



Guest conductor McGegan has fun with SLSO, Baroque masters

BY JOHN HUXHOLD • Special to the Post-Dispatch | Posted: Sunday, March 27, 2011 12:00 am

Guest conductor Nicholas McGegan is a frequent visitor to Powell Hall, and Friday night was yet another example of why he keeps getting invited back.

Part of it is that he is an internationally respected expert in Baroque performance practice, with an extensive discography. The other part is his delightful personality, which enlivened both the audience and musicians alike and created a nice, informal atmosphere.

The fun began with the Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 by Bach. It's a concerto in the old sense of a small group of mixed instruments, in this case played by members of the St. Louis Symphony, that allow each group to show off separately as well as together (in "concert" as it were).

McGegan stood on a podium that seemed too large for his small frame, firing up some zippy tempos, fanning his head with his hands along with a trill or an ornament, and turning to each section, cheering them on.

Everybody kept up with the furious pace, and whereas the third movement was scrappy and disorganized, the multisectioned fourth was a model of subtle phrasing and virtuoso ensemble work. Unlike many historically informed performances that roar up to the end of lines and just quit, McGegan tapered them off, which gave a greater sense of coherence and closure.

Next was the St. Louis debut of Gabriele Cassone in Johann Nepomuk Hummel's trumpet concerto. It's a beautiful piece, full of charming melodies that emerge in the many dialogues between soloist and orchestra. Cassone's day job is as a professor at the Conservatory of Novara in Italy, and he played a trumpet of type that Hummel would have known, one with an early version of valves. His entrances, even on high, soft notes, were right on the money; and every line of every movement was not just played through but had interesting nuances of volume and tempo.

The audience cheered his outstanding performance and was rewarded with an encore, Verdi's "Adagio for Trumpet and Orchestra."

Johann Baptist Vanhal is not exactly a household name among music lovers, but this contemporary of Mozart wrote a wonderful concerto, and the St. Louis Symphony's principal double bass Eric Harris performed it after intermission.

His instrument doesn't project very far, so McGegan kept the orchestra way down, allowing Harris to be heard even in the back. Bending way over for notes high enough to be on a violin, Harris had some hard work to do, tossing off double stops, rapid runs up and down the scale, and three extended cadenzas that seemed longer than the movements in which they were contained.

At several points during the performance, he got some laughs by wiping his brow or showing thumbs up after getting through a tough section. He also got a well-deserved standing ovation.

Last up was Handel's Suite No. 2 from his "Water Music." The trumpets and horns nailed their perilously high notes, the woodwinds danced along the rippling melodies, and McGegan was all smiles in a love fest with his gang musicians. Simon and Garfunkel's "Feelin' Groovy" was on the car radio afterward, which pretty much summed up the evening.