

MGM musicals created a wonderful night of nostalgia

By Peg Goldberg Longstreth

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Jack Everly has a voracious appetite for music.

He is also clearly a perfectionist, a creative genius and someone with apparently boundless energy, someone who is musically light years ahead of many other conductors/arrangers on the horizon today.

On Tuesday evening, an absolutely packed hall at the Philharmonic Center for the Arts got to enjoy the first of seven performances of another Everly brainchild, "The Great MGM Musicals."

Metro Goldwyn Mayer may theoretically have ceased to exist in the 1970s; you couldn't prove it last evening in Naples. It was alive and well at the Phil.

The evening consisted of 14 trips down musical movie memory lane. Jack Everly arranged or co-arranged all but three.

I used to shudder when I picked up a pops program, perused the obscene number of selections for the two-hour program, and wanted to depart right then. "Twenty-three selections!" I would mentally moan, knowing before the lights dimmed and the baton was lifted it was going to be an endurance contest of one number after another with no luscious arrangements and nary a segue.

There wasn't a bland arrangement in the bunch. Not just that but — glory of glories — each arrangement flowed so seamlessly into the next, there was hardly a moment to breathe.

The only thing missing was the popcorn.

Murmurs of "is that great or what," "what a great sound," "fabulous," floated around where I was sitting, virtually the entire evening.

The audience loved it.

I also loved the strikingly effective use of lighting enveloping the floor-to-ceiling, draped "theatrical sheers" on stage, subtly creating the illusion of another opening night at one of the great MGM movies of that era. That draping, and the use of a screen to project a couple of dates/years, were the only props used the entire evening.

Everything else was accomplished with Everly, the Naples Philharmonic Orchestra, the Philharmonic Chorale, and five superb vocalists (one of whom proved also to be a more than slightly respectable tap-dancer).

The movies whence all this great music sprang are so embedded in the minds of Americans, you and I and everyone else in the audience simply mentally filled in the gaps, knew the story line.

Life was so much simpler then.

You knew who the good guys and the bad guys were.

You knew good would always win over evil.

So here they came, those wonderful non-stop pearls of popular musical and movie history, and everyone in the audience nodded and smiled. A totally schmaltzed "When I'm Calling You." "You Stepped Out of a Dream," "It's a Most Unusual Day," "San Francisco," "Be My Love."

A taste both of Christmas ("Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas") and of Easter (the incomparable Irving Berlin's "Easter Parade"), "The Wizard of Oz," "Stepping Out (With My Baby)." And intermission was yet to come!

If noisy applause and cheers are any indicator, "Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe" won out over my two personal favorites, the smoldering "Love Is Where You Find it," and "Dancing in the Dark."

The evening's *piece de resistance*, however, was Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's "Can't Help Lovin' That Man O Mine."

The evening ended with Everly's arrangement of "Singin' in the Rain."

Leaving the hall, I couldn't help but notice just how many people were humming the melody of any number of the evening's selections. It's the best medicine in the world for a too-weary soul.

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