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Orchestra London finds Gowan outsells Bach

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Review

The trouble with Orchestra London is classical music.

There are simply not enough people in this city who love Bach, Brahms and Beethoven the way others love Bernstein or Gershwin or the Beatles, Pink Floyd or the Rolling Stones.

Or pop rocker Lawrence Gowan for that matter.

Larry was in town Friday night, taking a break from his current gig as the lead singer of Styx and performing with the orchestra for the sixth time — his third as the full-blown star of the show.

Centennial Hall was jammed, as it almost always is for one of the orchestra's Jeans n' Classics concert.

The orchestra packs them in for its Pops series, too, but rarely for its heavy duty Masterworks and Sinfonia programs.

Although the Pops and Jeans n' Classics aren't a big musical stretch for the players, they're a lot more fun.

Who wouldn't be turned on performing for a full house like the one at the hail last night?

The enthusiasm of the audience was palpable at times, with thundering applause, whistles of approval and hoots of appreciation erupting at the end of each piece. You never hear anything like this when the orchestra performs the classics.

The audience of 1,600 demonstrated that there are a lot of people in this city who are fond of the orchestra, people in their 30s, 40s and 50s who grew up on rock and pop and want more than guitar, bass and drums.

They'd hate to see the orchestra die and the sponsors of Jeans n' Classics showed they were tuned into that.

Corus Entertainment London, which owns and operates four radio stations in the London market, including the Hawk, scored a huge public relations coup by announcing it will be donating \$10,000 a year for the next five years to the debt-ridden orchestra.

Merrill Lynch, another big sponsor of the series, topped that with a commitment of \$90,000 during the next three years.

Faced with a debt that may reach \$600,000 by the end of the year, the orchestra and Gowan gave the kind of performance that should make for great ticket sales for the series again next year.

Gowan, a Canadian pop rocker who produced six albums and sold about 750,000 copies of them in the 1980s and 90s, performed his hits — *Strange Animal*, *A Criminal Mind*, *Moonlight Desires*, *All the Lovers in the World* — and about a dozen other tunes, too.

He and the orchestra closed the first half of the concert with a splendid rendition of the Beatles' *Walrus*.

Gowan and guest conductor Stephane Laforest engaged in light-hearted banter between songs, occasionally in French, Laforest's mother tongue.

Gowan switched between keyboards and 12-string guitar and once thanked the orchestra for saving his "ass" at the end of the song.

He repeatedly referred to the orchestra's concert master, Joseph Lanza, as "Joe."

His easy air fit perfectly with the pizza and beer atmosphere of the hall — a defining feature of the series — and that's undoubtedly why the orchestra keeps asking him back.