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ISO builds musical monument to pre-eminent maker of song

By Jay Harvey

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Most great American songwriters developed signature styles, even though the very best were quite capacious: Cole Porter wrote both "Don't Fence Me In" and "You're the Top." His fellow Hoosier Hoagy Carmichael wrote both "Rockin' Chair" and "The Nearness of You."

But someone once said that the songs of Irving Berlin seem always to have been there, like emanations of the American spirit. The splendid arrangements and unfussy continuity of Jack Everly's new Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra program glory in that abundant mystery.

They also contain multitudes of moods, reflecting everything from the city boy touting the latest craze ("Alexander's Ragtime Band") to the sophisticate of "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails," from the pained romanticism of "Remember" to the declamatory prayer "God Bless America," which ends the program.

In "Irving Berlin: From Rags to Ritzes," there's no shortage of period style in the costumes and carriage of the guest vocalists. On Friday, even their singing, while laudably individual, carried welcome echoes of past interpreters: Ashley Brown aptly evoked one Ethel in "Heat Wave" (Waters) and a quite different one in "They Say It's Wonderful" (Merman).

James T. Lane embodied the dapper song-and-dance men of Broadway's golden era in "Steppin' Out With My Baby." Tony DeSare, a seductive crooner with piano skills that allow him to be credible in lively stuff, waxed encyclopedic in classic keyboard styles during "I Love a Piano."

There were some soaring solos, ovation magnets well-distributed -- Brown's "What'll I Do?," NaTasha Yvette Williams' "How Deep Is the Ocean?" and Hugh Panaro's "Blue Skies."

The ensembles coalesced naturally, with appropriate stage business and firm harmonies, especially in a dance-themed medley of eight songs in the first half. And of course, no one could be left out of the sequence "White Christmas," "Easter Parade" and "Alexander's Ragtime Band" just after intermission.

Such a show can't include everything of quality, but Everly has put together something more generous than a sample. He took the "salute" format and, while keeping it loose and unpretentious (OK, it inevitably got a bit grandiose with "God Bless America"), built a sumptuously orchestrated monument to an unparalleled creator of popular art.

Some fans will notice the absence of a favorite or two, and there's little room for oddities -- such as, say, "You Cannot Make Your Shimmy Shake on Tea." I've never heard it; it could be a lousy song. But that title sure has the Berlin sound running through it.

Additional Facts

'Irving Berlin: From Ragtime to Ritzes'

Where: Hilbert Circle Theatre, 45 Monument Circle.

When: 8 p.m. today, 7 p.m. Sunday.

Tickets: \$20-\$73; call (317) 639-4300 or go to www.indianapolissymphony.org.

Bottom line: A tribute becomes a monument right before our ears.
