

Review: Tucson gets its freak on for TSO, Michael Jackson



Guest vocalist Gavin Hope shown fronting an orchestra for a show similar to the one he did with the Tucson Symphony Orchestra Friday night at Fox Tucson Theatre; Guest conductor fills in the sonic landscape of Michael Jackson's signature hits in the Tucson Symphony Orchestra's inaugural TSO Rocks the Fox series concert.

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It's not often that you go to a concert featuring the [Tucson Symphony Orchestra](#) and hear this invitation from the guest vocalist:

"If you want to get freaky, get your freak on!"

Canadian bari-tenor [Gavin Hope](#) threw that invite out moments into "For Michael: The Music of Michael Jackson," the inaugural TSO Rocks the Fox series concert. Two songs later, a woman in the front row got out of her seat and started dancing along as Hope and his four-piece Toronto-based [Jeans 'n Classics](#) band and trio of backup singers blasted out the Jackson 5 hit "ABC."

That inspired Hope to hop off the stage and join her, which prompted the first of several uproarious outbursts from the intergenerational audience loosely filling the Fox.

And that inspired a little boy in the front row named Marco to get on his feet and moonwalk to

Michael Jackson's disco-era hit "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough."

Which all made for an inviting introduction to those in the audience who had never imagined they would spend a Friday night at an orchestra concert.

The idea behind TSO Rocks the Fox is to appeal to those non-orchestra audience members. Judging by their applause, they got the message. That's not to say that we will see those two dozen young kids like Marco and their under-40 parents, or the healthy sprinkling of twentysomethings also in attendance Friday night, crowd into Tucson Music Hall for the TSO's next classical concert.

But it's a start.

"For Michael" celebrated the music of Michael Jackson from his Jackson 5 days to his landmark albums "Off the Wall" and "Thriller," which Hope sang with passion and an unbridled enthusiasm.

Hope showed us what he meant by getting your freak on as he gyrated and jammed to Jackson's biggest hits: "Billy Jean," "Rockin' Robin," "Rock With You" and "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'." Hope did not impersonate the King of Pop; he paid tribute to him with a voice that seamlessly reached into Jackson's higher register — although not nearly as high as Jackson was known to go — then effortlessly drop to the low range. It didn't sound like Jackson, and it was not meant to. Instead Hope maintained the integrity of Jackson's enduring music.

Hope was not the only one having fun on the Fox stage Friday night. Guest conductor Keitaro Harada, who as a first-grader shared a stage with Michael Jackson in his native Japan, seemed on the verge of doing his own moonwalk. When prodded by Hope, Harada bashfully declined, but several times throughout the two-hour concert he looked like he would break out and dance.

Under Harada's confident leadership, the orchestra filled in the sonic landscape of the ballads "Never Can Say Goodbye" and "Ben." Harada coaxed sweeping string passages that changed the dynamic of the softly uptempo "Rock With You" and the rollicking, jazzy "The Way You Make Me Feel." He was equally effective in the orchestra's more subtle contributions to "Beat It" and "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'," respecting that this was at its core a pop concert.

And like all good pop concerts, this one ended with speckles of cell phones piercing the darkness in time to a monster encore that left a lasting memory. For this, Hope chose Jackson's anthem "Man In the Mirror," a song that begs you to look first at yourself if you want to change the world.

Review: Tucson Symphony Orchestra's TSO Rocks the Fox "For Michael" concert with Gavin Hope and guest conductor Keitaro Harada at Fox Tucson Theatre Friday night. The [series](#) turns its attention to the music of Queen on April 5.