

Patriotic Pops enthralls crowd at Phil

By Bernadette La Paglia

May is the month of many things. Daffodils for one, Mother's Day another. For the American soldier, however, it has special significance. It is the month of Memorial Day, the last Monday in May when our nation pauses in a collective gesture of grace and recollection, especially in homage to those who gave their lives in service to our country.

And while we anticipate the traditions that accompany the celebratory side of this national holiday – the parades and flag waving, the barbecues and fireworks – so too are we called to make room for its solemnity by laying garlands on graves, reciting poetry, singing hymns. In short, remembering.

In keeping with this cultural significance, it is most fitting that each year the Philharmonic Center for the Arts pays such tribute at its annual Patriotic Pops Concert as it did last weekend under the baton of Maestro Bruce Hangen and Director of Chorales James Cochran.

And tribute it was! There was irrepressible toe tapping, hand clapping, even whistling – not

Dixie but Democracy. The spontaneity of the enthralled audience would brook no delay with eruptions of standing ovations and guest conductor Hangen delighted in it.

The marching cadence of the Junior ROTC Color Guard Honor Unit of Naples High School opened the concert with *The Star-Spangled Banner* and from that point on an infusion of patriotism pulsed throughout the evening. From the rousing "Liberty Fanfare" by John Williams to the reverential words of Walt Whitman in his "Song of Democracy," set to music by American composer Howard Hanson, an ebb and flow of emotion seemed to wash over the hearts and minds of all who listened so attentively.

In Peter Boyer's "Ellis Island: The Dream of America," narrator/actors Carrie Lund and Robin Willis presented animated accounts of immigrant journal entries in keeping with Polish, Italian, Irish and Russian ancestries while archival photos were projected on the stage.

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PHOTOS BY BERNADETTE LA PAGLIA

At the conclusion of the Patriotic Pops Concert held last weekend at the Philharmonic Center for the Arts, the participating veterans gathered in front of the flag that was unfurled at the finale. From left: Staff Sergeant Andrew Stewart, US Marines; First Lieutenant Corbin Wyant, US Army; WW II Army veteran Peter A. Thomas; Commander Fred Oczkowski, US Coast Guard; Colonel Ewald Fosbrey, US Air Force and Lieutenant Delbert Booher, MD US Navy. With the exception of Thomas who presented his poem, "Omaha Beach," the veterans comprised the Color Guard who marched into the theatre in a fanfare salute to the military.

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But clearly, the crescendo of the evening was the autobiographical narrative poem, "Omaha Beach," presented by decorated WW II Army veteran Peter A. Thomas. As an erect Thomas, 82, strode onto the stage in his original Army dress, a hush came over the house. In a voice that can only be described as godlike, he first provided a brief background of his poem's conception.

It was on a cold winter's day in Connecticut, 1954— 10 years post-Omaha — that Thomas was seized by 'all the awe' of Omaha Beach. Compelled to put pen to paper, he composed his thoughts. And as Maestro Hangen queued the orchestra, his illustrative narrative unfolded.

Phrases like "... We were dropped into water up to our shoulders, We waded in — a group of green soldiers... The water was red, Red from the dead..." painted a portrait that left many mystified. But it was at his conclusion that — like a seeming tidal wave — the entire house rose to its feet in awe and ovation:

"... And we humbly beseech Dear God, bless the men who died on Omaha Beach."

For Jeanne Milano, who attended the concert with her friend, Doris Hughes, it was the most moving of all the Patriotic Pops concerts they have attended in years past.

"It was just so moving. Not that the others haven't been, but this one was the best," said Milano. "The oratory and the projection of the poem made you just love America. We're way too negative, but to expe-

rience something so emotional at an important time like we're in now — when the enemy is still at our door — it has such power."

This was the second time that Neapolitans Gary and Karen Eidson attended the Patriotic Pops. Karen said, "Just beautiful." Gary offered, eager to comment on the Omaha Beach poem. "It was so stirring. We were thrilled that he was able to present it."

But Karen's comments were quietly provocative. "It's always an inspiration and a reminder of what a wonderful country we have, but I can't help but wonder in 20 years from now will there even be an event like this? It's sad that we've moved so far away from patriotism."