

DAILY BREEZE

MUSIC REVIEWS

Golden State Pops pays tribute to Elmer Bernstein



The Golden State Pops Orchestra conducted by Peter Bernstein.

By Kari Sayers

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To mark its 10th anniversary as the resident orchestra of the beautifully restored art-deco Warner Grand Theatre in San Pedro, the Golden State Pops Orchestra devoted Saturday's concert entirely to the music of film composer Elmer Bernstein (no relation to Leonard).

Under the baton of Maestro Steven Allen Fox, who founded the professional symphonic pops orchestra in 2002, the players provided enthusiastic audience members with a great evening of passionate and dramatic works, including two encores – the National Geographic theme song and music from the 1963 movie "The Great Escape."

The concert opened with a rousing rendition of the quintessential Western theme from “The Magnificent Seven,” replete with the clip-clopping of horses, evoking images of Yul Brynner and other stars riding into the Mexican village to rescue the town from bandits. The familiar soundtrack was a favorite of this reviewer and was a great choice for an overture.

The signature tune was repeated with some twists later in the program as the theme for “Three Amigos,” a silly 1986 spoof based on “The Magnificent Seven” starring Steve Martin, Chevy Chase and Martin Short, and directed by John Landis, who later took the stage to reminisce about working with Bernstein and reminded the audience that movies were never silent but always involved music.

Casually elegant in gray slacks and a sport coat, Peter Bernstein, the son of the elder Bernstein who died in 2004, was also on hand to talk about his father and conduct less-known works he had arranged into an interesting medley. He returned after intermission to conduct a Comedy Suite, which included music from “Animal House,” also directed by Landis.

Lyrical strains of the love themes in the short symphonic piece in four movements from the 1960 Wall Street drama “From the Terrace,” with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, offered up a contrast to the Wild West. Jazzy strains from “Walk on the Wild Side” included the concert’s most memorable moment with a trumpet solo by Blake Martin, who played with the orchestra for the first time and hopefully not the last.

Another favorite was the beautiful theme from “To Kill a Mockingbird” with Jonathan Hughes’ simple piano solo opening, indicating that the dark drama was told from a child’s perspective. The low-register winds and frightening brass conjured up images of the menacing lynch mob, and Bear McCreary — Elmer Bernstein’s student and protégé — played the unusual accordion part.

Maestro Fox, in a white dinner jacket over black tuxedo pants, exuded passion for both the music and his players with the pensive and often dissonant notes from the 2002 drama “Far from Heaven,” about the 1950’s housewife whose husband has an affair with another man and her scandalous close friendship with her black gardener.

The grand and majestic music from “The Ten Commandments,” depicting Charlton Heston parting the Red Sea and the Israelites marching across to freedom with Yul Brynner as King Rameses and slavery in Egypt, concluded the concert. No doubt the music by our big movie composers such as Elmer Bernstein will live on just like the big opera composers Verdi, Puccini and Wagner’s music from a different era does.