



**CALIFORNIA POPS
THRILLS WITH
MOVIE MUSIC
FUSION / 15**



**TAX TROUBLES
TRIP TWO
MORE OBAMA
APPOINTEES
NATION / 17**



**FORMER 49ER
SOLTAU STILL
GOING STRONG
AT AGE 84
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Spectacular music

BY JOHN ORR
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It's an enthusiastic crowd that turns out for shows by the California Pops Orchestra. People in the audience hoot and holler when their favorite violinist takes a seat, they shout back and forth at their buddy, conductor Kim Venaas, and when the singalong happens, they're having too much fun to stop singing after the orchestra finishes the several bars it played from "76 Trombones."

All part of the show, all part of the fun on Saturday at Spangenberg Theater in Palo Alto for the Pops' Silver Screen Spectacular, with a pleasing program of music from movies — a Cole Porter salute, George Gershwin's beautiful "Embraceable You," and the delightful treat of "Lydia the Tattooed Lady," which was a signature tune for Groucho Marx.

But, also, plenty of modern crowd-pleasers such as a medley of John Williams tunes — it is really fun to be sitting in the front row when the cellos and bass hit those notes that tell us all that the big shark from "Jaws" is on its way, or when the trumpets hit that "Daa-da-dot-da!" that means Indiana Jones is swinging into view on his whip — and selections from "The Great Escape," "Schindler's List" and "King Kong."

What was surprising, though, wasn't the big, bombastic movie themes that are all pretty much engraved in any film fan's brains; it was the quieter, more moving music that is sometimes hidden in even the largest of film scores.

For instance, concert master Julian Brown took center stage to deliver a beautiful, moving and excellently performed passage from "Schindler's List."

And perhaps the biggest surprise — for me, anyway — was the music from "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest," which featured

another excellent performance, from principal cellist Cynthia Swenson. Surprising not because Swenson performs beautifully in every way, but surprising because I saw that movie and don't remember it having such interesting and involving music (composed

by Hans Zimmer). It was a good choice for the curtain closer (if only there had been a curtain; as it was, the lights just went dim, and children started climbing on stage to greet their musician parents, which was charming in its own way).

Venaas mentioned that Cal Pops is the nation's only all-request orchestra, and that was almost true this night; there were two numbers that were requested by guest pianist Frederick Hodges, who is an impressive piece of work.

Hodges was a knockout on several tunes,



ABOVE: Julian Brown performs music from "Schindler's List."



RIGHT: Cynthia Swenson plays music from "Pirates of the Caribbean."

Photos by John Orr / Daily News

including "The Circus," for which he accompanied a hilarious bit from that Charlie Chaplin movie, which was projected on a screen over the orchestra, and on a medley of tunes associated with Fred Astaire. But even more fun was when he gave the piano bench to Venaas and went to the microphone to sing "Lydia the Tattooed Lady."

True, Groucho Marx was funnier, but Hodges has a better voice.

All of the music was accompanied by slide shows or film clips, including an extended sequence from "Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines" that drew plenty of laughter from the audience.

The orchestra is one in transition. It began as an amateur ensemble and has steadily grown in number and in quality. It remains a mix of amateurs and professionals, and that is reflected in its sound. Sometimes everybody really hits

it just right; sometimes somebody might be a bit off-key and/or off time. The sincerity of the performance never weakens, though. Everybody on the stage was clearly focused on performance, and the orchestra provided a very entertaining show.

Venaas is a capable conductor and an energetic master of ceremonies, running off stage to get an Indiana Jones hat for that bit of music, or a pirate hat for the curtain closer.

He also read a series of jokes that had been sent in by the orchestra's fans. He collects a few hundred of them between shows, then reads 10 from the stage. If you happen to run into him some time and have a need to groan, ask him about the three-legged chicken or the bacon tree.

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