

Classical violinist David Garrett puts on a rockin' good show

By David Fleshler

The Broward Center's Amaturio Theater in Fort Lauderdale was sold out. Two women in their 20s whispered excitedly to each other. A preteen boy leaned forward in his seat and bounced in rhythm to the music. People whooped and cheered at the end of difficult solos. Could this really be the audience for a classical violinist?

Sort of. David Garrett, a German-born crossover star making his first U.S. tour, has impressive classical credentials: a contract with Deutsche Grammophon at age 13, studies at Juilliard with Itzhak Perlman, solo appearances with major orchestras.

But rather than the standard career of recitals and concertos, he is attempting an alternative: appearing on stage in a black fedora and boots with an amplified violin, backed up by a rock band, to play a mix of songs by Queen, Metallica and AC/DC sprinkled with pop arrangements of classical works.

It doesn't hurt that the blond, pony-tailed violinist has, according to his website, arresting good looks. But unlike crossover king Andrea Bocelli, a tenor who has been skewered by classical critics for his weak vocal technique and dependence on electronic amplification, Garrett possesses a level of instrumental skill that demands respect.

As he showed Thursday in Fort Lauderdale, he can play at hair-raising speed with rock-solid intonation, demonstrating his skill in difficult works such as Paganini's Carnival of Venice, the last movement of Vivaldi's Summer from The Four Seasons and the Brahms Hungarian Dance No. 5.

In his performance of the old violin showpiece Hora Staccato, however, Garrett skipped the difficult staccato bowing that gave the piece its name. And he was less effective in melodic works such as the Bach Air from the Suite in D and Gershwin's Summertime, where his emphatic style was about as refined as someone jabbing their finger in your chest.

He was at his best in pulsing, high-energy arrangements of Queen's Who Wants to Live Forever, the theme from Pirates of the Caribbean, AC/DC's Thunderstruck and other rock and pop songs that integrated the violin with the thumping bass, drums and other instruments of his electronic band. Toward the end, he performed a couple of his own works, a soulful ballad and a pounding, rock-style tribute to Baroque music, drawing a long standard ovation.

It's easy for classical critics to sneer at crossover musicians like Garrett. But the level of excitement in the theater exceeded that for all but a few classical concerts.