

MUSIC REVIEW

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Pops gets a little help from good friends

By Sarah Rodman, Globe Staff | June 8, 2007

Old friends weren't only in the audience at the annual "Presidents at the Pops" gala Wednesday night, they were also on stage.

In addition to the corporate bigwigs -- who raised more than \$1 million for the Pops' educational and community outreach programs -- raising a glass, familiar faces and voices lent their skills to a rousing night at Symphony Hall.

Pops laureate conductor John Williams was on hand to conduct from several of his scores. Local legend James Taylor, Simmons College graduate and veteran television journalist Gwen Ifill -- who got her start in Boston -- and conductor Keith Lockhart's personal friend and Broadway star Maureen McGovern all lent sparkle to the night. But it was the fresh-faced exuberance of the youngsters in the Boston Children's Chorus that stole the hearts of the assembled during the 2-hour, 15-minute performance.

The night got off to a suitably lighthearted start when Charlie Baker, president of the "Presidents at the Pops" fund-raising committee and Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, came onstage to announce that Lockhart would be late because of a mysterious "transportation problem." The assistant conductor then led the orchestra through its jolly version of "Charlie on the M.T.A." as a film of the maestro getting lost on the T -- and running into Mayor Thomas Menino, Williams, and Wally the Green Monster in the process -- played on screens above them.

Lockhart then swept in through the side doors leading the red-jacketed Chorus up to the stage.

The Chorus, led by animated and encouraging director Anthony Trecek-King, performed two selections: the reverent yet joyful "Las Amarillas" and a nuanced "Deep River" that was filled with resonant lows and bright highs.

The orchestra picked the perfect match for its continuing salute to "Oscar and Tony" in McGovern, who as a film and Broadway veteran knows the terrain well.

Performing tunes by Harold Arlen, the radiant redhead was breathtaking doing a yearning, jazzy take on "Optimistic Voices," a scat-happy rendition of "Ding Dong the Witch Is Dead," and an unamplified version of "Over the Rainbow," all from "The Wizard of Oz." That last song was truly riveting as the hall went pin-drop quiet to hear the bell-like clarity of McGovern's sweet high notes.

She followed with an equally impressive medley of "The Man That Got Away," "Stormy Weather (Keeps Rainin' All the Time)," and "Blues in the Night (My Mama Done Tol' Me)" that had razor-sharp precision without sacrificing an ounce of interpretive emotion and reminded everyone of Arlen's many gifts.

Williams handled the second half conducting spirited passages from his scores of the "Harry Potter" films and "The Cowboys." He also had the pleasure of hearing the Chorus flawlessly perform his jubilant "Dry Your Tears, Afrika" from "Amistad" for a deserved standing ovation.

The night closed on a patriotic note with Taylor and Ifill providing narration to the iconic historical images of Steven Spielberg's "Celebration 2000: American Journey" -- commissioned by Bill Clinton for the millennium celebrations -- and Williams's score. The words, from great American literature, poetry, and public record, worked in concert with music filled with bold, brass figures, and contemplative string arrangements. ■