

Virginia Beach Pops

Walter Noona led the opening of the second season of the Virginia Beach Pops on Sunday, Sept. 16 in the Virginia Beach Dome. Last year, this column found fault with everything from the Dome's acoustics (and this year as well) to Noona's well-intended monologues. In some respects, this year may be different.

Not only has Noona rid his act of the pleading tone of voice, he's hired a spate of competent, fresh faces, mostly in the string sections, that have changed the complexion of these concerts from frequently blemished to only occasionally blemished. For a local orchestra in its second season, the Beach Pops can boast more progress than the old Norfolk Symphony could in 20 years. Consider also that the governing board, as of two years ago, knew little more of orchestra development and management than the people at the annual banquet table. The growth is fairly remarkable, though still deserving of some criticism.

The opening third of the concert demonstrated the new strength in string playing.

However, take a passage of busy-work, as in Offenbach's overture to *Orpheus in the Underworld* and the results can be amorphous and scratchy.

Notwithstanding, there were a number of solos worthy of favorable mention, including clarinetist JoMarie Leland, cellist Janet Kriner, harpist Elisa Dickon, oboist Ada Saunders, and the Pops' new concertmaster, Leonid Keylin.

The second third spotlighted saxophonist Dennis Zeisler, who is also the orchestra's principal clarinetist, performing Alexander Glazounov's Concerto in E-flat for Alto Saxophone and String Orchestra. The work, though written well into the 20th century, is vintage Romantic. The solo part is showy without really being taxing, and the orchestral accompaniment is full of those aromatic Russian harmonies with which we associate composers like Rachmaninov.

Zeisler had a firm handle on the work, and although his own face betrayed some consternation over his intonation at the outset, his performance settled in to become fluent, musical and well-controlled.

Also on the bill were the Mark Haim Dancers, a group of Juilliard-trained men and women led by Haim.

Dancing an original (presumably) choreography set to Vivaldi's "Winter Concerto," the group attempted to meld

pathos with humor.

In the opening section, a dancer wanders the stage rather mindlessly, periodically donning garments cast to the stage during an effusive display of grand-jetes. Once vested, he becomes a Christmas tree and the brunt of a parody of an idyllic home-and-hearth exchange of "Xmas" presents. Add to this a large, ungainly male dancer whose appearance cried out for the invention of a better cod-piece.

The real frustration was that the dancing distracted from the orchestra and the aforementioned concertmaster, Leonid Keylin. Keylin is a very solid player, knocking out the florid passagework in the Vivaldi with security and vitality. The orchestra's string section caught the spirit of the Baroque *moto perpetuo* most ably.

The final portion of the program brought out the Walter Noona Trio with a tribute to Ethel Merman, for whom Noona was music director until her death last year. Noona really plays this stuff well. While it would be glorifying to call his playing "jazz," it would be demeaning to describe it as "cocktail piano." He has his own style, one which is deservedly well-received by press and public alike.

There is something very interesting afoot with the Virginia Beach Orchestral Association and its orchestra. They're certainly not wanting for enthusiastic, near-capacity audiences, and their level of musicianship foments new aspirations with each season. ●