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With Kurt Elling, audience is always pleasantly surprised

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YOU get a bunch of Kurt Ellings when the jazz singer takes the stage - multiple musicalities, if you will.

There's the straight ahead singer; the scatter; the master of vocalese; and the hipster, the man with the clothes, mannerisms and voice you expect from a hep cat.

But most of all, you get a man with the rich baritone voice, musical talent and sense of jazz history to carry off all those roles. You also get a singer who likes to front a top-notch jazz band, not just a singer who hires accompanists.

Elling closed out the Izzy Asper Jazz Performances season Saturday night with longtime pianist and musical director Laurence Hobgood, bassist Harish Raghavan and drummer Ulysses Owens.

It's hard to tell which Elling most pleased the audience. The one who sang Dedicated to You, the title song from his upcoming recording of songs from the famous collaboration of tenor saxophonist John Coltrane and singer Johnny Hartman; or the one, say, who scatted like crazy in a call and response with drummer Owens.

Or the one who writes new lyrics to Body and Soul dedicated to his daughter and sings them to the transcribed solo of tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon from his celebrated Village Vanguard recording, Homecoming.

Or the one who, as an encore, sang a capella and unmiked, scatted mostly, I've Been All Around the World.

Standards from the Great American Songbook have been a staple of Elling performances, yet they don't sound quite like your father's standards. You Don't Know What Love Is and My Foolish Heart, for example, sound just as good reworked and reharmonized by Elling/Hobgood; they just don't sound the same. For example Dedicated to You, a standard when Coltrane and Hartman did it in the 1960s, started out as a simple ballad, then slipped into a shuffle beat, then Elling stepped aside as the trio laid out on a boppish romp before Elling closed off with a full-blown jazz shouting blast. You're never sure what you'll get with Elling, except that you'll like it.

It's hard not to praise pianist Hobgood, who has performed and recorded and arranged with Elling for almost 15 years, including the singer's two previous appearances in Winnipeg, at Jazz Winnipeg Festivals.

He is a superb pianist, and the trio would have given

a satisfying performance on its own. Owens and Raghavan are newer to the Elling fold, but they click beautifully with Hobgood and Elling.

The trio's opening number, before Elling came onstage, was a stunning reworking of Que Sera Sera and a particular showcase for Hobgood.

Whatever Elling you see onstage, at the core is a great singer.

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ConcertReview

Kurt Elling

Izzy Asper Jazz Performances

Burton Cummings Theatre

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4 out of five stars

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