

## Review: Merchant plays elegant and silly with Pops

Former 10,000 Maniacs singer took requests long into the night



Natalie Merchant might have played all night for a receptive Riverbend audience. / Mark Seliger

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What began as a refined evening of singer-songwriter Natalie Merchant singing against the cinematic sounds of the Cincinnati Pops eventually transformed into Merchant literally letting her hair down and covering everything from "Dust in the Wind" to Beck Saturday night.

The first half of the 2 hour and 40 minute-long concert entailed the silver-haired Merchant mainly drawing from her latest album, 2010's "Leave Your Sleep," coupled with John Morris Russell conducting the Pops. For the hour-long encore, Merchant performed a stripped down, acoustic set with just her guitarist, Gabriel Gordon, accordion player Uri Sharlin and her pianist. That's when things got interesting.

To start, though, she sang songs adapted from 19th century poets like Robert Louis Stevenson and E. E. Cummings. While she sang opener "Land of Nod" and then "Nursery Rhyme of Innocence and Experience," the barefooted Merchant waltzed across stage in time with the strings and woodwinds.

Between playing songs from "Sleep," she included her classics from alt-rock group 10,000 Maniacs such as "Gold Rush Brides," "These Are Days" and "Verdi Cries" from 1987's "In My Tribe," a song she wrote at only 19.

She dipped into nostalgic cuts like "Life Is Sweet," which sounded even sweeter and more life-affirming with the Pops' soaring strings, and "She Devil," a sensual song powered by bongos and Merchant's equally seductive Latin dance.

After a twenty-minute intermission, night had fallen and Merchant and the Pops came back, but her charcoal sarong and ponytail had been exchanged for a purple dress and her hair resting on her shoulders.

She prefaced “The Sleepy Giant” based on author Charles Carryl’s book “Davy and the Goblin” about a creature that eats children with, “I’d like to thank Toyota for bringing so many children,” she joked, referring to Toyota’s free lawn admission for kids under 12.

The remaining songs from her regular set weren’t quite as grisly, but she did sing “Indian Names” inspired by Lydia Sigourney’s writings on the destruction of Native Americans, and a brand new song, “The End,” a somber ballad Merchant said she wrote last week.

The Pops left the stage, finished for the evening. Merchant and Gordon came out and turned a typical three-song encore in something unexpected.

“This is when we stretch out,” she said.

It was also the point where she took requests. As she sang “Break Your Heart,” fireflies lit up the night sky. “Carnival” from “Tigerlily” got the audience (who had flooded the pit) and Merchant clapping, dancing and stomping along.

She told an anecdote about going to The Penguin Dueling Piano Bar and how she’d requested the Carpenters “Top of the World” but the pianist was so off key she gave him money to try and get it right, which he didn’t.

“When I’m in the country tucking in my daughter, this is going on in Cincinnati,” she laughed.

When she realized there wasn’t a curfew for the venue, the intimate party continued. She performed “Motherland”, “Tell Yourself” and broke into a sing-a-long covers medley of “Top of the World,” “The Gambler,” “Dust in the Wind,” “Hey Jude” and ended on Beck’s “Loser.”

“When you see the Cincinnati Pops, you didn’t think we’d do “Dust in the Wind,” she said.

After a couple failed attempts at proper covers, she was told there was indeed a curfew and it was time to wrap things up. Of course, she was already 30 songs into her set and could’ve gone all night without the restrictions.

She ended her epic set on her hit “Kind and Generous” and sang those words directly to the audience. “I like to thank you for coming to the show tonight and thank you for not posting any bad videos of me on YouTube.”

Merchant’s performance was a dichotomy: the elegance of her earnest songs, enhanced with the Pops backing, contrasted with the fan-favorite hour that revealed her sillier side.

In a way, the second half felt more organic and fun, which didn’t reduce her performance with the Pops much, it just showed what a well-rounded performer Merchant can be.