

## MUSIC

# Keen vocal quintet does the time warp

By HAROLD McNEIL

*News Staff Reviewer*

Having been born sometime around the Depression era no doubt enhances one's enjoyment of the "Radio Days" show performed by the marvelous vocal quintet Five by Design.

The audience for Friday night's performance in Kleinhans Music Hall — most of whom were probably youngsters during World War II — responded with a gleeful familiarity to the brassy big band sounds, the swinging rhythms and distinctive vocal harmonies of the era, not to mention the obscure commercial jingles. That is, obscure to those of us born sometime after the advent of Elvis.

Still, lacking a firsthand intimacy with the era was not barrier enough to keep you from popping your fingers, tapping your feet and finding the swing. This is fun stuff.

The Minneapolis quintet, ably assisted by a swinging Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, employed all the right tools to transport listeners to a time 60 years ago when the popular music of the day came wafting through radio tubes instead of from MTV.

A floor-model radio and an old-fashioned overstuffed chair simply and elegantly set the initial scene as the narrator, Alton Accola, took the stage. He was followed by BPO assistant conductor Ron Spiegelman, who led the orchestra through Les Brown's "Sentimental Journey."

Shortly thereafter, the quintet — three guys in tuxedos and tails, two gals in slinky gowns and up-

## REVIEW

### Five by Design

Vocal quintet, with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra.

Friday and tonight in Kleinhans Music Hall.

swept hairdos — glided onto the stage to perform "I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo."

What followed was a virtual 90-minute trip down memory lane for those in the know. Employing tight vocal harmonies, antic physical comedy and rapid costume changes, the members of Five by Design seemed to effortlessly channel the spirits of Betty Grable, Kay Kyser, Guy Mitchell, Carmen Miranda and a host of others from that bygone era.

Among several highlights was a wacky rendition of the Andrews Sisters' "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," performed by the two women in the group, Lorie Carpenter-Niska and Catherine Farr Scott, and one of the male members of the quintet portraying a hapless radio station janitor who was drafted to sing with the women after the third member of their trio failed to show up for a live radio broadcast. Talk about channeling the spirit of Patty, Maxine and LaVerne. They were superb.

It's also worth mentioning the men in the quintet: Kurt Niska, Michael Swedberg and Terrence Niska, terrific vocalists and great physical comedians all.

Along the way, there were rousing renditions of "Tico, Tico" and W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues March" and a gorgeously symphonic "Holiday for Strings" performed by the orchestra. There also was a lushly arranged version of "Moonlight in Vermont," the haunting "It's Been a Long, Long Time," and the riveting "Rosie the Riveter" to bring those old-time memories even closer. And for those really in the know, there was a medley of radio commercial jingles and theme songs.

I still don't get the "Shave and a haircut — two bits" thing, but it got a big laugh from Friday's audience. The show repeats tonight at 8.

e-mail: [hmcneil@buffnews.com](mailto:hmcneil@buffnews.com)

# Quintet makes *Radio Days* 'golden'

BY ERIC E. HARRISON  
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra and guest vocal quintet Five by Design took the Robinson Center Music Hall audience back to those thrilling days of yesteryear Saturday night with a delightful mix of music, comedy, history and even cameo star appearances.

*Radio Days*, part of the orchestra's Pops Live! series, offered just about every element of 1940s radio, including big band tunes, song standards, Westerns, soap operas, patriotic fervor and even vintage commercials.

Five by Design — soprano Lorrie Carpenter-Niska, alto Catherine Scott, tenor Curt Niska, baritone Michael Swedberg and bass Terrence Niska — pays tribute to period vocal groups, including the Modernaires, on which they are clearly modeled.

The group sings close harmony with unparalleled polish and a nonpareil vocal blend, whether crooning classics — “The Trolley Song,” “Chatanooga Choo Choo,” “Big Noise From Winnetka,” “I’ve Got a Gal in Kalamazoo,” “Personality,” “Juke Box Saturday Night” and “Rosie the Riveter” among them — or in novelty numbers like “Mairzy Doats” and “Managua, Nicaragua” (in which conductor David Itkin got a sombrero sur-

REVIEW

## Music

prise).

