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TS-Whoa! Trans-Siberian Orchestra rocks the Pan Am

By Lucas Peerman/peerman@lcsun-news.com
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LAS CRUCES — Trans-Siberian Orchestra musical director Al Pitrelli didn't use many words to introduce keyboardists Vitalij Kuprij and Jane Mangini. He said for him to describe their talents would be akin to describing a thunderstorm —you just can't.

"You just have to experience it," Pitrelli said to the 7,167 in attendance Tuesday night at the Pan American Center. The spotlights then shone on Kuprij and Mangini as they took turns performing Carnegie Hall-worthy numbers. The excitement and passion intensified among the musicians and audience alike until all in the sold-out crowd were on their feet cheering in admiration.

The dueling keyboardists were a microcosm of the night —a performance that started slowly, but built to a wondrous finale full of ooh's, aah's and whoa's.

TSO did not disappoint in its second visit to the Pan Am in the past three years, mostly on the strength and theatrics of the second half of the show.

Las Cruces was stop No. 8 in TSO's 2011 Winter Tour, which will encompass 118 performances in nearly 80 cities in North America. As the concert began, it was evident there were still some kinks for the road and technical crews to work out. The third of four large diamond-shaped video screens behind the band was out of order during the group's introductory number.

The screen was up and working, however, by the time TSO kicked into full gear with the seasonal rock opera "Christmas Eve and Other Stories." Although always entertaining,

there were no surprises in the first half of the show. "Snow" fell from the ceiling during the playing of "First Snow," a bum (Bart Shatto) stumbled onto the stage to sing "Old City Bar" and "Christmas Eve/Sarajevo 12/24" was the musical and theatrical highlight.

During the first half, narrator Phillip Brandon and vocalists Andrew Ross and Jeff Scott Soto, as well as the rest of the touring band, all had solid performances. **Vocalist Chloe Lowery and violinist Asha Mevlana — each new to the tour since TSO last came to Las Cruces — were refreshing and energetic additions.** However, aside from "Sarajevo," the production's full complement of lights, pyrotechnics and moving stage pieces was not evident. I would venture to say most of the crowd — many of whom had likely seen TSO before — was wondering if they would get their money's worth.

Pitrelli spoke to the crowd after "Christmas Eve and Other Stories" reached its conclusion and commented how the production crew had worked since Oct. 23 without a break to perfect the stage, which was quite a sight — especially the backdrop, a large LED screen nearly the entire length of the Pan Am floor.

"Do you want to see what this (stage) can do?" Pitrelli asked. The crowd roared in approval as screens and speakers and stage parts moved in different directions. A giant Y-shaped walkway slowly dropped from the ceiling, coming to a stop about 10 feet above those seated on the floor. Musicians then walked onto the component, with the outer reaches of the "Y" reaching into the middle decks of the Pan American Center.

That was cool.

The band tore into some heavier songs from their upcoming rock theater "Gutter Ballet and The New York Blues Express" as the multicolored lasers spread out into the abyss above the crowd, lights began to flash to the beat of the song and the pyrotechnics — barely evident during the first part of the show —shot up from the main stage, providing a blast of much-needed energy.

That was really cool.

For the entirety of the second half of the concert, the music, lights and theatrics combined to give fans a Trans-Siberian Orchestra show they wouldn't soon forget. The dueling keyboardists, "Wizards in Winter" and the finale "Carol of the Bells" received the biggest ovations.

By the end of the concert, the Trans-Siberian Orchestra had once again left fans of all ages and musical tastes in awe. Let's hope they come back next year for another performance that leaves us speechless.

Pulse Editor/Digital Editor Lucas Peerman can be reached at (575) 541-5446.

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