

Concert version of 'Music Man' needed more color, excitement

By **ALEC HARVEY**
News staff writer

There's something about the flamboyant Professor Harold Hill in a staid tuxedo that doesn't seem quite right.

The Alabama Symphony Orchestra opened its pops season with a concert version of "The Music Man," but even a concert version of this show demands some excitement. To paraphrase from the musical itself, Where were the lights? The balloons? The colors? They certainly weren't here.

Part of the joy of Meredith Willson's tale of a con man in River City, Iowa, is its exuberance, and although Saturday's show was sung well, it rarely was able to thrill. Part of that was acoustics that dulled the sounds coming from the stage, and part of it was star Jim Walton playing it safe, but much of it was exactly what a "concert version" boxes you into — no sets, minimal staging and very little color in the costumes.

Some were surely disappointed to find that Helena's Rebecca Luker, a Tony nominee for the revival of "The Music Man" on Broadway, was no-

★★★★☆

THE MUSIC MAN

BJCC Concert Hall
Part of Alabama Symphony Orchestra
Pops season
Saturday night

where to be found on stage. Luker is now on Broadway in "Mary Poppins," so she had to bow out of the Birmingham show, but her replacement, Broadway veteran Christiane Noll, was a more-than-suitable replacement. She made for a feisty Marian, and her voice soared, particularly on solos such as "My White Knight" and the beautiful "Till There Was You." As her mother, Tam DeBolt was also an audience pleaser, as were the barbershop quartet (Danny Bowers, Howard Green, Don Everett Garrett and David Coker) and their "Pick-A-Little" counterparts (Louise Beard, Kristin Staskowski, Lisa Paden Gaines and Carolyn Violli). And if his Doppler ever fails him, Fox 6 meteorologist Mickey Ferguson can take to the stage — he was hysterical as Marcelus Washburn, Hill's partner in crime.

As Hill, Walton, who starred in the show opposite Luker on Broadway, was fine, but he needed to be more than that. Hill is a larger-than-life con man, but as played by Walton, he's just another guy, one who doesn't seem to have enough excitement in him to rally the librarian around him, much less an entire Iowa town. His Hill, like his tux, was all black and white, no color.

Some strong moments were supplied by conductor Christopher Confessore and the symphony, as well as the talented Birmingham Concert Chorale (led by Mark Ridings) and the always delightful Summerfest Performing Ensemble. Under director Keith Cromwell, they helped pep up the proceedings, most notably with the rousing "Wells Fargo Wagon" and the finale, which also featured the Mountain Brook High School Band.

In the end, though, this "Music Man" needed a little more life to it. Some color, and some energy from Walton, would have helped.

E-MAIL: aharvey@bhamnews.com