

Music of Freedom a varied, mostly successful presentation

By: by Gwenda Nemerofsky

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Winnipeg newcomer Richard Lee was under the gun this weekend. The Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra's freshman resident conductor had the daunting responsibility of directing almost 100 performers in the three mixed-media WSO Pops shows entitled Music of Freedom.

Joining the ranks of the WSO was youth choir Prairie Voices, members of the Winnipeg Infantry Tactical Grouping, folksinger/songwriter James Keelaghan, jazz vocalist Anna-Lisa Kirby and veteran CKUW radio host Ron Robinson. They assembled to pay homage to past and present heroes, battles and victories, with the theme of freedom wending its way throughout.

As with many battles, positive progress came in fits and starts, with some setbacks among the successes.

The program itself presented many challenges, as it attempted to meld patriotic film scores with homespun folk songs and Big Band-era tunes.

Four numbers by movie-score maven John Williams relied heavily on Fred Liessen's snare drum capabilities to evoke a military mood and the long-time principal obliged with precision. It took a few moments for everyone to get in step for March from 1941, but once they did, this anthem sparkled. Exceptional brass work featured lots of nuance, not just pomp and bluster.

Keelaghan has a wonderfully resonant honey-toned voice you could listen to all night. His song, Honoré, about Honoré Jackson, a survivor of the 1885 Red River Rebellion, displayed Keelaghan's signature tuneful appeal.

By contrast, Medusa, co-written with Karine Polwart, bordered on morbid, with lyrics including "fresh blood," "swallowed whole," "petrified," "never coming back" and "row on row" -- not likely images the invited guests from 17 Wing particularly enjoyed.

Prairie Voices, directed by Kristel Peters, lent their exultant and hope-filled youthful voices to Williams' Exultate Justi from Empire of the Sun. This was a welcome furlough from the gruesome Medusa and gung-ho military themes previous; the singers in particularly fine voice, bouncing along to Lee's vibrant direction. The glorious brass section made this especially heartwarming.

Robinson scuttled in and out, dressed in a snappy purple vest, providing context and humorous, if somewhat long, snippets of information about the era and its music.

Lee himself never spoke, even when a few words might have bridged the frequent awkward pauses in the program.

Kirby was a brilliant addition, with her stylish rendition of And the Angels Sing. Dressed and coiffed in the style of the times, she lent her pure tone and silky vocals to the Johnny Mercer standard and later returned for a medley of period favourites.

Her White Cliffs of Dover and We'll Meet Again were clear as a bell, swoop-free and tastefully unaffected. She's a peach.

Kudos go to concertmaster Karl Stobbe and trumpeters Dave Lawton and Brian Sykora for cracking solo work.

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Concert Review

Music of Freedom

Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra

Centennial Concert Hall

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Three and a half stars out of five

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