

Concert Review / McGegan's reunion with the SPCO brings out their best

By Rob Hubbard
Special to the Pioneer Press

Posted: 04/01/2011 12:01:00 AM CDT

Before launching into the finale of a Joseph Haydn symphony on Thursday night, conductor Nicholas McGegan paused, hunched his shoulders and rubbed his hands together devilishly, as if to say: "This is going to be fun."

And fun it was. As was just about everything McGegan and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra performed at Apple Valley's Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church. And not just because there might not be a more enjoyable conductor to watch than McGegan, but because the SPCO doesn't play baroque and classical-era music any better than when McGegan is on the podium.

It was the conductor's first time back with the orchestra since his term as an artistic partner ended two years ago, and the musicians exuded an air of delight at the reunion. Soon the audience was smiling, too, as McGegan employed an ample arsenal of imaginative cues on Haydn's "Alleluja" Symphony that included cowering in mock fear to suggest putting some menace into the music or scooping like a steam shovel to emphasize explosive upbeats on a minuet.

McGegan, flutist Julia Bogorad-Kogan and the orchestra brought plenty of fresh interpretive ideas to J.S. Bach's Suite No. 2 for Flute and Strings. Sitting between Haydn and Purcell at this party, Bach might have sounded a little intellectual for the evening's festive tone had McGegan not consistently reminded the orchestra to make the music dance.

A jig and a hornpipe found their way into this extended dance mix on a collection of music

from Henry Purcell's "Abdelazer," a 1695 work that helped make Haydn's 91st Symphony (written almost

a century later) sound positively modern by comparison. McGegan's theatrical gestures continued to entertain on the closing Haydn, but they were always in service to the music. And the SPCO responded with sounds that perfectly matched his movements, be the conductor fluttering his fingers or seemingly stirring an invisible cauldron.

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Who: The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra with conductor Nicholas McGegan and flutist Julia Bogorad-Kogan

What: Works by Joseph Haydn, J.S. Bach and Henry Purcell

When and where: 8 p.m. today, Wooddale Church, 6630 Shady Oak Road, Eden Prairie; 8 p.m. Saturday, St. Paul's United Church of Christ, 900 Summit Ave., St. Paul

Tickets: \$25-\$5, available at 651-291-1144 or thespco.org

Capsule: The most fun you'll have at an SPCO concert since ... the last time McGegan was in town.

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