

“We’ve Got Rhythm”; Max Raabe & The Palast Orchestra Return to America

By Richard Z. Chesnoff / February 25, 2014

My very favorite import (next to champagne) is back in the U.S. next week: the super-slick German-born bandleader/ crooner Max Raabe and his dapper Palast Orchester kick off a new American tour with a one night gala at New York’s Carnegie Hall on Monday, March 3rd. At center-stage, Raabe & Co’s authentic time capsule renditions of the sophisticated dance and film music that charmed American and European movie and cabaret goers in the 1920s and 1930s.

Not all the vintage melodies are American-born. Weimar Germany and its rich culture produced its own brand of jazzy pop music — something that Hitler and his Nazi Reich soon banned as “Negroid, Jewish and degenerate”. To underscore that dreadful judgement, the Nazis soon began deporting composers and musicians to concentration camps.

Nonetheless, the “degenerate” melodies lingered on. And Raabe, a wide-ranging baritone who founded the Palast Orchester in 1985 while studying opera in Berlin, brings back the tap-your-toes dance tunes of Fred Astaire, the melodies of the Andrews Sisters, the romantic ballads of Kurt Weill and Bing Crosby, the seductions of Marlene Dietrich, the rhythms of Benny Goodman — and even the fun tunes of Betty Boop and Germany’s own famous a cappella quintet, the Comedy Harmonists.

The Palast Orchester presents it all in its original arrangements. “This time,” Raabe recently told me by phone from Berlin, “We’ve researched and uncovered some previously hidden Cole Porter arrangements.”

Raabe’s full tour repertoire will include a whimsical mix of German, French and Italian period chansons alongside Cuban rumbas, Argentine tangos and British fox trots.

Still, most of the ditties he plans to offer will be made in the U.S.A., such as “You’re the Cream in My Coffee.” He will also offer English translations of some previously unknown tunes including one he says that’s about “a bathroom tub”.

It’s far more than humor or just nostalgia — it’s almost like being there. As Raabe puts it: “It’s music that pleases, that makes people happy.” Between that, and Raabe’s own cheeky demeanor, the Palast Orchester epitomizes the elegance of the musical 20s and 30s. As one German critic described it: “excellent manners spiked with a touch of decadence.”

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