

## Music Review: Webber warbled wonderfully

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JOHN TERAUDS

TORONTO STAR

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### The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber

★★★★ (out of four)

Starring Michael Burgess, Liz Callaway, Michael K. Lee, Alice Ripley, Laurie Gayle Stephenson and Max Von Essen. Until Sunday at the Hummingbird Centre, **416-872-2262.**

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Sitting through the opening night of *The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber*, it felt, to quote one of his songs, as if we never said goodbye.

Our long love affair with *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, *Evita*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, among his many musicals, is being rekindled at the Hummingbird Centre until Sunday, with an all-star cast backed by a strong orchestra in a concert performance of 29 numbers.

Through the last quarter of the 20th century, the boffo British tunesmith could do no wrong. And as this nicely packaged program attests, good pop music does have staying power.

An excellent cast makes the show fly. The vocal performers are all Broadway marquee names.

Liz Callaway could do no wrong last night as she applied her trademark sincerity and clear soprano to such Webber chestnuts as "Memory" (from *Cats*), "You Must Love Me" (*Evita*) and "I Don't Know How to Love Him" (*Jesus Christ Superstar*). She sang each tune as if for the first time, and proved that less is often much more when it comes to reigning in the melodrama.

On the other hand, dusky voiced Alice Ripley pulled out all the emotional stops for *Evita*'s "Don't Cry for Me Argentina," and it worked.

The two young leading men proved to be powerful singers with remarkably flexible voices. Max Von Essen was all romantic charm in "Evermore Without You," from Webber's current Broadway show *The Woman in White*.

Michael K. Lee was all swagger — both vocally and physically — to great effect, leading off the program and the whole ensemble in "Superstar."

Less well-known shows represented on the list are *Song & Dance* (which goes back two decades) and the more recent *Whistle Down the Wind* and *The Beautiful Game*, from which the orchestra played the intriguing tribal/Celtic-sounding Overture.

The second half of the program was dominated by *The Phantom of the Opera*, where Laurie Gayle Stephenson showed off her impressive range and power in the title song. Her duet in "All I Ask of You" with Von Essen was wonderfully affecting.

*The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber* is the perfect tonic for the post-holiday blahs, and a great way to start off a new year.

To paraphrase: Yes Webber changes everything/ Now I tremble at your name/ Nothing in the world will ever be the same/ Webber changes everything/ Days are longer, words mean more.