

Renegade Orchestra rocks, reimagines classics at Freight & Salvage

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When someone goes to an orchestra, they don't expect to hear Led Zeppelin — that is, unless they're going to see the Renegade Orchestra.

Self-described as having “the beauty of a symphony, the soul of a rock band,” the Renegade Orchestra's musical stylings are vast. The group comprises traditional string instruments and a rock band rhythm section, and its sound traverses classic rock, metal, bluegrass and more. On the afternoon of Oct. 22, the Renegade Orchestra gathered in Downtown Berkeley's Freight & Salvage to deliver a cozy rainy day concert filled with smiles, laughter and, of course, Jimi Hendrix.

Musicians mingled with audience members in the coffee house venue before gathering on the almost too-small stage. Unlike a traditional orchestra, members were dressed in fun patterns; one violin was even covered in tiger stripes. Taking center stage, conductor Jason Eckl cracked jokes and engaged in casual conversation with the crowd, prefacing the performance as “everything an orchestra should not do.”

Kicking off with the Scorpions' metal classic “Rock You Like A Hurricane,” the Renegade Orchestra showed not what an orchestra shouldn't do, but what it could do. Seldom would one expect for a stringed instrument to produce a sound akin to an electric guitar, but as the musicians riffed off each other, this only seemed natural. At times, members would be compelled to step off the stage and into the crowd, making for compelling musicianship and light-hearted fun.

Through every song, cellist and group leader Rebecca Roundman was a standout. Known for her work in the band Dirty Cello along with Eckl, she has played with the likes of Joan Baez, Elvis Costello and Carlos Santana. As Eckl noted, some classical music fans get mad when they see Roudman playing standing up, leaning over the cello as if it's a guitar and whipping her curly hair back and forth. However, Roudman exuded infectious energy as she embraced the music and cheered on her bandmates; the audience simply could not look away.

The Renegade Orchestra's set spanned from Lynyrd Skynyrd's “Sweet Home Alabama” to Guns N' Roses' “Welcome to the Jungle” to the Eagles' “Hotel California.” During the first half of the show, Eckl declared that he would be conducting an “age check” by how many people recognized songs from different decades. Though few knew Walter Murphy and the Big Apple Band's “A Fifth of Beethoven,” the disco take on Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 proved strange in the best of ways, melting together a variety of genres.

The second half of the show consisted of previous audience requests. Though the Renegade Orchestra was open to requests during intermission, Eckl noted that they probably wouldn't hear them until 6 months to a year later — all the more reason to come back. Among some of the songs included Led Zeppelin's “Immigrant Song,” Leonard Cohen's “Hallelujah” and Queen's “Bohemian Rhapsody.” During

the more upbeat tracks, some audience members stood up to dance, but thankfully (according to Eckl) they did not try to sing along.

For its final number, the Renegade Orchestra played a song they've done from their beginnings as a group: Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze." Although a unique take on the classic, the rendition was a beautiful ode to the late musician and a testament to all that classical instruments can achieve.

To be a renegade means to defy an established set of rules and principles. As Eckl noted several times throughout the night, the musicians who joined him on stage were brave for breaking free from traditional notions of classical music. By the end of the performance, they proved that strings don't just belong at the symphony — they're made for rock and roll.