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CLASSICAL REVIEW

Enjoyable CSO program explores less traveled musical paths

By John von Rhein

Tribune critic

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Whether Nicholas McGegan—or anyone else, for that matter—can succeed in rescuing the music of Johann Nepomuk Hummel from obscurity is highly debatable. But, as the guest conductor demonstrated Thursday night in his refreshingly offbeat program with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at Orchestra Hall, there are a few pieces by the Austrian composer that warrant an occasional hearing.

As part of his sampler of smaller-scaled works from the Baroque to the early Romantic eras, McGegan included Hummel's Piano Concerto in A Minor. Dating from 1816, this second of nine concertos he wrote for piano sounds like a cross between Mendelssohn and Chopin, combining lyrical charm with brilliance.

Hummel was a far less inspired composer, but he must have been some virtuoso to be able to toss off the cascading runs, leaping intervals and rapid hand-crossings that give the work its beguiling surface.

Stewart Goodyear, the gifted young Canadian soloist, clearly has the chops to make you appreciate its modest merits.

He sped across the keyboard like a dervish in perpetual motion. The chiseled clarity of his articulations was something to behold, while his lyrical tenderness in the central Larghetto showed a remarkable sensibility. McGegan and the CSO followed him as attentively as the rest of us, and the audience rewarded Goodyear with a noisy, well-deserved ovation.

The rest of McGegan's chamber-orchestra fare consisted of major pieces by great composers that don't turn up very often at the CSO's downtown concerts.

His readings of Mozart's compact Symphony No. 33 and a jolly suite from Henry Purcell's "King Arthur"

were full of vitality and character, the latter prefaced by a droll spoken introduction. Handel's Concerto Grosso Opus 6, No. 6, capitalized on the airy grace of the string ensemble, the concertino set in subtle relief against the larger ripieno (main) group.

The CSO musicians seem to enjoy playing for McGegan, and their enjoyment was evident from their crisply engaged performances.

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Chicago Symphony Orchestra

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave.

Tickets: 312-294-3000

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