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Wednesday, December 3, 2008

Contagious Joy

Classical Review

By Rick Walters



Worried about sounding like the bland sentiments of a Hallmark card, I would not normally use the words love and joy to describe a performance. However, they richly apply to Nicholas McGegan's work as guest conductor with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra last weekend. His love and joy in music making is contagious, spreading to the orchestra and the audience.

Though I have only heard the last half of the MSO's 50 years, I would guess that McGegan has been the most successful guest conductor in the orchestra's history. This conclusion is surprising, since he came into the mainstream symphony world as a Baroque specialist. A few years ago he led the best *Messiah*

ever heard in Milwaukee. His MSO concerts of Baroque music have been memorable, but he has brought unique sensibility and spirit to other music as well. Now he has shown new aspects of his talent in a sprawling early Romantic work, Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*.

This often-played symphony has a far-fetched story. A young man falls insanely in love with an unattainable woman. In his desperate, spurned loneliness he dreams he murders her and is marched to the scaffold to his death, then is tortured by surreal visions of a witches' Sabbath. McGegan narrated it like a master storyteller, delighting in every nuance. As a parallel, imagine Laurence Olivier vividly spinning out a ghastly tale, each syllable annunciated and building to overall effect. McGegan's light touch made the music clear, with playful sharp contrasts and overall restraint, limiting the loudest volume to only the biggest moments.

The result was orchestral balance and sensitive ensemble playing. The musicians sound as if they like playing for McGegan. His conducting techniques are not classic. Without a baton, he is a free dancer on the podium. If nothing else, he proves that a conductor can do anything as long as it works. Conductor and orchestra were no less successful in two Mendelssohn works, The Hebrides Overture and Symphony No. 5 ("Reformation"). I am now curious to hear what McGegan's fine ear, graceful liveliness and taste would bring to practically any music.

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