

Oklahoma City Philharmonic has a hit with Irving Berlin tribute

The Oklahoma City Philharmonic recently paid tribute to Irving Berlin with a pops concert pair titled "From Ragtime to Ritzes."



1

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Horatio Alger often wrote about impoverished boys from humble backgrounds who became successful through hard work, determination, courage and honesty. He could easily have been writing about Irving Berlin.

With a recent pops concert pair titled "From Ragtime to Ritzes," the Oklahoma City Philharmonic surveyed some two dozen Berlin classics, ranging from Broadway show tunes and Hollywood classics to poignant ballads and patriotic gems.

With fine contributions from five guest vocalists, this tribute to the man George Gershwin called "the greatest songwriter that has ever lived" left no doubts about the veracity of such a statement. One of the evening's many treats was getting to hear the rarely heard verses that preceded the familiar choruses of songs ranging from "Blue Skies" to "This Is a Great Country."

Tony DeSare accompanied himself at the piano in the catchy "Play a Simple Melody," followed by Judy McLane's bittersweet rendition of "What'll I Do?" Eric Summers demonstrated some deft dance moves in "Steppin' Out With My Baby" while Virginia Woodruff suggested how easy it is to "Let Yourself Go" with the music of Irving Berlin.

Ted Keegan possessed the most consistently appealing voice of the bunch, a tenor capable of a wide variety of shadings as heard in "Let's Face the Music and Dance." Keegan and the men later joined McLane for the lively "Heat Wave," a number to which Oklahomans could clearly relate.

Most in the audience probably knew that the musical "Annie Get Your Gun" introduced "There's No Business Like Show Business." But how many were aware that "You're Just in Love" came from "Call Me Madam" or that "Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor" found success as part of "Miss Liberty?" Berlin truly was an eclectic.

Our national holidays also benefited from Berlin's expertise. Keegan and McLane offered a lovely version of "White Christmas" while DeSare and Woodruff strutted through "Easter Parade." Laughter quickly spread through the audience when

Summers appeared as the Easter Bunny.

The concert's biggest liability was its excessive amplification, a miscalculation that often rendered Berlin's clever lyrics incomprehensible and gave the women's upper ranges a fingers-on-the-blackboard shrillness.

The evening's most appreciated extravagance was the quality of the orchestral arrangements, a fine collection that illustrated the orchestrator's craft in how to showcase great melodies. Among the standouts were “Blue Skies,” “Remember” and “God Bless America.”

Whether accompanying the singers or spotlighting the nuances of an orchestral feature, Joel Levine lent a steady hand that brought these arrangements vividly to life. The evening clearly delivered on its promise, leaving most everyone to marvel at Berlin's musical mastery. Or, as Jerome Kern famously put it, “Irving Berlin is American music.”

— **Rick Rogers**



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