

Virginia Beach Pops kicks off season with a bang

By CHARLES TAYLOR
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A year ago there was some question as to whether Hampton Roads could support two pops orchestras. Today, happily, it can be reported the answer is yes.

The youngest of the area's pops groups, the Virginia Beach Pops, kicked off its sophomore season at the Dome Sunday with the "Star Spangled Banner," ended with the "Stars and Stripes Forever," and proved in between that it need take a back seat to no one.

With music director and conductor Walter Noona's sure-fire — and in this case, innovative — programming, this year-old orchestra entertained the near-capacity audience with a formula that differs from the more established Virginia Pops.

The Beach orchestra patterns its concerts after the venerable Boston Pops — three segments and a good mixture of pops and classics. The Virginia Pops, with its variety of guest conductors, changes its format according to who's on the podium. The difference is what enables both groups to coexist.

The first third of Sunday's concert offered works by Berlioz, Tchaikovsky and Offenbach, with the musicians in excellent form, but it was

Music review

THE VIRGINIA BEACH POPS, Sunday at 2:30 p.m. at the Virginia Beach Dome. Presented by the Virginia Beach Orchestral Association.

the second part that showed how the Beach Pops can continue to distinguish itself. The orchestra engaged the New York-based Mark Haim Dancers to perform original choreography to the "Winter" section of Vivaldi's Op. 8 concertos. "The Seasons." While the Virginia Symphony's offshoot brings in big-name conductors and performers, the Virginia Beach Pops is right on target in offering a showcase for youth.

Haim, a 23-year-old Juilliard School graduate, choreographed "Winter" with an eye toward combining classical and modern elements with theatrical elegance. Vivaldi annotated his music with descriptive sonnets and Haim interpreted the text literally in some cases, abstractly in others.

The notes to the concerto's first movement, marked *allegro non molto*, read, "To tremble, frozen amidst icy snow; to breathe the sharp and wild wind..." To tremulous strings in the orchestra, Haim hobbled as an

old man, while three other dancers whirled about him like wind-driven snow. Megan Williams and Stuart Gold danced a *pas de deux* to the concerto's inner *Largo* movement that was a romantic contrast to Haim's being transformed into a Christmas tree at stage left.

Orchestral support of the dancers was of the highest caliber, with new concertmaster Leonid Kroylin soloing with technique as secure in passagework as in threadlike legato lines. Haim and company's performance was like adding locomotive subtitles to music, which would have been enough alone, but which benefited from the addition.

Five string players were added to the Pops roster this year, and they help flesh out this group of mostly imported players. All brought a fuller sound to bear in the overture to the final opera by Berlioz, "Pleatrice and Benedict." The *Andante cantabile* from Tchaikovsky's "String Quartet in D Major," Op. 11 was meltingly lyrical with its familiar melody.

The orchestra closed the top third of the program with the most popular music Jacques Offenbach never wrote, the overture to his opera, "Orpheus in the Underworld." The prelude is built of themes from "Orpheus," but was actually written by

one Carl Binder for a Vienna production in 1850. The overture was instantly recognized by many in the audience, but even more so when its famous cancan theme came near the end.

Throughout the afternoon, Noona's energetic, sometimes literal, conducting paced his forces through works no less ambitious than these. Wind players maintained good balance with the strings, and orchestra regulars provided some noteworthy solos.

In addition to the Vivaldi, Glazunov's "Concerto in E-flat for Alto Saxophone" shared the second third of the program. Dennis Zeisler, an associate professor at Old Dominion University and the Pops' principal clarinetist, was soloist. Glazunov's work treats the saxophone with all the respect due instruments with much longer orchestral histories. In Zeisler's hands, the horn, capable of flogging raucous smears in its more familiar jazz setting, sounded perfect as a symphonic foil. His tone was controlled and well supported throughout the instrument's range. Only once did his fingers falter on a rapid passage.

The final part of the concert, with a tribute to Ethel Merman, made up for an omission last season. Noona served as conductor for the star of

Broadway, films and concert stage before her death. At last year's Pops concert held within weeks of her passing, no tribute was paid, nor mention made of their association. That was rectified Sunday with a musical remembrance from the orchestra and the Walter Noona Trio, and an oral one from Merman's former — and Noona's current — manager, Robert Gardner.

Noona conducted from the piano and played a medley of songs closely associated with the singer actress. From "Everything's Coming Up Roses" and "I Got a Kick Out of You" to a poignant "Someone to Watch Over Me," the orchestra played with all the flash of a Broadway pit crew.

And Noona's conquest of the ivories was brilliant. His shower-of-notes technique was as extroverted as ever, but few notes were wasted, as is sometimes the case when his solos turn into exhibitions.