

**A Lot of Night Music****High Baroque**

by ALAN RICH

## BIT BY BIT

Thirty-three short pieces made up the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra's program at Disney Hall last week: 29 orchestral bits by Rameau and Handel, and four Handel arias. I would not have spared a single one. There is something immensely joyous in the way both these composers employed their orchestral forces to tickle the fancies of their aristocratic audiences — and, more to the point, their pleasure-loving monarchs (Rameau's Louis XV and Handel's George I). Their music throbbed in dance rhythms, and the sounds themselves seemed to dance: the roulades for flutes and oboes, the daring leaps into midair for the horns, the fanciful treads for the strings, the solid anchoring chords from the keyboard.



(Photo by Josef Astor)

The Philharmonia Baroque, Bay Area-based, was one of the first ensembles on this coast to seek out the historically correct way of performing this music. The Berkeley hills in my grad-student days were alive with the sound of music: early-music making on harpsichords and clavichords from build-it-yourself kits, recorders and sackbuts brought home from European shops by the first generations of Fulbright scholars, horns without valves and therefore as treacherous to play upon as those at last week's concert. Lively and ambitious musicians — the name of harpsichordist Laurette Goldberg remains in my memory — assembled the first Philharmonia Baroque in 1981; the English-born Nicholas McGegan came on a few years later, and the ensemble grew (in quality, that is, and, therefore, in fame). Several years ago they tried a concert series here at the County Museum that fizzled because of poor attendance; last week's concert, in a hall three times the size, was very nearly sold out.

McGegan, part hobbit and part wizard, is great fun to watch, as he doesn't so much conduct as re-enact the music. His arms sweep around it in a giant bear hug, but the smallness of his frame enables him at times to disappear inside its glowing splendor. The program ended with one of the three suites that make up Handel's *Water Music*, the one that ends with the hornpipe that sounds like a toy version of an Elgar *Pomp and Circumstance* of many decades later. Something in McGegan's performance, at once grandiose and respectful, managed to reconstruct that bridge across the time span. Lisa Saffer was the evening's soloist, bright-voiced and virtuosically sure. She is, like McGegan, an artist exceptionally adept in crossing time bridges. Her four Handel arias ranged from the deeply pathetic side of that composer's work that we are only now properly honoring ("Se pietà" from *Giulio Cesare*) to the delicious goofiness of the "Sweet Bird" duet (from *L'Allegro*) with flutist Stephen Schultz.

The orchestra as heard here (lacking trumpets) numbered 36, larger than our Musica Angelica, but a good size to resound handsomely in Disney's welcoming space. (Among its members is the

violinist Elizabeth Blumenstock, who also plays with Angelica.) I can only hope that the turnout last week, and the response, signals more frequent visits for this excellent group and its greatly imaginative, cuddly conductor. They have been missed.