

November 24, 2010

John Terauds

It's only a coincidence that two hours after reporting a financial deficit for the previous year on Wednesday, only 48 members of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra appeared for a concert on the Roy Thomson Hall stage.

This event was part of the organization's short Afterworks concerts that start at 6:30 p.m.

The stage may have been just half full, but the music was a perfect example of less being more. Visiting British conductor Nicholas McGegan led the tight little group in impressive readings of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 8* and the *Cello Concerto No. 1* by Camille Saint-Saëns.

McGegan, who specializes in historically informed performances of Baroque- and Classical-era music, infused the pieces with a lively lyricism. The sound was not big, but the transparency of the textures blew through the concert hall like a breath of fresh air.

This concert was also a chance for the orchestra's new principal cellist, Joseph Johnson, to step into the spotlight in the *Cello Concerto*.

Although this piece dates from 1872, it is built on musical architecture from earlier times. McGegan treated it like a Mozart symphony. Johnson, in turn, treated it like an oversize piece of chamber music, integrating himself seamlessly into a larger whole.

The resulting performance was delicate, casting aside Romantic *Sturm und Drang* for unaffected musicianship. Johnson's flawless playing was emotionally restrained but gorgeously crafted and propelled by a confident momentum.

It was such a sweet evening of music-making that it made me wish the Toronto Symphony would do more with less more often.

McGegan and Johnson, as well as several other symphony soloists, return Thursday night for a regular, 8 p.m. concert which adds the suite from the opera *Dardanus*, by Jean-Philippe Rameau, and a *Concerto for Four Violins* by Antonio Vivaldi.