

StarTribune.com



SPCO conductor McGegan shows off Handel, with care

MUSIC REVIEW A longtime partnership between the orchestra and the maestro ended with the flourish and splash of "Royal Fireworks" and other pieces.

By LARRY FUCHSBERG Special to the Star Tribune

Last update: April 5, 2009 - 12:13 AM

Nicholas McGegan, whose impish persona can't wholly conceal the great conductor he's become, wrapped up his longstanding partnership with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra this weekend with a characteristically captivating program of music, familiar and not, by Britons native and adoptive. Friday's performance, which rattled the rafters of Wayzata Community Church, offered nearly everything a hedonist could wish for, except the sound of corks popping.

Amid the resplendent brass and timpani of Handel's "Music for the Royal Fireworks," however, it was hard not to hear a poignant note. Beginning with violinist Jorja Fleezanis' valedictory concerto at Orchestra Hall, this has been a week of musical leave-takings. And one can hardly be sanguine about the fiscal condition of many of our performing organizations. Are we at the end of what will be seen, in retrospect, as a golden age? The question, though awkward, feels unavoidable.

But let me not rain on McGegan's parade, which, fittingly, began and ended with his beloved Handel. The opener, No. 5 of the Op. 6 Concerti Grossi, had a nostalgic subtext, having figured in McGegan's first SPCO program in 1988. Agreeable as this was, it was overpowered by the "Royal Fireworks" suite,

which managed to sound supercharged and insouciant at once. The open-air premiere of this rousing entertainment was a fiasco: the pyrotechnics were botched, and a pavilion built for the occasion burned to the ground, with casualties. But on Friday there was nothing untoward, and in McGegan's relaxed grip the music attained an almost wild grandeur, with the SPCO players happily swept up in the gale-force winds the diminutive conductor unleashed.

Edward Elgar's Introduction and Allegro -- "a smiling with a sigh," as the composer put it -- was no less remarkable. I've heard more ruminative accounts of this compact masterpiece, but none more thrilling. Prizing energy over exactitude, McGegan coaxed wonderfully sinewy and incisive playing from the SPCO strings; Elgar's "devil of a fugue," taken at full throttle, gave me goose bumps.

Best of all was Peter Maxwell Davies' beguiling "A Spell for Green Corn," with principal second violin Dale Barltrop the spellbinding soloist. Songful, playful, infused with Scottish folk fiddling, the piece is both festive and introspective, making it a near-perfect soundtrack for McGegan's farewell.

The conductor turns 60 next January. Isn't it time for a knighthood?

Larry Fuchsberg is a Minneapolis writer.

Advertisement

the news you want
delivered right to your inbox →

SIGN UP NOW AT startribune.com/newsletters

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™