

GJ symphony mixes ragtime with Christmas cheer at show

by ANN WINTERHOLTER

The Grand Junction Symphony Orchestra got into the Christmas spirit by mixing carols and ragtime at its holiday concert Tuesday. With a lighted backdrop which changed colors to accentuate the music conductor Kirk Gustafson got the evening under way with "A Canadian Brass Christmas." The arrangement cast carols in various moods as the melodies were given a clear voice by the brass or plucked by strings.

The featured artist for the concert, Butch Thompson, joined the orchestra for the next piece. Thompson, who spent 12 years as the house pianist on Garrison Keillor "A Prairie Home Companion," is well-known as one of the foremost jazz and ragtime performers today.

Thompson started heads bobbing with "Reindeer Rag" by Joseph Lamb (1887-1960). Thompson took the lead in the foot-tapping by stomping his heel in time to the rag and showing off what he called his "Christmas costume" — bright red socks decorated with Christmas trees.

The Ragtime Era (1897-1917) is considered the prelude to American Jazz and rags the first American original published music. At the time, ragtime was viewed by "the Establishment" as disreputable, probably because it was primarily played in saloons or clubs. Thus, in ragtime can be heard the taste of the saloon and the spark of jazz with classical found in the form.

Thompson put the ragtime flavor into "It Came Upon Upon a Midnight Clear" in such a way that the angels bending near the earth were surely jivin' on their harps of gold. Then "Silent Night" got the Blues treatment.

Scott Joplin (1867-1917) received his due in the three rags, arranged for orchestra and piano performed next. Joplin is considered the "King of Ragtime" — a title many parents can vouch for given the ever-present piano recital favorite, "The Entertainer."

In "Elite Syncopations," "Solace" and "Maple Leaf Rag" the orchestra enhanced themes and phrases as the Piano presented or repeated them. Thompson played with an air that made the rags sound deceptively simple; the accents and dynamics were intuitively placed, showing Thompson knowledge and experience with the music.

Although at times the orchestra's entrances sounded a little unsure, their underscoring gave greater depth to each rag.

After the intermission the orchestra Played strong performances of two well-known carols arranged by Chip Davis of Mannheim Steamroller fame. "Bring the Torch, Jeannette, Isabella," featured solos by flute, oboe and violin and the brass was bold and thrilling in "Deck the Halls."

Thompson returned to the stage in Santa wig, beard and hat, rolled "Jingle Bells" out on the piano, and told a few jokes before taking off the Santa get-up and turning to a suave jazz piece, "Memories of You" by Eubie Blake (1883-1983). Thompson played this on the clarinet, accompanied by the orchestra and joined with solos by a string bass, guitar and trombone.

Thompson went back to the piano with "Bethena: A Concert Waltz" by Joplin. The 1, 2, 3 of the waltz mixed with ragtime syncopation showed off the composer's ingenuity and familiarity with the classical form.

After explanations of a couple of Blake's musical techniques, Thompson demonstrated them in several carols before moving on to "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy," (Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky might have relinquished the tutu for this version.)

An energetic performance of "Sleigh Ride" recognized by the clear clip-clops, whip cracks and jingling bells brought the concert to a close.

The following round of applause and whistles were answered with "Deck the Halls" via ragtime that was the finale to the concert.