

A swingin' night with James Darren

By Valerie Scher

CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Singer James Darren is a compendium of coolness, a wizard of with-it-ness. His hipster style - which owes much to legendary Rat Packers Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr. - is so retro it's current, so genuine it transcends parody.

That was entertainingly evident over the weekend as Darren made his San Diego Symphony Summer Pops debut opening the orchestra's 10-weekend series at downtown's Navy Pier. While the summer lineup features everything from opera to circus performers, Darren was secure in his night-clubby niche.

Friday's program, repeated Saturday, also showcased the orchestra. Resident conductor Matthew Garbutt introduced and led excerpts from musicals by Cole Porter, Frank Loesser and Leonard Bernstein. Best were the three dance numbers from Bernstein's "On the Town," during which the orchestra conveyed the music's raucous energy and melancholy lyricism.

Once Darren took over, however, Navy Pier was more like Vegas by the bay. The singer-actor-director, who long ago appeared opposite Sandra Dee in "Gidget" movies, was like an incarnation of Vic Fontaine, the 1960's-era crooner he portrayed on TV's "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine." Darren's delivery was so suave that he could give tutorials in how to work a crowd. He graciously toasted a couple that became engaged during the intermission He shamelessly shouted, “you’re sensational!” to the audience. The most striking aspect of his singing was its naturalness. Though his interpretations never approached the profundity of Sinatra or the virtuosity of Tony Bennett; Darren knew his way around a song, and performed with ingratiating ease.

Darren could probably make anything swing, even Puccini's "Nessun dorma." But he stuck to mellow favorites like "Night and Day," "Let's Fall in Love," and 'The Best is Yet to Come," ably backed by the orchestra plus his fine contingent of musicians – music director/pianist Wayland Pikard, bassist Chris Colangelo and drummer Kevin Winard. Darren even supplied a sultry, bossa nova version of the old Frankie Valli hit, "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You."

The cleverly assembled clips from his film and TV career (shown on screens on either side of the stage) were both amusing and informative. Who knew that the old animated TV series, "The Flintstones," included a character based on Darren? The character’s name appropriately enough was Jimmy Darrock.

But there was nothing remotely rocky about Darren’s summer pops program.

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