

Violinist David Garrett crosses over in Anaheim

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David Garrett, the young crossover violinist seen on PBS and elsewhere around TV-land these days, gives classical music a beat. Not that it doesn't already have one, but Garrett makes it explicit, performing with a rock band. His show Friday night at the Grove Theater in Anaheim brought together the music of Metallica and AC/DC and Rimsky-Korsakov and Bach, no small feat in itself.

Virtuosity is part of the package. Garrett can fiddle. A student of Itzhak Perlman and Ida Haendel, and a graduate of Juilliard, the 28-year-old musician from Aachen, Germany, plays fast, plays clean, plays in tune. In terms of technique, at least in the short pieces he played Friday, he can do it.

His band is made up of electric keyboard, guitar, bass and drum set. With the band already onstage, Garrett made his entrance walking down the aisle, in a spotlight, playing a fantasy based on tunes from Bizet's "Carmen." He wore his blond locks in a ponytail and was dressed in a black coat, printed t-shirt, shiny pants and boots that were loose at the top. His whiskers were several days old. A former model, his looks are part of his appeal, too, if screaming women are any indication.

The atmosphere was more casual than a classical event. People brought drinks to their seats and wooed and hollered and told Garrett that they loved him. Colored lights flashed onstage throughout the show and were sometimes aimed at the audience. You know the scene – a pop concert.

Garrett performed on a regular acoustic violin which was hooked up to a microphone. The sound was fine most of the time, if loud and steely, but in some of the softer melodic playing it could sound tinny. He spoke between numbers with a slight accent, introducing each piece, making small talk, telling anecdotes and smiling a lot. He comes off not as the dangerous rock star type, but approachable and sincere.

Queen's "Who Wants to Be Forever" came next. Many of the rock and pop numbers, including Metallica's "Nothing Else Matters," Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal," AC/DC's "Thunderstruck," and Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir," came off well. The violin has always been good at imitating a singing human voice and, when electrified, it can drive rock riffs as well as any instrument. Garrett's band was in its element in these pieces.

It was a versatile band, comfortable in anything that Garrett threw its way, but in some of the music it was reduced to little more than a wedding band. I am thinking of such pieces as Brahms' Hungarian Dance No. 5, Dinicu's "Hora Staccato" (an old Heifetz favorite) and Monti's Csárdás, where the supporting players sounded like a polka group (not that there's anything wrong with polka). But then the focus was clearly on Garrett during these bonbons.

Some of the classical arrangements were better, though, such as the hard-driving take on Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" and an almost punk rendition of "The Flight of the Bumblebee." Vivaldi-like "sewing-machine" patterns on the violin juiced many an arrangement, in fact, both pop and classical.

Garrett cast his net wide, performing "Volare" (rumba-style), Bach's "Air" (from the Orchestral Suite No. 3), Gershwin's "Summertime," Bernstein's "Somewhere," "Dueling Banjos," and Bill Withers' "Ain't No Sunshine." The amplification sapped some of the sweetness out of Dvorák's delicate "Humoresque." Paganini's Variations on "Carnival in Venice" engendered a big roar from the crowd for Garrett's clear mastery of its technical demands.

He plays with a good deal of portamento, and bows aggressively, but neither unduly. He wants to entertain and please, and his fans seemed both on Friday.