Just about all of the numbers are neatly choreographed, most involving stepping or swaying to the beat, but some more illustrative (“The Three Little Fishies” fleeing the shark, for example, and the timely arrival of the “janitor” as an emergency third sister for “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy”).

“Guest stars” Betty Grable, Kay Kyser and Carmen Miranda put in appearances of varying lengths. The orchestra got instrumental moments in “Moonlight Serenade,” “Holiday for Strings,” “St. Louis Blues March” and “Moonlight in Vermont”; wind players with solos got to

stand up, just like in a real big band. Some of the instrumental segments covered the many changes in period costume, some of which (Carmen Miranda’s hat, for example) were real scene-stealers.

Various segments recalled radio dramas — *The Lone Ranger* and *The Shadow* among them. Commercials for Pepsi (“Pepsi-Cola hits the spot”), Halo Shampoo, Shredded Ralston and Wheaties provided lively interludes. Terrence Niska doubled at the organ as sort of a Phantom of the Soap Opera. An “actual episode” of *Inner Sanctum*, including a very overworked sound effects technician, brought down the house.

Host Alton Accola put everything into historical context from an easy chair next to a period Philco.



BY DOUGLAS HAMER

Five by Design's Terrence Niska, Lorie Carpenter-Niska, Kurt Niska, Catherine Farr-Scott and Michael Swedberg in "Radio Days" at the Kennedy Center.

## Music

# 'Radio Days': A Pops Program Tuned to the '40s

By GRACE JEAN  
Special to *The Washington Post*

Down by the Tidal Basin at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, there's a sculpture of a man sitting by a radio console listening to one of the 32nd president's famed fireside chats. Leaning forward with his forearms on his knees, he appears hopeful. It is a moment of history becoming more difficult to imagine in today's world of BlackBerry, iPods and TiVo. But one group has spent the past decade recreating the glory days of radio on the stage in a carefully packaged production for symphony pops audiences across the nation.

On Thursday, the Minneapolis-based jazz/swing vocal ensemble Five by Design made its Kennedy Center debut with the National Symphony Orchestra Pops in "Radio Days." It was one of the best NSO Pops performances of the season.

Hosted by Alton Accola, Design by Five's founder and manager, the evening unfolded as a 1940s broadcast, effectively transforming the Concert Hall stage into equal parts radio console and studio.

For two hours, music shared the spotlight with commercials, voice-overs and segments of vintage shows, including a delightfully funny installation of "The Swamp Thing," courtesy of the sound effects props onstage.

NSO Associate Conductor Emil

de Cou led the Pops through several stylish features. The strings, seated together on the violin side of the stage, charmed listeners in David Rose's "Holiday for Strings" while the winds, seated in a big-band configuration opposite the strings, charged up the crowd with W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues March." Their combined mellow sound on Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade" enticed at least one couple to rise from their seats and dance.

The Pops proved a fine partner for Five by Design singers Lorie Carpenter-Niska, Catherine Farr-Scott, Kurt Niska, Michael Swedberg and Terrence Niska, whose harmonies were as solidly spaced as teeth on a comb throughout the show. They sang impressively on, among others, "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," "The Trolley Song," "Chattanooga Choo-Choo" and an a cappella "Rosie the Riveter."

The vocalists went through a number of costume changes, occasionally emerging solo as celebrities of the time: tutti-frutti-hatted Carmen Miranda singing "Tico, Tico" and Betty Grable crooning "It's Been a Long, Long Time." A poignant rendition of "I'll Be Seeing You" from the days of World War II resonated for the 21st-century audience.

"Radio Days," part of the Kennedy Center's 1940s festival, repeats tonight at 8. For tickets, call 202-467-4600.

# 'Radio Days' takes 'em back in grand style

Minnesota quintet  
hits all the right notes  
for night of nostalgia

BY RACHAEL RECKER  
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

I'm not exactly a product of the 1940s.

(At Thursday's show, I was tapped on the shoulder by an inquisitive attendee, wondering whether I was even enjoying myself with what must be foreign tunes, given, I'm assuming, that I looked like a 14-year-old or something.)

