

Las Vegas Sun

REVIEW:

Using the familiar as lure, Nevada Pops charms



Leila Navidi

Music director/conductor Richard McGee leads Nevada Pops' "Under the Lights" concert at UNLV's Ham Hall on Friday.

By [Joe Brown](#) (contact)

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Although Nevada Pops shares a good chunk of its DNA with the Las Vegas Philharmonic, it has an entirely different, visibly relaxed vibe.

The audience and performers are more casually dressed, the tickets cost less and if you get there early enough, you can sit where you like, and the instrumentalists tend to stand up when they take solos.

"Pops," by definition, tends toward the familiar, hummable and bite-sized side of the orchestral repertoire, salting jazz, pop and show tunes in with well-known classical pieces. Although this relatively new performing ensemble is dedicated to making orchestral music accessible, that doesn't mean Nevada Pops takes a training-wheels approach to the music.

In his welcoming comments at Friday night's highly enjoyable "Under the Lights" show at UNLV's Ham Hall — the first in its first full season of concerts — music director/conductor Richard McGee promised a different configuration of musicians for each of the six Pops concerts. This time out, McGee convened a big band, which he said was "very similar to the studio orchestras used in Las Vegas showrooms for years," with a jazz trio of piano, bass and drums at its core, flanked with horns and strings.

McGee warmed up the band with the secret agent swing of Henry Mancini's "Peter Gunn Theme," which gave the strings a chance to slink and menace and the brass to growl and bam-POW! McGee then juxtaposed the Dixieland filigree of "South Rampart Street Parade" with his own instrumental arrangement of Stevie Wonder's "Do I Do," but without the untethered vocals, the result seemed like so much earthbound and funk-free vamping. During both of these numbers, the Pops' best efforts were hindered by the chancy acoustics of Ham Hall, which gobbled up a good part of the bottom and middle tones.

The Pops generously turned the spotlight —and about a third of the concert's running time — to the Hot Club of Las Vegas, a gypsy jazz ensemble that includes several former members of the "Mamma Mia!" orchestra. Opening with the lacy guitar runs of Django Reinhardt's "Blues Clair," lead guitarist Mundo Juillerat and rhythm guitarist Marlow Valentin generated considerable heat and light, and working with a minimal percussion set, including bells and a wooden box, Mickey Alvarado took a solo that mimicked a blazing tap dance. Hot Club vocalist Carole Linnea Johnson, celestial in a champagne-colored gown, contributed a sly theatricality to "Belleville Rencouvous" and the Eydie Gorme hit "Sabor a Mi." The Hot Club's songs were lightly sweetened with strings by the Pops, and for Duke Ellington's "Caravan," McGee brought the brass and woodwinds back in for a bracing contrast of textures.

The evening's second half was devoted to the indelible melodies of George Gershwin. McGee called up old friend Rocky Lombardo for a velvety trumpet solo on "Embraceable You," and amid the amber twilight glow of "Summertime" McGee himself contributed a honey-toned trombone solo.

The program closed with an exuberant, beautifully voiced "Rhapsody in Blue," featuring guest soloist Scott Holshouser, pianist for the Houston Symphony. Holshouser was perfectly positioned so the audience could enjoy the musical dynamics and visual theatrics of the piece, as he playfully romped through the themes and variations. "Rhapsody" was a triumph for the Nevada Pops, recharging a perhaps over-familiar piece with freshness and dynamism, an object lesson for the rewards of experiencing live performance.

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