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Music review: Nicholas McGegan conducts Mozart at the Hollywood Bowl

August 12, 2009 | 4:15 pm



I'd like to have a dollar for every time [Nicholas McGegan](#), the longtime music director of the Bay Area's [Philharmonia Baroque](#), has been called the Energizer Bunny of early music. He is, in fact, the sunniest conductor in classical music.

He opened his all-Mozart Los Angeles Philharmonic program at the [Hollywood Bowl](#) on Tuesday night (it repeats Thursday) with the "Marriage of Figaro" Overture. But his performance began a few seconds before the music. The video monitors showed him on the podium boyishly excited, barely able to contain himself. Beaming, he put his fingers to his lips, as if the pleasure would be just too delicious for words were the music allowed to quietly sneak up on its listeners.

It was and it did. That little motivic twirl that sets off Mozart's great societal exploration of folly,

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authority, lechery and redemption was a musical spring that snapped into exhilarating cadential fireworks. Who wouldn't have been happy to wrap up in a blanket against the evening chill and settle into four hours of full opera following that?

Some throw away the "Figaro" Overture. The orchestra pretty much did so in a slovenly performance over the weekend, when it used the piece as an irrelevant curtain raiser for the Herbie Hancock/Lang Lang extravaganza. McGegan, however, made his "Figaro" opener perkily pertinent to the piano concerto and symphony that would follow.

Louis Lortie was soloist in K. 488, Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23 in A-Major. "We're Laurel and Hardy," McGegan said, introducing the French Canadian pianist, who is a little taller and slimmer than the conductor. And then in banter, Laurel merrily contradicted Hardy.

McGegan: The concerto is cheery Mozart.

Lortie: The slow movement is sad.

McGegan: But it's short.

Lortie: And *I* get to set the tempo.

McGegan: Well, that's easier for me than the other way around.



Mozart's late concertos are often described as operatic. The major-keyed ones are the comic operas; the minor-keyed ones, the opera seria. The amiable Laurel and Hardy act continued musically in the performance.

McGegan encouraged a bright sound. He follows period performance practice, which means little vibrato in the strings. Flute, clarinets, bassoon and horn supply the concerto warmth, and McGegan made certain that they stood out.

Lortie is cooler, a careful and precise pianist with just enough sparkle in his eye to give his playing character. He was somber in the Adagio and added embellishments that, while not inappropriate to the Classical-era style, had a hint of the blues. That was a nice touch, especially following Hancock's radiant embellishment of "Rhapsody in Blue" at the Bowl on Friday night. In the fast movements, Lortie and McGegan playfully bounced the ball back and forth, not exactly competitively but not altogether innocently either.

After intermission, McGegan conducted Mozart's Symphony No. 40. G minor, the key of his penultimate symphony, provided Mozart the atmosphere for agitation and melancholy. McGegan was not dark, but he was aggressive in the way Toscanini could be aggressive with this symphony, letting the rhythm do the driving.

One way to read Mozart's score is as a road map to dark places. But McGegan did not get distracted by emotions. He focused on the rhythmic grooves in each movement and rode them hard and dramatically. A listener knew the disturbing scenery not by observing it but by the cinematic white-knuckled tension of the driver.

Still, this was a driver who clearly enjoyed the ride wherever it took him, and he didn't hesitate to ride the brakes for the moving Andante, which he led like a big caress. The orchestra was taut, playing Mozart with the quick reflexes it famously brings to new music.

Mozart attracts large crowds to the Bowl -- more than 9,000 came Tuesday -- probably because this idealized composer seems a pleasant accompaniment for a picnic under the stars. From what I could tell of the audience around me, though, McGegan made many sit up and really listen. The amplification had juice, and that was a good thing as well.

-- Mark Swed

Los Angeles Philharmonic, Hollywood Bowl, 2301 N. Highland Ave., Hollywood, 8 p.m. Thursday. \$1 to \$126. (323) 850-2000 or www.laphil.org.

Photos: (Top) Nicholas McGegan conducts the Los Angeles Philharmonic in an all-Mozart program at the Hollywood Bowl on Tuesday night. (Above) Pianist Louis Lortie, and McGegan. Credit:

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