Still, the question was relevant. I'm not even close to being a child of the World War II era.

But neither were many of the middle-aged attendees in the crowd of 700 gathered for Minnesota quintet Five By Design's performance of "Radio Days" in the 798-seat Van Singel Fine Arts Center in Byron Center.

This is not to say that I (seemingly the only representative, aside from my similarly aged guest, of our age group) and the middle-aged could not appreciate the histrionically humorous radio commercials and shows of the 1940s as well as the slickly smooth (not just the men's hair styles), snappy musical numbers performed with the quintet's beautiful, tight harmonies and swaggering big band.

## Talents even sold cereal

In fact, Five By Design's delightful performance of a Wheaties radio jingle had me, a Wheaties-hater, convinced that the "best breakfast food in the land" was, indeed, healthy for me, tasty to the tongue and delicious with an ice-cold Pepsi-Cola (the '40s jingle for which immediately followed).

The musical revue, created and narrated by Alton Accola (appearing in an armchair at the side of the stage next to an antique Philco to explain the significance and importance of radio during World War II), featured a whirlwind of musical hits and snippets of superbly acted game shows, commercials and adventure/mystery serials in order to remember and reflect on the women and men who served their country in the war.

Aside from a familiarity and respectful appreciation for the music, I was lost, although entertained, by period radio programs such as "Kay Kyser's Kollege of Musical Knowledge" quiz show, ending with a random and hilariously spastic dance by Michael Swedberg. Even a performance of spooky radio show "Inner Sanctum" — a period show I had never

## MUSIC REVIEW

### 'Radio Days'

★★★ 1/2 (out of four stars)

**Highlight:** Behind-the-mike humor of flirting, quirky expressions and the occasional foibles of a 1940s, on-the-air radio show

**Low point:** Occasional mike feedback; large props blocking views of the fascinating, 13-piece orchestra

**Stage time:** 2 hours (including 15-minute intermission)

#### SEE IT:

**When:** Repeats 7:30 tonight in Van Singel Fine Arts Center

**Where:** 8500 Burlingame Ave. SW, Byron Center (adjacent to Byron Center High School)

**Tickets:** \$26.50 (\$17.50 for high-schoolers and younger at the box office)

**Phone:** 878-6800

**Other venues:** 7 p.m. Sunday in Cobb Great Hall of the Wharton Center, at Michigan State University, East Lansing, \$20-\$35 at box office, call 432-2000 or (800) WHARTON

heard of — had me laughing uncontrollably at the purposefully exaggerated, simplistic dialogue and the physical humor of Kurt Niska's sound-man travails.

Other staples of '40s pop culture having never hit my radar included a laundry list of soaps, rattled off by Accola's lilting voice, which had me wondering if I had forgotten my native tongue of English.

While the younger crowd could enjoy Five By Design's impressive acting and vocals — consisting of amazing actors and brothers Terrence and Kurt Niska, beautiful soprano Lorie Carpenter-Niska (wife to Kurt), newcomer with the addictive smile Sheridan Zuther (filling in for Catherine Farr-Scott on maternity leave) and Swedberg — many in the audience had a stronger connection to songs such as the playfully acted "The Three Little Fishes," lulling "Moonlight in Vermont" (featuring a sweet and sonorous solo by Kurt Niska), eyebrow-raising but enjoyable "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition" (not exactly the 21st century's anthem) and show opener "I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo."

## Audience was engaged

These individuals had obviously lived during the age, made obvious by their proud reactions to period pop-culture questions and their cheers to announcements of upcoming songs. Yes, a lot of history and a lot of stories were gathered in Van Singel hall Thursday night.

E-mail: rrecker@grpress.com

# Days when radio ruled

By DENIS ARMSTRONG  
Ottawa Sun

Nothing in the National Arts Centre's final Pops Series concert of the season, *Radio Days*, is computer-generated.

