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CONCERT REVIEW: Mastery of material powers Pitre at Pops Concert

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Louise Pitre is both singer and actress, as well as a professional entertainer to her fingertips.

She took command of the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium stage Friday night, as Symphony Nova Scotia's Pops Concert star of the evening, in a program of showbiz classics that ranged from Charlie Chaplin's Smile to ABBA's Mamma Mia.

There are not many performers around with the versatility and authority that allow them to sing Al Jolson (Rock a Bye Your Baby With a Dixie Melody) and Judy Garland (The Man That Got Away) as well as she does, and without the slightest abandonment of her own identity as a performer through sleazy imitation of such iconic interpreters.

We know not only the songs but the classic performances of them. And while she has picked up a bit of the quasi-hysterical style of Garland, with jerky arm gestures meant, I suppose, to suggest spontaneous emotional intensity, she is such good actress she gets away with it.

In any case, there is always something quasi-hysterical about the typical showbiz anthem (As Long As He Needs Me, for example). It's designed to go over the top as something special, but fails to do so with some of us because it is so corny a conceit and a so clumsy a programming device.

But Pitre is so skillful, we end up admiring her. She really is a powerful entertainer and that's the bottom line.

While evoking echoes of Little Shop of Horrors (Ashman and Menken), Oliver (Lionel Bart) as well as signature classic songs from shows by Jacques Brel, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Harold Arlen, Jule Styne and others, Pitre slipped into each of these classic showstoppers as smoothly as a synchomesh transmission transitioning from low to high with just a touch of the gas pedal.

She can do this because she has such a thorough grasp of her repertoire.

Pitre's piano player, Diane Leah, gave elegant support when the symphony was silent, playing with the same sense of improvised ease and familiarity as the singer brought to her interpretations.

At the top of the show, Symphony Nova Scotia resident conductor Jonathan Govias paced the orchestra through Cameron Wilson's clever adaptations of Henry Mancini's Pink Panther theme in the styles of Mozart, Beethoven, the Romantics, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Webern and Elvis Presley.

Each style was identified by familiar tags (such as the four-note, knock-on-the-door motif of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony). This charming novelty introductory number elicited much

applause as it ended up with a parody of Country Style and what Wilson annoyingly tagged as Smoke On the H2O Pink Panther.

For the beginning of the second half, the orchestra played the Waltz from the Delibes ballet Coppelia. It was a very pretty performance as a vignette of 19th-century pop music at its most elegant.

Stephen Pedersen is a freelance arts writer who lives in Halifax.

(spedersen@ns.sympatico.ca)

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