

Baroque orchestral maneuvers, from an expert hand : Famed for his work as a conductor, performer and scholar of Baroque music, renowned conductor Nicholas McGegan returns to the Music Academy of the West festival

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So far, the 2009 classical music season in Santa Barbara has been unusually well-stocked with memorable early music concerts, given such memorable concerts as the Academy of Ancient Music's performance of the Bach Brandenburg Concertos and the Australian Chamber Orchestra's spicy affair at the Lobero Theatre this spring.

On Saturday, the early music warming trend continues. Renowned early music specialist and conductor Nicholas McGegan will be the next visiting conductor to pass through town as part of the Music Academy of the West's summer season, leading the Festival Chamber Orchestra in an all-Baroque program at First Presbyterian Church.



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For this longtime champion of early music, who has watched the source of his obsession move from the esoteric to some degree of public acceptance, the irony is not lost that early music has gained considerable ground and clout in recent years.

Earlier this week, the British-born McGegan - who lives in Berkeley, where he leads the Bay Area-based Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra - arrived in Santa Barbara to begin rehearsing the orchestra. Saturday's program is a balanced sampler plate of baroque music, including Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, Rameau's "Nais Suite," two suites from Handel's "Water Music" and, older yet, music from Henry Purcell's "Abdelazar." "We've got all the greats there except Vivaldi," he muses. "Certainly, (the program) involves a great deal of variety."

At the time of an interview from his hotel, McGegan had just come from a rehearsal with the young musical charges in the orchestra. "We had a wonderful time doing the Brandenburg 3 this morning," he says. "They were fantastic."

Working with younger musicians, says McGegan, "you're introducing something to the musicians for the first time, and that's always a thrill. It's as much of a thrill for me as it is for them. It's like cooking dinner for them, saying 'you've probably never tried this recipe, but here it is.' It's nice to watch their faces as they get it and see what it's about."

He admitted feeling energized by the experience, partly through the realization that today's fledgling classical musician is better equipped for baroque music than even in the recent past. As McGegan notes, "I asked them 'how many of you have had the experience of playing baroque violins or string instruments?' Quite a few people put up their hands. Then I asked 'how many of you have baroque

bows?' And quite a few people put up their hands. If I had done that 10 or 15 years ago, I would have been lucky to get one."

It was a different story, of course, when musicians such as McGegan - who studied at Oxford and Cambridge - and Christopher Hogwood found themselves fascinated by the then-more obscure early music oeuvre in the 1970s. Back then, McGegan recalls "we didn't have teachers. We had to teach ourselves. We had to actually read the books and look up the fingerings ourselves, rather than have somebody tell us. I think that was rather more exciting."

Is it fair to say that the early Early Music and "Period Instrument" champions were cultural explorers?

"Yeah," he says, laughing softly. " 'Pioneers' is too grand a word. 'Explorers' sounds nice. Also, we had the hope, but we didn't necessarily find what we were looking for. Luckily, the arts are more uncertain than that. Yes, the thrill of discovery for yourself is great. It's lovely and particularly gratifying to pass that on to the students here. I spent a couple of weeks in Aspen doing much the same thing. It's tremendous fun."

But he is also quick to add, "I hope, in my case, that I'm not totally pigeonholed in the baroque."

In fact, McGegan deals with a broad swath of classical music repertoire beyond baroque. Last year, in his first experience with the Music Academy of the West, he conducted a program that included work of Mozart, Schumann, and the great 20th-century French composer Olivier Messiaen. Next week, he heads down to Los Angeles to conduct the L.A. Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl, in an all-Mozart program.

Of course, he also remains happily steeped in things baroque, and will conduct two Handel operas, back to back, later this month. Most importantly, he is pleased to find that baroque music, in many ways, is "no longer controversial. One thing, of course, which makes it interesting amongst the students, is that they realize that a career can actually be had. You can actually go to Juilliard and take their early music course now.

"I run my Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra up in the Bay Area and we hold auditions every year for tenured positions. I wouldn't call it a living, like playing in the San Francisco Symphony, but it is certainly a job. Once you start being able to offer people work like that, then it's not just something you do like flower arrangements. It has a much more serious feel to it."

One of his most recent recordings (now totaling more than 100 in number) is a version of Handel's "Acis und Galatea," in a potentially controversial version arranged a century after its creation by Felix Mendelssohn. The resulting music, says McGegan, with a hearty laugh, is "like a colorized movie. I'm just waiting for all the Handel nuts to tut-tut their way through that.

"Everything your mother told you not to do, he does, in terms of what we were taught and what I'm supposed to do with period instruments. What's quite fun about it, actually, is that we slide around with all the portamenti and things, as you would if you were playing Mendelssohn, but on period instruments. It sounds very funky in Handel."

For McGegan, dealing with older repertoire and works he hasn't done many times before doesn't interfere with his core mission of keeping performances fresh. That philosophy prevails with this weekend's program.

"I have certain old pieces coming up yet again," he says, "which is great, because I can think of new things to do with them. I think the idea that a musician should just stick something in the microwave is more or less the death of music."

By way of a very recent example, he says, "I was trying to come up with really being very self-critical about Brandenburg 3 today, compared with how I did it a couple of weeks ago. Of course, that will change once we get into the Presbyterian Church where we're playing. It will again be different, because the building will make it different. So that will change the recipe yet again.

"It keeps me on my toes, which is a good thing."