

LOS ANGELES TIMES

28 February 2005

MUSIC REVIEW

McGegan's lively conduct connects sight and sound

The conductor adds wit and vibrancy to Philharmonia Baroque's Rameau and Handel.

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February 28, 2005

Close your eyes at most concerts and you'll not miss much. But if Nicholas McGegan is conducting, closing your eyes means missing something vital. At Walt Disney Concert Hall on Friday, McGegan connected sight and sound in ways funny, witty and illuminating.

McGegan led his excellent San Francisco-based Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra in a program of Rameau and Handel. Soprano Lisa Saffer was the soloist.

Although McGegan and his merry period-instrument band played in Cerritos in 2003 and three times in Irvine in 2001, they've been absent from Los Angeles for about a decade. It's been a long time.

Other conductors may interpret Baroque scores as plains of sewing-machine rhythms and textures; McGegan finds in them rivulets, courses, hairpin turns and breezes gusting through valleys and up and around mountains.

The conductor bounces, lurches, dodges, flicks a hand, stomps a foot. At every move, his musicians respond instantly, fluidly, and the music springs into life and stays alive.

Who would have expected, for instance, the suite from Rameau's "Les Paladins" (The Knights) — one of those obscure, mid-18th century theater pieces — to be so full of comic character and moments of grace?

The plot is rather silly and typical of the period, something about two knights wooing the same lady imprisoned in a castle, with a fairy working some magic to resolve the conflict.

McGegan and his players made each of the 15 sections a jeweled vignette.

Handel is a much more profound composer. Saffer rose to the varied demands in four Handel arias, singing with limpid purity and agile virtuosity, and embellishing the repeats with imagination and taste.

She was vulnerable in Cleopatra's "Se pietà" (from "Giulio Cesare"), indignant in "Falsa imagine" ("Ottone"), gracious in "Sweet bird" ("L'allegro, il penseroso, ed il moderato") and saucily dazzling in "Voglio amare" ("Partenope").

Stephen Schultz was the evocative flutist in "Sweet bird." Cellist Phoebe Carrai and harpsichordist Hanneke van Proosdij provided the delicate continuo support in Cleopatra's lament, which blossoms into full orchestral accompaniment only at the end.

Throughout, McGegan was a sympathetic collaborator.

Still making music visual, he closed the program with a buoyant account of Handel's "Water Music" suite in F.

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