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Concert review: Livingston Taylor displays charm and control in show with orchestra

by Susan L. Pena • Sept. 28, 2015

At exactly the time Pope Francis was scheduled to begin his final Mass in Philadelphia on Sunday, a magical thing happened at Reading Area Community College's Miller Center for the Arts.

Singer/songwriter/guitarist Livingston Taylor, appearing with the Reading Pops Orchestra under conductor Willis Rapp, held the small audience in thrall in a program that combined his own songs, a song by his "beautiful brother James," and a few songs from the cabaret repertoire.

One would assume that a person who taught a long-popular course in stage performance at the Berklee School of Music knows a thing or two about putting songs across. But what Taylor did with these songs, his deep rapport with the orchestra, and his effect on the listeners, were uncanny.

Standing erect in his formal suit and bow-tie, with his craggy face and wide comedian's smile, Taylor had both the complete control of a craftsman over his voice, guitar and diction, and the complete vulnerability of an artist. If you were susceptible to this sort of thing, he could crack you wide open.

And that's what he did, from his opening number, "When Sunny Gets Blue" (by Marvin Fisher and Jack Segal) which he gave an elegant, nuanced rendition, to his own incredibly delicate, deeply moving "I Will Be in Love With You," and "I'm Glad I Know You Well," written just before his oldest brother Alex passed away.

He followed those with the bouncy, somewhat whimsical "Everybody's Just Like Me," and "Blind," in which he was accompanied by pianist Erwin Chandler.

He began James Taylor's "Carolina in My Mind" with only his guitar; the orchestra slipped in behind him for a beautiful, expressive performance.

After giving a quick history of railroads in hushed tones, calling them "the wellspring of a flood of tonal ideas" for American composers, he sang train-related songs in an ebullient "Railroad Medley."

Then, in a tribute to the art of song lyric writing, he recited Oscar Hammerstein II's "If I Loved You" from "Carousel" and "I'm Just a Girl Who Can't Say No" from "Oklahoma" in the way of a consummate actor, with respect for their brilliance. This explains why, in his concert, you could hear every last word distinctly - so refreshing.

Then, he gave touching, off-beat, intimate, plaintive renditions, with just guitar, of "People Will Say We're in Love" (also from "Oklahoma") and Rodgers and Hart's "My Funny Valentine."

He wound up with "Banjo Extravaganza," performing banjo solos with the orchestra, mingling classical and bluegrass styles with panache. And as an encore, a touching "Over the Rainbow."

The Pops did justice to the wonderful arrangements by Bill Elliot of Taylor's repertoire; they also opened the program with John Whitney's arrangement of George Gershwin's "Strike Up the Band" (incorporating service tunes and a conga) and later played Richard Hayman's lovely arrangement of R. Ortolani and N. Oliviero's "More."

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