

Pops program lovingly skewers divas

By **Mark Kanny**

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Uproarious humor lifts the Pops' salute to Broadway Divas to a must-see show, one that also includes superb straight performances from the rich legacy of American musicals.

As always, guest conductor Jack Everly brought a beautifully crafted production, created by the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra-managed Symphonic Pops Consortium, of which he is music director.

The evening opens with a two-part musical prelude arranged by Everly that starts with an instrumental medley and is completed by four of the five singers performing "There's No Business Like Show Business."

After Cara Johnston's winning solo in "I Could Have Danced All Night," Toni DiBuono offered the evening's first parody by singing "There's No Divas Like Old Divas, Like Old Divas Like Me" in Ethel Merman style.

Everly introduced Heather Tepe, 14, as a "diva in training" to sing the ultimate child-star vehicle, "Tomorrow" from "Annie."

Because "Tomorrow" has been ubiquitous to the point of absurdity, the following number had the audience in stitches. DiBuono returned in costume as Annie, as though she had sung the premiere 30 years ago. That Ethel Merman-style New York accent was perfect for "I'll be 49 -- ta-morrah." The lyrics by David Levy were hilarious through all its verses.

The Pittsburgh Symphony performed magnificently under Everly's leadership, producing more beautiful sonorities -- fabulous strings -- with much better balances than it has at several of the Mellon Grand Classics concerts this season.

Everly offered a little misdirection in his introduction to "With One Look" from Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Sunset Boulevard" about aging star Norma Desmond. What seemed to be a solo turned into a competitive duet when a second Norma emerged. Then it was a trio, then quartet, of dueling Desmonds.

Turning the "Tomorrow" joke on its head for "With One Look" was Tepe playing the over-the-hill star. out-belting the older singers and ending with a split. Top that!

Affection and humor characterized the second half as well. For example, both Tepe and Everly played piano in the "I Love a Piano" segment that included a wonderfully droll spoken translation of a verse that was sung in German. The send up of Liza Minnelli's hyperkinetic and breathlessly confused stage manner was wicked.

The only problematic aspect of Friday night's concert was the inconsistent amplification of the singers, which is likely to be corrected in subsequent performances.

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