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Keying on the Gershwins, Feinstein bolsters already great Chicagoland Pops concert

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BY MIRIAM DI NUNZIO Staff Reporter

Wow. That's what popped into my head more than once on Saturday night as I sat in the Rosemont Theatre taking in the season-opening concert of the Chicagoland Pops Orchestra. What a treasure for Chicago this marvelous orchestra is. Under the direction of music director and principal conductor Arnie Roth, the 60-piece orchestra made up of world-class musicians is not to be missed.

The thought of a full pops orchestra out in the 'burbs might have seemed like a joke not too long ago, but we are fortunate to have such an entity in our backyard. The crystalline acoustics at the 4,200-seat Rosemont Theatre more than proved their worth, as every note from every instrument danced gloriously in the air -- which is not necessarily the case at some other concert halls in town.

The evening was billed as a tribute to the Great American Songbook, but kicked off with the rousing "Brindisi" from Giuseppe Verdi's "La Traviata." The selection proved a grand showcase for guest vocalists, tenor Rodrick Dixon and soprano Alfreda Burke, who also navigated the songbooks of George Gershwin (numbers from "Porgy and Bess") and Leonard Bernstein ("Maria" and "Tonight" from "West Side Story") with the greatest of ease.

The second half of the night belonged to pianist-singer Michael Feinstein, who was in his glory in a program devoted to the Gershwins ("Nice Work if You Can Get It," "Fascinating Rhythm," "Someone to Watch Over Me"), Sammy Cahn and Jules Styne ("Guess I'll Hang My Tears Out to Dry") and Bernstein/Sondheim ("Somewhere"). With his striking features, endearing personality and signature musical style, Feinstein remains one of the best contemporary interpreters of American standards. The combination of Feinstein and the Pops was delightful.

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To hear the music of Gershwin, Sondheim and Bernstein performed with all its fabulous nuances by a full orchestra is something we don't often get the chance to experience these days when synthesizers or pre-recorded music miserably take the place of entire string sections, woodwinds or brass. The Pops is by no means heavy-handed symphony, but it is beautiful popular music and a lot of fun. So even if this isn't what purists will get at Symphony Center, it may very well lead listeners -- and especially younger patrons -- to appreciate big, bold orchestral music. Even if it's not Bach, Mozart or Beethoven.

NOTE: The next Chicagoland Pops Orchestra concert is the Christmas show featuring Johnny Mathis on Dec. 18.

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