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Cole wild, wonderful in Gershwin marathon

BY MARY KUNZ GOLDMAN

NEWS CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

LEWISTON — A thousand people turned out at Artpark on Sunday to catch the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra's Gershwin marathon, featuring pianist and singer Kevin Cole. And no wonder.

The BPO has welcomed some fine Gershwin pianists in the last couple of years. Cole, however, is a world unto himself. Originally from Bay City, Mich., he looks to be in his early 30s. He has a smile like Howdy Doody. He doesn't seem to have a worry in the world.

Before he even sat down at the piano, Cole did some singing. He crooned "S Wonderful" and "They Can't Take That Away From Me," both in a wistful, humorous tone, smiling fondly into the distance as if imagining his true love there.

As he prepared to hit the ivories, superlatives were heaped upon him. Resident Conductor Robert Franz spoke reverently of "the piano bench of Kevin Cole," as stage men hauled it out. Cole sat down with that sunny grin, as if he was sure he could live up to any advance praise. And he did.

Playing from memory, he went wild with a medley including "The Man I Love," "S Wonderful," "But Not For Me" and "Swanee." His solid stride and showy glissandi suggested that he had listened to a lot of Art

CONCERT REVIEW

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra

Gershwin's Greatest Hits on Sunday in Artpark Mainstage Theater.

Tatum and James P. Johnson. He was deft and assured, like a piano roll. He has raging technique and superb articulation. He can change the color of what he's playing at the drop of a dime, just by slightly altering his touch. Left hand churning, he built up tremendous momentum.

The audience loved it, jumping up at the end and cheering. And the Concerto in F was still to come.

Cole played the heck out of it. The best thing about his performance was that he enjoyed himself. He played joyously, as if he were dancing. His fingers were like little hammers. Between him and the orchestra, which was in great form, the marvelous syncopated ending of the first movement was a thrill. Cole pounded the last chords and then sat there and laughed. The audience did, too. It was a delightful moment.

The slow movement had romantic depth, and in the last movement, taken at a ferocious tempo, Cole's fingers jumped and danced as if the keys were hot coals. The spirit of fun still prevailed. There's a moment when a gong sounds, signaling



Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News

All about Gershwin: Vocalist Colleen Williams sings with the support of Bobby Jones on piano and conductor Robert Franz and the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra in an all-Gershwin concert Sunday at Artpark. Review on Page C7.

in Gershwin fashion that the finale is coming. At that instant, I happened to be glancing at one of the violinists, and as he was playing, a smile of pure pleasure spread across his face. I think that was how we all were feeling. The music was that exciting.

The popular Buffalo vocalist Colleen Williams was also on hand. She sang "Someone To Watch Over Me" and "The Man I Love," both perfect for her smoky, torchy voice. Bobby Jones, her regular pianist,

joined the orchestra in accompanying her. It was a pity he was limited to reading from a score, which consisted mostly of simple chords. Listeners should try to catch him in a jazz club, preferably at a Hammond B3. He's a monster.

Rounding out the afternoon were the overtures to "Girl Crazy," "Strike Up the Band" and "Funny Face." The BPO's Summerfest at Artpark continues through July.

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