

Violinist David Garrett Balboa Theatre Show Review

by julia on March 9, 2010



German-American violinist David Garrett played an impressive show at downtown San Diego's Balboa Theatre.

I first heard of German-American violinist David Garrett a few years ago, after he made worldwide headlines for falling down a concrete flight of stairs after a holiday concert in London. Thankfully he was uninjured, minus a few scrapes and bruises. His violin, however, was not. He landed on his violin case and when he opened it, his Guadagnini, crafted in 1772, lie in pieces. He pronounced it “a mess.”

The prescription? Eight months in the repair shop, but Garrett needed his violin back sooner than that. He had another concert date in London, on Valentine's Day. In a too-good-to-be-true twist of fate, Garrett received a Stradivarius to play days before the show, flown in special from Milan. He has played a 1710 Stradivarius ever since.

It was a stunning story, full of intrigue. I found Garrett's discography online and was surprised to discover that everything was an import; there were no U.S. releases. At the time it didn't occur to me to shop amazon.de instead of amazon.com.

But there was information on Garrett, much of it in the European press. David Garrett, born in Aachen, Germany to a German father and an American mother, picked up the violin at age four. Initially the instrument was brought home for his older brother, but the youngster took to it and within the year he was playing in public.

When he turned eight, he was prepping for shows booked with the London Symphony Orchestra and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and at 13 he was signed to the premiere classical label Deutsche Grammophon as a soloist. By his late teens he'd already amassed a staggering resume of recordings, performances and tours. He moved to New York City and, to top it all off, secured a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to become the first student under the tutelage of Itzhak Perlman at the Juilliard School, from which he graduated in 2003.

Further intrigue ensued. How could such an astounding talent, who'd already conquered audiences across Europe and played in India and the Far East, be so unknown in the U.S., the country he'd called home for nearly a decade? Where were the American music critics? Under a clear night sky outside the beautifully restored Balboa Theatre in downtown San Diego on the last day of February, I wondered how many other concertgoers wondered the same.

His band of four (drums, bass, guitar and keyboard) made its way on stage as the lights dimmed, but Garrett was nowhere to be seen. Then the first notes of *Carmen Fantasie* wafted down the aisle, followed by Garrett strolling minstrel-like, somehow managing to play, walk and smile all at once, his violin plugged into a wireless microphone to amplify its sound.

When he hit the stage his band joined him in a spicy, Spanish flamenco-styled rendition that quickly heated up the theater's Spanish Revival-styled interior. What followed was two hours of such rich and exquisite vigor by Garrett and his bandmates that it was a wonder as to how they could possibly maintain this intensity within the span of one performance, much less a 22-city North American tour – Garrett's first.

Dressed in a black shirt and jacket and shiny gray pants, his dark-blond hair tied back in its usual ponytail, Garrett sports a five o'clock shadow and tattoos. He doesn't so much look like a classically trained violinist as he does a grunge rocker á la Kurt Cobain, to whom he bears a slight and eerie resemblance. So it wasn't too surprising to learn of his love for hard rock and heavy metal music.

What *was* surprising was his uncanny ability to bring those genres and others into the classical realm (or is it the other way around?). By translating metal, rock, blues and R&B to violin, Garrett seamlessly brings classical music to non-classical ears and Metallica to classical aficionados, bridging and melding the two communities into one and thus devising a musical language devoid of genre and categorization.

By doing so, Garrett establishes his own unique voice and individual place among a small cadre of violinists and other orchestral-minded musicians, whom themselves have forayed into popular, contemporary formats like indie rock and hip-hop; folks such as Owen Pallett, Julie Penner, Petra Haden, Lisa Germano, Emily Wells, Andrew Bird and Sufjan Stevens.

Reminiscing over his first rock album purchase (Queen's *A Night at the Opera*), Garrett then launched into a slow boil of "Who Wants to Live Forever." He continued to up the ante with unlikely covers of AC/DC's "Thunderstruck," Metallica's "Nothing Else Matters," Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir" and a particular crowd favorite, Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal," all of which sounded wholly original without diminishing the spirit and integrity of the songs and the artists who originated them.

It would be too easy to expect the violin to sound shrill, if not shrieking, on many of these head bangers, and maybe this seems all the more so because it's all violin—Garrett doesn't sing a word—but it's his virtuosity and deftness which create these beautifully pure and commanding tones in a new context. If the violin is said to be the instrument that most closely resembles the human voice, in Garrett's hands it's so close to the electric guitar it's almost freakish. Dumbfounded and shaking my head in disbelief throughout the night, I'd never thought in a million years a violin could ever sound like *this*.

Garrett's not merely a metal head, though. He explained his love of all music genres and how they have informed his prodigious classical upbringing. His set verged into blues with Bill Withers's "Ain't No Sunshine," psychedelic rock via Jimi Hendrix's "Little Wing," "Dueling Banjos" bluegrass from the *Deliverance* soundtrack and the American musical songbook à la Leonard Bernstein's "Somewhere" from *West Side Story*. The real showstopper, however, was Chopin's "Souvenir de Paganini," a variation on Paganini's "The Carnival of Venice." It begins rather benignly but quickly turns complicated, each measure more technically demanding than the last, and it's not a lengthy composition to begin with. Garrett pulls it off, making it look easy, but it's clearly not, and he freely admits it. The piece is as breathtaking as Garrett's candor.

Sprinkled about were arrangements of his own, including a wicked version of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee" (for which Garrett is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records, having performed it in 66 seconds), as well as compositions he penned himself, such as the bittersweet melancholia of "Chelsea Girl." This "Chelsea Girl" has nothing to do with Nico or Andy Warhol, however; it's a somber ode to an ex-girlfriend, prompting Garrett to jokingly ask his band mates, "And why are we still playing this?"

Garrett is not only a very gifted performer, but a genuine and heartfelt storyteller too, prefacing each song with some history, a few anecdotes and his easy-going sense of humor. Considering his life's trajectory, it's a testament to his upbringing and the people with whom he's chosen to surround himself that gives him such an extraordinarily down-to-earth, levelheaded, amicable presence. It's something audiences love him all the more for.

Looking out into the audience, many faces beamed as if the spotlights were in reverse, and maybe they were. David Garrett was on stage, shining, a star already having been discovered in other skies, now appearing to American audiences gazing heavenward. We only need keep our telescopes poised to capture his ever-brightening future.

David Garrett performed at the Balboa Theatre in downtown San Diego on February 28th. His U.S. debut is the self-titled album David Garrett. Last spring, Garrett received wide exposure to American audiences during a national fund drive for PBS. His albums are available on Amazon.com, Amazon.de and on iTunes. He has also released two live concert DVDs.