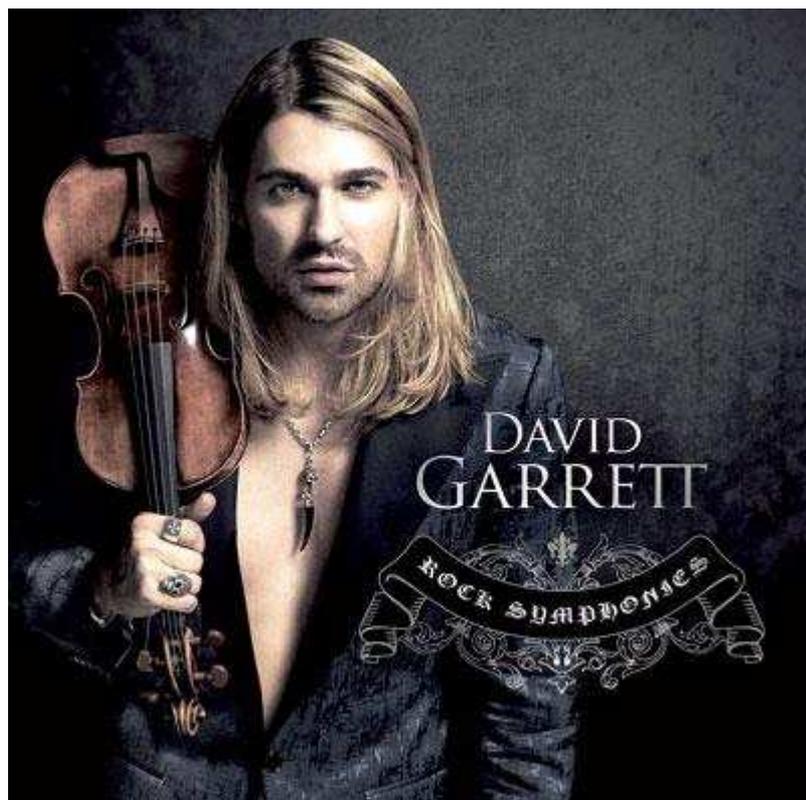


Hard-Core Classical: David Garrett's a crossover star with a Stradivarius

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By Donna Doherty, Register Arts Editor ddoherty@nhregister.com



WALLINGFORD — That side lock of bleached-blond hair that just escapes his ponytail makes women swoon, but those fingers flying over the strings of his 1716 Stradivarius violin are the technical reason David Garrett has soared to superstardom as a crossover artist on a mission to bring classical music to the masses.

The PBS star and People magazine “hunkiest musician,” whose violin, whether plugged or unplugged, has brought a whole new audience to classical music, comes to Toyota Presents the Oakdale Theatre, Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. for one performance.

Don’t let those heartthrob looks fool you: The Juilliard-trained musician, who studied with Itzhak Perlman and Ida Haendel, has virtuoso technique with the heart of a rocker.

He may love Beethoven, but he rocks out to Aerosmith, U2 and Nirvana with the same independent streak that gave him the guts to flee to New York from his native Germany as an 18-year-old.

This stop is part of a national tour, scheduled in conjunction with his latest Decca CD, “Rock Symphonies,” which was released in July.

For Garrett, no matter what the genre — and he still considers himself very much a classical artist — it’s all about quality.

“A good classical purist is someone who’s looking for quality. That’s my attitude, and it is for anyone who’s a good musician,” says the man whose concerts made Billboard’s Boxscore Chart in December as one of the top grossing acts among such acts as Justin Bieber, The Eagles and Metallica.

Garrett, the son of an American prima ballerina whose maiden name he took, and a German jurist (family name: Bongartz), made his first of a string of classical albums at the age of 13, after starting a solo career with the world’s major orchestras at the age of 10.

He says his interest in rock really peaked “probably in my second year of studies in the U.S.,” as a way to connect with his less-sheltered peers, who weren’t touring the world as a violin prodigy.

“Before that, I wasn’t really in contact with people my age. I was home-schooled until I was 18, and when I finally got in touch with people my age, I wanted to connect with them. Music opened the doors.”

Garrett’s looks have served him well in all stages of his career, though. As a Juilliard student, he walked the runways for Armani and appeared in Vogue, but he laughs when asked about whether he now uses a stylist to keep up the image.

“I certainly don’t have a stylist. I collect my own classics. Never used a stylist in my life. I think I’m too egocentric to have someone tell me what to wear,” he says, adding, “It has to be me ...”

His “overnight” PBS success came after what he says were “6-to-7 years out of my life,” a connection he is not exactly sure how it came about.

“I’m very happy. It’s a good collaboration. I’m a big fan of public television, because it shows what you don’t see on regular TV. I remember when I was at Juilliard, I couldn’t afford to go to the ballet, but I watched it on PBS. I have the challenge, but also the responsibility, to give a great performance for people who maybe can’t go to a concert.”

Garrett says he maintains his roots by varying his album content, noting that he was getting ready to record Beethoven’s concertos. The transition back and forth is seamless, because, he says, there is a symbiotic relationship between rock and classical in the harmonic progression.

“In the end, I just want people to realize the harmonic material hasn’t changed much in the last 400 years. It’s kind of fun to play with the history and legacy of classical music,” he says.

The one constant is technical proficiency.

“The connection between classical and rock is very close, with a strong sense of rhythm and precision. But in the end, you have to play it properly. You can’t fake playing an instrument in rock either.”

Of “Rock Symphonies,” he says, “I’m in a very lucky situation to record what I want. It was actually quite easy once I knew what direction I wanted. I tried a lot of stuff and took what worked best. The most important thing is to reorchestrate the whole thing. It took a couple of months and a couple of rewrites, but it’s one of my favorite projects,” Garrett says.

“Vivaldi vs. Vertigo” is a must-hear.

“Crossing over means you have to cross back over as well, and bring people over with you. Just to cross over without that makes no sense. It’s a vehicle in order to build a bridge,” he says.

Fans will hear most, if not all, of those works at the Oakdale concert, though Garrett is on the road with a 4-piece band, as opposed to the album’s five-piece, backed by The City of Prague Philharmonic.

“To be quite honest, I don’t feel I have to recapture exactly what’s on the record. In fact, sometimes I think it’s better for the live show to have a reduced band. ... I prefer a show with three great musicians than five great ones covered by an 80-piece.”

Garrett has a breakneck lifestyle. This 20-concert tour opened in Seattle on Feb. 1 and ends in Fort Pierce, Fla., Feb. 27, but he’s not complaining.

“I absolutely would never do something I hadn’t dreamed about. I have no complaints, and if I ever have complaints, I make sure I change the system.”

Contact Donna Doherty at 203-789-5672. Follow us at [Twitter.com](https://twitter.com/NHRegBuzz) at Twitter @NHRegBuzz.