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Pops offers sampling of British pop

Concert review

By Chris Varias • Enquirer contributor • February 6, 2009

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The British have made their mark in every popular-music arena from the orchestra hall to the silver screen to the '60s rock revolution. This weekend's Cincinnati Pops Orchestra program, "Pops Goes British," chronicles Brits going pop, and it offers a sample of proof that the U.K. should be near the top of anyone's list of pop-music superpowers.

Advertisement The Pops Orchestra treated Friday's opening-night crowd at Music Hall to selections that ranged from "God Save the Queen" to "Hey Jude." And conductor Erich Kunzel got by with a little help from his friends, namely the King's Singers, a British vocal ensemble making a return trip to sing with the Pops.

The beginning of the first set was marked by true pop music, not the type heard on Top-40 radio, but pop music in the sense that it was music everyone knows.

Twelve "Beefeaters" marched down the aisle to start the show. Each took his statuesque place at the front of the stage when the Pops opened with "Rule Britannia" and "God Save the Queen," with American tenor Kevin Anderson providing the vocals. These were followed by another traditional classic, "Pomp and Circumstance."

Kunzel got some laughs out of a winter-weary crowd when he described Camelot as "most beautiful place in the world – a place where there is no snow." The orchestra's selections from "Camelot" offered a nice escape.

The King's Singers, a vocal sextet that formed at King's College in Cambridge in 1968, took things in a more contemporary direction. Their first selection was a bit jarring – an a cappella take on the Beach Boys' "Kokomo" from the movie "Cocktail" doesn't necessary come to mind when you think of old England. But they quickly redeemed themselves with a rendition of Paul McCartney's "Live and Let Die," complete with rocking Pops accompaniment.

The singers closed the first half with somewhat mawkish movie music that included "A Groovy Kind of Love," Seal's "A Kiss from a Rose," and Elton John's "Candle in the Wind."

The Pops returned to Sir Elton in the second half of the show, playing an instrumental renditions of "Candle in the Wind," followed by "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" featuring piano and vocals by arranger Julie Spangler.

Agent 007 also got his due, as the Pops performed the "James Bond Theme" and theme music from the films "For Your Eyes Only" and "Goldfinger."

There was room in the program for a traditional Scottish tune. "Auld Lang Syne" kicked off the second half of the show and marked the appearance of the Cincinnati Caledonian Pipes and Drum Band, whose bagpipes added a powerful punch. "That was noisy up here," Kunzel observed.

No collection of British pop music can leave out the Fab Four. The second half came to a finish with several Beatles songs. The Pops kicked off the Beatles block with "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." The King's Singers then returned to the stage to do some tunes with the Pops and others a cappella, including a lively take on the lesser-known "Honey Pie."

"Pops Goes British" repeats Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m. Tickets are available at 513-381-3300 or www.cincinnati pops.org.

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