

Cleveland Jazz Orchestra and Musical Theater Project (Jan. 25)

By Kevin McLaughlin



Many things about George and Ira Gershwin's 1930 show *Girl Crazy* set it apart — the cast of future superstars (Ginger Rogers and Ethel Merman), the creativity of the Gershwin brothers, the artistry of orchestrator Robert Russell Bennett — all distinguishing it as a landmark musical. But in the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra and The Musical Theater Project's ninth annual collaboration on Saturday, January 25 at the Maltz, the songs were the stars.

Though the weather outside was frightful, your heart would have to have been frozen solid not to be affected by songs like “I Got Rhythm,” “Embraceable You,” “Bidin’ My Time,” “But Not For Me,” and “Boy! What Love Has Done to Me,” — songs memorable, charming, and tender, that set *Girl Crazy* apart as one of Broadway's most endearing scores.

As sung by Erin Kufel Keckan, who has both sunlight and empathy in her voice, and Michael Shirtz, who employed his most boyish tenor, “But Not for Me,” was a wistful and dreamy scene of love's dejection. Shirtz was also great in the cowboy numbers (“Lonesome Cowboy” and “Bidin’ My — actually a trio with the Musical Theater Project's Bill Rudman and CJO trombonist Paul Ferguson). Later, again in duet with Kufel Keckan, the two leads were the essence of romance in “Embraceable You.”

Vocalist Evelyn Wright, ostensibly playing the Ethel Merman role, thankfully inhabited her own vocal persona. When Wright sang “I Got Rhythm” with true jazz phrasing and in-the-pocket rhythm, the number stopped the show (well-timed since it was the finale).

“Sam and Delilah,” featuring Wright at the end of the second half, was pure swing, with extra hot sauce ladled on by Ferguson’s arrangement.

In Musical Theater Project fashion, the presentation was more living room intimate than Broadway spectacular. The singing was unpretentious but accomplished, with a bloom of loveliness that sort of crept up on you. Bill Rudman, who wrote and narrated the script, also projected geniality — laughing, tapping his toes, and enjoying the performances right along with the audience. He said a typical MTP show, *Girl Crazy* included, takes four months to write and assemble.

Paul Ferguson pared down the original Robert Russell Bennett orchestrations to an eight-piece version for CJO, who were there to support, not cover up, the singers. Frequent brass and wind solos added much, including those of Jack Schantz (trumpet), Paul Ferguson (trombone), Chris Coles (tenor sax) and Brad Wagner (alto sax). There was excellent support, too, from Ricky Exton (drums) and Bryan Thomas, who, at one point, delivered a virtuosic bowed bass solo accompanying his own singing.

A band highlight was pianist Joe Hunter’s take on George Gershwin’s original solo on a jubilant “I Got Rhythm.” Hunter also had some spoken lines (as Ira Gershwin), which was fun.

The original 1930 production put an all-star jazz orchestra in the pit, led by cornet virtuoso “Red” Nichols, and rising stars Glenn Miller, Gene Krupa, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman — and possibly both Jack and brother Charlie Teagarden.

Photos of that production appeared overhead, giving a sense of authenticity of time and place. Hearing the verses, along with the better known choruses, was a much appreciated touch.

With no encores forthcoming, the crowd seemed to agree with Gershwin: “Who could ask for anything more?”

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Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 30, 2025

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