

Rattle and Hum: An Evening of U2

Saturday November 20, 2010 — by Brian Hay



LONDON — There's no need to extrapolate about the music of 'U2'. They've created one of the strongest catalogues in the field of popular music. Their work doesn't seem to have had much coverage by orchestras though. (That might be because the Royal Philharmonic's treatment seems to have come across as a dud but this isn't the time to go into that). Michael Shotton, 'Jeans 'n Classics' frontman for the evening pointed out that this was the first time their ensemble had covered the work. What they and the musicians of Orchestra London demonstrated was how well it can work with a symphony orchestra. All that's needed is the right mixture of parts.

Michael Shotton himself is an excellent showman. Apart from being able to belt out a tune with the best of them (which he does in spades) he also knows how to engage the audience he's playing for. He began the show not from the stage, but from somewhere within the crowd. The fact that not all of the sight lines in Centennial Hall are great ones only enhanced the air of mystery this created as his voice soared above the crowd while he remained mostly unseen. That he considered all this before the show began almost goes without saying. Throughout the show he interacted with audience and the other performers. His anecdotes (and antics) were engaging and funny. His tenacity was remarkable. He worked continually to engage the audience more intimately. He trusted the musicians to follow when he deviated from the script to make it happen. His hard work paid off when everybody finally sang.

The 'Jeans 'n Classics' ensemble are more than just a fine group of musicians. They're a band. When they're performing at functions like these they follow charts but they react to each others signals without needing to look at them. The rhythm section of bassist Kevin Mir and drummer Jeff Christmas was stellar. Muir laid out the melodic foundation and Christmas was always in front to signal the changes. Guitarist David Dunlop often wasn't anywhere near his charts when a change came but he followed Muir and Christmas beautifully. He also played some pretty tasty licks. Much of what keyboardist Don Paulton laid out, separately and with the orchestra, was delicious. He and David Dunlop also provided excellent harmony vocals. Guitarist and arranger Peter Brennan played his parts quietly as the the fabric he created wove itself into a vibrant tapestry.

It took a while to really begin to understand the sort of dialogue he'd created but that was because I was too busy boppin' along to the music to separate little things like details. The wind players in the orchestra, especially the trombone and trumpet players, had a really good dialogue going with drummer Jeff Christmas and bass player Kevin Muir. The percussion players were in on it too. They were punctuating each others movements and dotting each others' 'i's'. They were reading each other. The string players formed the same type of relationship with keyboardist Don Paulton. One would start something, the other would finish it. Or they would play together. Whatever they were were doing melded beautifully. With conductor Mitch Tyler at their helm and Brennan directing 'Jeans 'n Classics' they made it look effortless.

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With Shotton's voice soaring above it all the effect was fabulous. The smiles that kept showing up all over the stage made it obvious they were all having fun.

There was an abundance of musical highlights. 'Elevation' rang through the hall as Shotton approached the stage. The rendition of 'Angel of Harlem' was excellent. 'New Years Day' rocked. 'The renditions of 'Sunday Bloody Sunday' and 'Pride' were strong enough to make one wonder how they could be followed in the second half. No worries. 'City of Blinding Light', 'One', 'Desire', 'The Unforgettable Fire' and everything else they played made the second half a barn-burner. When they closed with 'Bad' and 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For' it was the end of a very satisfying show.

They didn't imitate 'U2'. But they captured the essence of their music.

Rattle and Hum: An Evening of U2 was performed at Centennial Hall in London Ontario on Friday November 19, 2010. It will be performed again on Saturday November 20, 2010 at the same venue. Check it out and take your friends.

<http://www.norules-nolights.com/rattleandhum.html>