

Orchestra soars on Eagles' wings

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By Gwenda Nemerofsky

Fog wafting across the stage, jean-clad musicians and audience, impromptu dancing, and the aroma of popcorn -- could this really be a Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra concert? The Burton Cummings Theatre rocked at Friday night's opening Classically Hip series and Maestro Alexander Mickelthwate and the WSO were in the thick of it with Toronto's Jeans 'n' Classics Band. On the program -- Hotel California: The Music of the Eagles and fans of all ages came out in droves to hear an evening of their favourite Eagles tunes. They were not disappointed -- in fact they were thrilled. From the title song until the encore, audience members clapped, danced and sang along with gusto, having a fantastic time. Best of all, they connected with the orchestra. In a stroke of inspiration, the WSO invited CityTV's Jimmy Mac to do the concert introduction. Decked out in an over-the-top tuxedo complete with patent spats, Mac, a stand-up comedian, warmed up the audience with tales of his on-air forays into the community, where he has to do "unguy" things like arts and crafts. He had everyone in stitches, while Mickelthwate fidgeted in the background, checking his watch and feigning impatience. The audience was treated to a great selection of hits, including The Long Run, with vocals by host Michael Shotton, accompanied by stylish singing by Katalin Kiss and Lis Soderberg. The WSO brass section was downright sexy in this number. Shotton attempted to replicate the throaty edge of Don Henley's voice in the moody Sunset Grill. Kiss was powerful in the hard-hitting All She Wants to Do is Dance, a song that kept the strings busy and the brass shining. Good arrangements ensured that the WSO was a major player in the show. Principal trumpet Brian Sykora was centre stage for a sizzling solo in In a New York Minute. Concertmaster Gwen Hoebig miked up for a funky solo, then a duet with guitarist Michale Vassos in Hotel California. The talented Vassos, a last-minute replacement, showed he could sing with the best of them in a moving rendition of Heart of the Matter. Soderberg was exceptional in the anthem-like The Last Resort, her strong, pure voice bringing it to life and Kiss's smooth, sultry phrasing in Desperado had the audience in the palm of her hand. This was a breakthrough for the WSO, the energy and spirit in the hall unprecedented. Newcomers to the symphony went home Friday night loving the WSO -- and I'll bet they'll come back.