

Posted on Fri, Mar. 23, 2007

Old Blue Eyes would approve

Tribute to Sinatra is exceptional

BY PUNCH SHAW / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM



Steve Lippia gives a respectful and loving treatment to Frank Sinatra's work in a concert with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra on Thursday.

FORT WORTH -- They may look like classical players but, deep down, those cats are achin' to swing.

And the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra did just that in support of guest vocalist Steve Lippia who celebrated one of the greatest voices of the 20th century at Bass Hall on Thursday night with the show *Simply Sinatra: A Tribute to Old Blue Eyes*.

It would be foolhardy for any singer to put on a tux and try to make an audience think he is the reincarnation of Frank Sinatra. To his credit, Lippia did not do that. He didn't attempt to *be* Sinatra, just to sound like him. And in that endeavor, he often succeeded.

Gliding through a nicely structured set comprising several of Sinatra's classics (*The Lady is a Tramp*, *The Best is Yet to Come*, *It Was a Very Good Year*), Lippia displayed a timbre and overall approach that came remarkably close to the original.

The differences were found only in the details. Lippia sometimes lacked the punchiness and sharply clipped clarity found in much of Sinatra's phrasing. The singer had some vibrato in places where Sinatra would have laid down a thick, smooth ribbon of sound. Which is to say, unlike Sinatra, he is mortal.

Lippia's cause was greatly helped by an outstanding performance from the symphony under the baton of Miguel Harth-Bedoya.

Symphony members really got in touch with their inner Duke Ellingtons and Count Basies in Thursday's performance. Lippia's arrangements (which included several by Nelson Riddle and other bygone greats) were exceptional. They often used the orchestra as a stringless jazz band and, in that configuration, symphony members especially cooked. Other numbers called for strings alone, solo piano accompaniment and, in a few well-chosen moments, the whole shootin' match.

The so-called "Great American Songbook" has been beat to death lately by aging pop stars such as Linda Ronstadt and Rod Stewart. But the varied nature of these arrangements and Lippia's respectful and loving treatment of the evening's subject and his music made this profoundly overworked material much more palatable.

There were a few problems with the sound balance on opening night, but they were likely to be fixed for remaining performances.

Lippia's pleasing vocals (setting aside any comparisons) and warm stage demeanor, coupled with the enthusiastic and free-spirited efforts of the orchestra, made this show a winner. You might say they did it their way.

GRADE: A

Steve Lippia and the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra

8 tonight and Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday

Bass Hall, Fort Worth

\$24-\$76

817-665-6000, www.fwsymphony.org