Saskatoon Hilltops football players were on hand, invited to celebrate their third national championship. The Canada Cup trophy was hauled on stage to illustrate We Will Rock You and We Are The Champions.

Queen's operatic-influenced music is a perfect choice for a symphony to present at a pops concert, but sound issues kept the audience from hearing the players' contribution in too many songs. You could see them playing their hearts out in Radio Ga Ga, for example, but the electric guitar was overpowering.

This was not the most polished concert ever presented by the SSO, with some numbers seeming under rehearsed. This was easily forgotten, however, in light of the fun atmosphere and honest emotion used to present the well-loved music.

Freddie, if he was looking down, would be pleased.

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