Even its strategic scheduling with Disney's WWII blockbuster *Pearl Harbor* is nothing more than a happy coincidence for this loving tribute to

★★★★★ Rating out of 5

**'Swinging good!'**  
— DENIS ARMSTRONG, SUN

**Radio Days**

Stars: Kurt and Terrence Niska  
Michael Swedberg,  
Catherine Farr-Scott,  
Lorie Carpenter-Niska

the popular music and entertainment of the war years.

In fact, this is a production

that's resolutely luddite, an intentionally old-fashioned and authentic recreation of the romantic mood of the *Pearl Harbor* era.

One part pops concert, another radio drama, vocal group Five By Design's tribute to the medium and music of the 1940s is much more than a wistful trip down nostalgia alley.

It's one of the concert delights of the year and it's at Southam Hall until tonight. Thirty songs from the big-band era, packaged into broadcasts that evoke radio's golden age with an aw-shucks personality.

In a scene right out of Norman Rockwell, *Radio Days* tunes into the madcap comedy and drama of the times, joining programs such as *The Shadow*, *The Happy Gang* and *Secret Mission*, as well as a segment dedicated to "the soaps" like *Stella Dallas* and *My Girl Sunday* in between swinging vocals.

Staging these landmark programs, *Radio Days* teases the imagination and the funny bone with a convincing send-up of those early, labour-intensive broadcasts.



File photo

**THE SINGING** troupe Five By Design leads audiences of *Radio Days* through a nostalgic trip of the music of the WWII era.

But the real strength is the music. Glenn Miller's *Moonlight Serenade*, Les Brown's *Sentimental Journey*, *Moonlight in Vermont*, *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*, *Holiday for Strings* and *I'll Be Seeing You* among the many tunes transported the audience back through time.

Fronting the NAC Orchestra, Five By Design create an authentic, fun-loving atmosphere that pales nostalgia. Singing in four- and five-part harmonies to their own stunning orchestral arrangements, Kurt and Terrence Niska, Lorie Carpenter-Niska, Michael Swedberg and Catherine

Farr-Scott, along with conductor Earl Stafford, invite comparison with the Swingle Singers and Nelson Riddle. And their little theatrical touches, meant to add visual delights and emotional depth, are effectively understated, dropping hints rather than hitting you over the head.

Dean Holze's lighting was equally effectively dramatic, giving the music appropriate mood. In the end, what promised to be another Pops concert is one of the bigger theatrical surprises of the year.

denis.armstrong@ott.sunpub.com

# Radio Days a superb retrospective

D. T. BAKER

*Special to The Journal*

EDMONTON

There are plenty of pops shows making the rounds of symphony orchestras, with well-intentioned nostalgia themes of big band tunes and memories of the war years. What sets apart *Radio Days*, a production by Minneapolis-based Five by Design, is that it goes well past good intentions.

In as slick and polished a show Friday night as the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra's Pops series has seen in quite some time, Five by Design crafted a tight, well-conceived and highly rehearsed two hours of songs, jingles and the odd production bit spoofing the medium which many in the Winspear audience could recall like it was yesterday.

Sure, the odd bit seemed a little forced here and there, and Alton Accola's narration was a trifle overwritten. But from costume changes (many) to the appropriate dance steps to the segues between production sets, the polish put on this show was worthy of all the soap products mentioned during the night.

All this has said nothing so far about

---

## CONCERT REVIEW

---

### Edmonton Symphony Orchestra

**What:** The Pops with special guests Five By Design

**Where:** Winspear Centre

**When:** Friday

---

the music. *Radio Days* has a well-judged retrospective of the war years' music, sung with clean, tight harmony and jazz-tinged flair that made the big band vocal sound unique. Moreover, the orchestrations were superb — sophisticated, hardly ever lacking for some deft and subtle touches, and fully involving every corner of the orchestra.

David Hoyt led the ESO Friday night, and the orchestra was in top form. The full orchestra had great stuff to play throughout the night. Special mention can go to wonderful settings of *It's Been a Long, Long Time* and *Mairzy Doats*.

Kudos also to Five by Design for their canny inclusion of The Happy Gang — a fine nod to a Canadian institution from that era, Robin Hood Flour commercial and all.