

Symphony Pops tackle Vegas with glitz and humor

By **Mark Kanny**

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Conductor Jack Everly made no secret of the tacky glitter ahead on Friday night. When he turned around to start conducting the Pittsburgh Symphony Pops, the back of his jacket was adorned with the word "VEGAS" in red lights.

The latest production from the Symphonic Pops Consortium, of which Everly is artistic director, embraced the excess of some Las Vegas-style entertainment with good cheer and touches of humor at weekend concerts at Heinz Hall, Downtown.

"High Rollers" Overture was the conductor's own arrangement of several songs and made the evening's best use of the big band that occupied the right side of the stage in rows of reeds and brass. The strings were all on the other side of the stage.

The show evoked the styles of several Vegas entertainers with varying degrees of devotion and satire. Brain Duprey's version of Frank Sinatra featured smooth vocals that had the Sinatra timbre and were delivered with a combination of patience and smugness.

But it was the Liberace of Martin Preston that ran through the show like a string of colored beads which defined the production. The costumes alone were a hoot, and there were plenty of them. One sequined "coat" looked like an overloaded bathrobe with fur trim and balls. Playing his costumes to the audience the way Liberace did, Preston extended a fur-cuffed sleeve to a woman in the audience and said, "Want to feel it?"

Liberace's trademark candelabra sat on the piano as Preston played the opening of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 and other music. The imitator had a less flashy piano style than Liberace himself, but Preston was more than adequate at the keyboard.

The evening's funniest segment was "Joe and Ally: It's Us Again" -- a show biz couple offering their 10th annual farewell tour -- which was well performed by Joe Cassidy and Allison Briner. You know the roles: she's in love with him and he is, too.

Briner offered a hilarious sequence of vocal and facial parodies of top women singers including Barbra Streisand, Liza Minnelli, Bernadette Peters, Charo and Cher. Mismatching artist and repertoire was part of the fun. The topper was Ethel Mermen belting out "Silent Night."

Some humor probably was not intended. But, hearing "I Gotta Be Me" and "I Did It My Way" performed by an imitator, well sung as they were, struck me as just plain hilarious.

Mark Kanny can be reached at mkanny@tribweb.com or 412-320-7877.