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MUSIC REVIEW: Boston Pops and Hot Sardines heat up the Roaring 20s

The versatile Boston Pops gave a virtuoso performance as backing band for the high-energy Hot Sardines jazz octet.



The Hot Sardines with the Boston Pops at Symphony Hall Wednesday.



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By Keith Powers
For The Patriot Ledger
Posted May. 29, 2014 @ 12:41 pm
Updated at 12:51 PM

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Hot Sardines sound great.

Maybe not on a tapas menu, but as the centerpiece act for the Boston Pops' "Gatsby

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Night" Wednesday evening at Symphony Hall, the New York-based jazz octet made a perfect match.

Not so much reviving standards, as taking defib paddles to them and jolting them back to life, the stylish Sardines, aided by the ever accommodating Keith Lockhart and his symphonic charges, raced through a half dozen tunes from its New Orleans/Parisian-retro songbook, fronted by the alluring chanteuse Elizabeth Bougerol, with an alert horn gang behind her and a rhythm section abetted by tap dancer Fast Eddy Francisco. The Pops transforms itself to complement nearly any kind of guest act, and here the orchestra mostly laid out to allow the Sardines, who play mainly in clubs, have also appeared in subway cars, and were – no surprise – making their orchestral debut, to run free.

BOSTON POPS GATSBY NIGHT

Wednesday night again 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday; a Symphony Hall, 300 Massachusetts Ave., Bos...

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Stride rhythms and jazz decorum drove the set: each song allowed one member or another to take a solo turn, with the others hanging out and admiring. But the Sardines are truly driven by the personable Bougerol – "Miz Elizabeth" – as talented a jazz singer as you will find. Her husky contralto was used most of the night in an understated sort of sprechstimme, her lyrics spoken as much as sung. She has ample vibrato, and exquisite phrasing. It was her inviting rubato – keying entrances just off the beat, creating great tension and snap to the arrangements, which made the music unique, and drove the ensemble forward. Tunes ranged from Cole Porter's "I Love Paris" to the Billie Holiday vehicle "What a Little Moonlight Can Do," and culminated with a New Orleans funeral procession stomp through the Symphony Hall aisles (with Lockhart gamely bringing up the rear on tambourine). The Sardines' set also include what appeared to be a nap (Lockhart joining in for some bed rest on the podium) during the group's signature tune, "Bei Mir bist du Schoen." It was all unusual fun, with far more dancing and audience participation than usually accompanies performances in the great hall on Mass. Ave.

Hot Sardines were part of a program highlighting music from the Roaring 20s, with the first half including a sentimental showcase featuring a brassy, crisp medley arrangement ("If You Knew Susie," "Tiger Rag") by Don Sebesky; selections from the Broadway sensation "Showboat"; another arrangement by Sebesky, beautifully done, of three piano preludes from George Gershwin; and two unforgettable Duke Ellington originals, "Sophisticated Lady," and "It Don't Mean a Thing."

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