With their annual holiday concert at The Kennedy Center on Thursday, December 10, 2016, the NSO Pops, joined by special guests Stephanie J. Block and The von Trapps, as well as the Washington Chorus, showed that they are most definitely in the holiday spirit—a joyful, exuberant spirit that was felt by the entire audience.

The NSO Pops, under the direction of brought their musical prowess and excellence to bear on traditional holiday favorites, made new again with fresh arrangements. Accompanying them were the great-grandchildren of The Sound of Music von Trapp family and musical theater powerhouse Stephanie J. Block. Between the folk-pop sound of the von Trapps and the brassy, rich voice of Block, backed by the skill of the NSO Pops, it was the perfect way to kick off the holiday season and get into the spirit of things.

The concert opened with The Washington Chorus’s version of “Deck the Halls,” with an expressive, fun rendition that set the stage for the night. That joy and exuberance continued as Block sang a lively version of “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” and then a jazzy, throaty version of “Winter Wonderland.” Block, best known for her roles as Elphaba in the musical Wicked and Liza Minnelli in The Boy from Oz, showed off her tender, more emotional range with the touching new carol “Yes, Virginia” about the importance of belief in the ideals of Christmas.
4 siblings, and the great-grandchildren of Captain von Trapp (of *The Sound of Music*), continued the fun with a haunting, almost ethereal version of “Carol of the Bells”—their own arrangement. Their harmonies and excellent blending give their voices a warm, inviting quality, as they sang Christmas carols in French and Spanish, and an expressive, impressionistic song of their own composition called “Storm.” And of course, they sang “Edelweiss”—a beautiful, warm arrangement that earned them a standing ovation.

Other highlights included Joe Isenberg’s expressive narration of “Twas the Night Before Christmas” with the NSO playing Randol Bass’ almost-cinematic accompaniment, making for a very dramatic reading indeed! Also, Stephanie J. Block’s rendition of “O Holy Night” with the Washington Chorus, was simply stunning. Breaking free of the normal, sweepingly-melodic-type arrangements, this arrangement focused on matching the tempo and expression of the music to the lyrics (such as choppy notes paired with the “chains shall He break and so on), making this old favorite new and fresh. Then paired with Block’s extraordinarily strong vocals, alternately powerful yet tender, weaving joy with almost fierce exuberance, it was a most effective, novel performance of “O Holy Night”— gaining a well-earned standing ovation.

As the concert closed with the appearance of Santa and a sing along of holiday favorites (including “Jingle Bells” and “Frosty the Snowman,”), what else was there to ask of the jolly old elf? He and the cast sang “We Wish You a
Merry Christmas” as an encore, but there was no need for wishing. With this fantastic holiday concert, everyone’s Christmas was already very merry.

Running Time: Two hours, with one 15-minute intermission.

NSO Pops: The von Trapps & Stephanie J. Block Family Holiday plays through Saturday, December 12th, 2015 at the Concert Hall at The Kennedy Center—2700 F Street, NW, in Washington, DC. For tickets, call the box office at (202) 416-4600, or purchase them online.

RATING: ★★★★★

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