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## Culture Monster

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### Music review: Handel and fireworks at Hollywood Bowl

September 16, 2011 | 1:16 pm



A mid-September night in the Cahuenga Pass may be warm or cool, but fireworks and Handel at the Hollywood Bowl are classical music signifiers of summer's end hereabouts. Thursday night was overcast and chilly. No matter.

The crowd was large (11,244) and amiable. Nicholas McGegan was the jolly conductor. The Bowl-weary Los Angeles Philharmonic, no doubt eager for a week off before the start of the fall season, played Handel's "Music for the Royal Fireworks" with perky style and spirit. The sky lit up with splendid explosions. I loved the sparkly curlicues that accompanied a dainty minuet.

But that's the end of the evening. Things began with Rossini's overture to "La Cenerentola," his Cinderella opera. A specialist in early music, McGegan is not known as a Rossini conductor. But he has the zest for the composer like perhaps no one else. To watch him on the big video screen shimmy and smile as he giddily, yet with virtuosity, finessed Rossinian rhythms and crescendos was to automatically be won over.

The big piece was Beethoven's Triple Concerto. The soloists -- violinist Jennifer Koh, cellist Christian Poltéra and pianist Sergio Tiempo -- were youthful and energetic. McGegan kept the performance propulsive. It wasn't enough.

A problematic piece in the best of circumstances, Beethoven's Triple is not at the Bowl in the best of circumstances. Balance between three soloists and orchestra is hard enough in the concert hall. At the Bowl there are the added obstacles of amplification and too little rehearsal time. Even so, the logistical traps of the Triple (which also include the expense of three soloists) would easily be overlooked if this were, like all of Beethoven other concertos, a great work.

In the Bowl program book, Orin Howard writes that "the themes tend toward severity and the tissue connecting them, besides being repetitive, is surprisingly formulaic." But it's still middle period Beethoven, there are some memorable tunes and a rousing finale. Exciting soloists can make it work, and the relative rarity of performances keep the concerto from feeling tired.

Three youthful soloists on Thursday were likable enough. Koh and Poltéra egged each other on. Poltéra's sweet-toned high register was the highlight. Tiempo was more restrained, but that's the role Beethoven gave the pianist.

It may be a surprise that Haydn's "Surprise" Symphony, played after intermission, is not quite as Bowl-worthy as might be expected or that Haydn's great wit and McGegan's great wit only partially connected.

The issue here is one of scale. Haydn's humor is in the little things, subtle unexpected turns of phrase, easily lost in amphitheater distractions or amplification balances. The famous "surprise" of this symphony is a more slapstick belch in the Andante. Watching McGegan with hilariously deft yet silly gestures prepare for it was great fun. But also watching him on the screen meant we saw the cue to the orchestra, so the big surprise became no surprise at all.

What McGegan is, however, is an inspired Handel conductor. The "Royal Fireworks" could have been a throwaway, especially given that half of it gets drowned out by the crash and boom of the fireworks as well as by the audience's oohs and awes. Who cares what the orchestra is doing when the sky looks like that?

But we do care. This was a nuanced, brilliantly decorated, sprightly, characterful performance. The piccolo trumpet was brilliant. Music could be experienced as propelling pyrotechnics. Summer, at least from the classical music perspective, was given a glorious send-off.

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-- Mark Swed

*Photo: Fireworks at the Hollywood Bowl in 2010. Credit: Anne Cusack / Los Angeles Times*

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