

Pops, Guster make quite an edgy team

By Joan Anderman, Globe Staff | June 23, 2005

Beer and roadies under the gilded Beethoven insignia topped the list of firsts at Symphony Hall last night, where the Boston Pops kicked off its groundbreaking Pops on the Edge series with the alternative pop band Guster.

Additional oddities included girls rushing the stage, whoops loud enough to peel the paint off the statues, and the sight of Keith Lockhart pogo-ing on the podium. If the series' goal is to lure a younger crowd to the hallowed hall -- mission accomplished. University of Connecticut students Sean Morton and Kristen Kelleher -- both 23 and fretting that they were underdressed -- said they were excited to be attending their first classical music concert. It was with them and the throngs of other flip-flopped, jeans-clad audience members in mind that Lockhart programmed the first half of the evening with "the music of revolution."

The Danse sacral from Stravinsky's 1913 "The Rite of Spring" was so controversial in its day, Lockhart explained, that at the premiere the dancers couldn't hear the musicians over the furor in the hall. Ninety-two years later it's as noisy and jagged as a rock tune.

Full appreciation of the harmonic structure in Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" required a subtler grasp of musical revolutions, but the work's liquid beauty was within everyone's reach. "Totally amazing" is how one 13-year-old girl assessed Tod Machover's computer-enhanced, video-augmented "Jeux Deux" for hyperpiano and orchestra -- a wild, lovely, and utterly modern collision of art and science.

What Lockhart may not have predicted is that his well-orchestrated campaign would cut both ways. Guster -- formed at Tufts University in the early '90s by singer-guitarists Ryan Miller and Adam Gardner and percussionist Brian Rosenworcel, and fleshed out into a quartet for the Pops gig -- found some new and unlikely fans among the older set. "What rhythm!" marveled 84-year-old Dodie Higgins McGrath, a BSO season ticket holder for half a century, during one of the several new songs Guster debuted at Symphony Hall.

Beyond the novelty appeal, the collaboration between the orchestra and the rock band was an artistic mixed bag. "Come Downstairs to Say Hello" and "Two Points for Honesty" were grand collaborations -- the force of a full string section, bursts of warm brass, and dark, gathering swells of violas infused Guster's earnest, quirky pop tunes with a cinematic flair.

But there were also moments when the fusion simply didn't work. "Empire State," another new song, felt painfully tentative, with a spotlight on the sort of wobbly vocals that sound sensitive at the Paradise but criminal in Symphony Hall. And at one point the flutes were eaten alive by Rosenworcel's snare drum. Happily, the entire wind section was redeemed when one of their ranks loosed a prog-rock solo worthy of Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson during fan favorite "Fa Fa." Screams -- the likes of which this venue has surely never heard -- ensued.

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