

REVIEW

MUSIC In Evan Marshall's hands, mandolin makes magic

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NEWPORT --- He sounded at times like the Boston Pops, maybe even the Boston Symphony. The thing is, all Evan Marshall had with him at a fogbound Salve Regina University was a lowly mandolin.

But from that instrument, the 35-year-old mandolin wizard produced some amazing musical magic. Marshall, whose day job is playing in a hillbilly band at Disneyland, is in mandolin circles sort of what Itzhak Perlman is to the violin world. He's taken techniques developed by past masters and pushed to a new level and is a sort of one-man band.

Last night, he gave an audience mostly of aficionados a sampling of just what he could do on his instrument in a program that ran from Brahms to the Beatles by way of Irving Berlin.

Marshall, who has cut a couple of albums for Rounder records, was appearing as part of the American Mandolin and Guitar Summer School, a week-long institute held on the campus of Salve. Guitarist Mark Davis, of the popular Providence-based Mair-Davis Duo and co-director along with his mandolinist wife, said that a lot of advanced players were in the audience. But even they were bowled over by Marshall's command of the instrument.

What he does perhaps better than anyone else around is create the illusion of several mandolins playing. He can deftly juggle a delicate tremolo accompaniment while picking out a melody, a technique used in a touching arrangement of the Lennon-McCartney ballad "In My Life" - complete with the piano riff - and a bang-up rendition of the William Tell Overture that brought down the house.

Marshall, who was on his first trip to Rhode Island, plans to be back on the East Coast next spring for a New York recital of pretty heavy-duty classical numbers. But last night, he spent a couple of hours at Salve's Carey Mansion picking his way through an eclectic mix of light classics and pop standards - all laced with a little schtick. "There must be a critic in house," he said after his first set of Italian folk songs (he spent a decade serenading diners in posh Italian restaurants). "I'm starting to perspire."

Even the more serious offerings on the program, selections such as the Sixth Hungarian Dance of Brahms, were not without a theatrical flair. Marshall knows just when to pull back, just when to ham it up - but without trashing the music. And when Marshall hams it up, he does it in style. All during high school and college, Marshall had his sights set on a career as a concert violinist, so he has staggering - and clean - left-hand technique that he put to impressive use in the William Tell and a foot-stomping arrangement of the old fiddle tune "Hamilton County."