

'The music is timeless'

Lansing Symphony teams with Jeans'n Classics for a salute to Billy Joel

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by Christopher Horb



Roll over Beethoven, it's time to rock.

The lights go up on the Lansing Symphony Orchestra's "Piano Man: The Music of Billy Joel" at Wharton Center's Cobb Great Hall Saturday. It's the LSO's latest collaboration with the Jeans 'n Classics band.

According to Jeans 'n Classics headliner and former Detroit resident Jean Meilleur, the opportunity to put his own mark on Joel's hits is a huge thrill.

"This isn't a tribute act — we're not just going out there trying to clone an artist's performances," he said, in a phone interview. "There are certain inflections that must be there to be true to the originals, but I'm singing in my own voice. It's all about celebrating the music, some of the greatest pop music that's ever been written."

Founded by Peter Brennan, the Canada-based Jeans 'n Classics has been combining rock musicians and singers with symphony orchestras worldwide for over 20 years, and has tackled the likes of Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen and Queen in its programs. The troupe last paired with the LSO for a tribute to Elton John in 2009.

For "Piano Man," Joel hits including "Uptown Girl," "Only the Good Die Young" and the ubiquitous title tune have been given symphonic arrangements that remain true to the

original compositions while making use of the sweeping instrumentation a full symphony orchestra provides.

Meilleur said it's not as unlikely pairing of styles as one might think.

"(Joel's) classical training comes through in his melodies. There's an availability in his songs that allows for really opening them up for other instruments. He's an easy choice to orchestrate."

Joel is a six-time Grammy-award winner and has sold over 150 million records worldwide.

"The music is timeless," Meilleur said.

Meilleur, who has been performing professionally for over 25 years, and is in his 15th year of headlining for Jeans 'n Classics, sees the group's shows as chance to introduce the uninitiated to the work of symphony orchestras, something he says is "hugely important."

"I hope people discover that they have a cultural gem in their midst in the LSO," Meilleur said. "These people are incredible musicians, and it's so thrilling to play with them."

"For a town to have an orchestra that is capable of pulling off so many kinds of music is really something special."