Trans-Siberian Orchestra dazzles with glittering show

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CONCERT REVIEW

One is tempted to describe a Trans-Siberian Orchestra concert with the overused adjective "awesome."

Friday night's Christmas-themed performance by the group at the BI-LO Center was awe-inspiring, a jaw-dropping combination of soaring vocals, ribcage-rattling guitars, booming percussion, sparkling lasers and fiery flash pots.

The band — "orchestra" is a misnomer for this highly electrified group — brings to mind the hair metal groups of the 1980s with several guitar-playing men and five sexy female singers all swishing their long locks throughout the hard-charging show.

Notably, the concert seemed to attract a larger audience Friday evening (and this was the second of two performances) than did the legendary The Who at its recent BI-LO performance.

Certainly the band has its detractors who accuse it of favoring gaudy style over meaningful substance.

It's a matter of taste. As for me, I was thoroughly entranced Friday, as I have been at past TSO performances, by the dazzling over-the-top spectacle of it all.

This band puts on a terrific show.

It's a multi-sensory experience, with the lights, fog, falling snow and ascending flames that slap you with a jolt of heat. The TSO's grandiosity knows no bounds.

The main course of the evening was a truncated performance of TSO founder Paul O'Neill's 2004 rock opera, "The Lost Christmas Eve," narrated with James Earl Jones-like fervor and sonority by Bryan Hicks.

Then came the dessert: the TSO's popular hard-rock versions of familiar classical tunes by Tchaikovsky ("The Nutcracker"), Vivaldi ("The Four Seasons"), Beethoven (Fifth Symphony), Grieg ("In the Hall of the Mountain King" from "Peer Gynt") and Mozart ("Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" and The Queen of the Night's aria from "The Magic Flute.")

Throughout the show, the audience seemed mesmerized by an arena-rock show that grabs you by the collar and doesn't let go.

In all, there were about two dozen performers on stage, including two keyboardists, four male singers, a drummer, an electric violin player and several string players, in addition to the aforementioned guitarists and female singers.

Leading the revels were the fantastic and hyper-kinetic TSO guitarists Joel Hoekstra and Chris Caffery, bassist Dave Z and the electric violinist Roddy Chong.

Of the many fine TSO vocalists, I particularly enjoyed Broadway singer Rob Evan, who delivered the impassioned "Back to a Reason" and "What Child Is This?" Georgia Napolitano, meanwhile, offered a powerful "Christmas Canon Rock."

Among the group's new stage wizardry are two hydraulic platforms that take performers high above the audience. When it comes to showmanship, TSO founder O'Neill is always trying to top himself.

He's figured out that for the TSO's adoring millions, nothing succeeds like excess.

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