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MSO Review: McGegan accentuates the positive

Posted By [Tom Strini](#) On February 19, 2010 @ 11:50 pm In [Arts & Culture 2](#), [Music](#) | [No Comments](#)

As the stage was reset for Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* Friday night, conductor Nicholas McGegan could have read the little poems that go with each of the four violin concerti in the Vivaldi cycle. Instead, he did five minutes of stand-up on the scenes that Vivaldi painted in sound: the drunken peasant, the chirping birds, the gondola-borne hunting party and so on, in a witty way that kept the big and unusually youthful audience engaged and laughing.

The performance that followed delivered on McGegan's storytelling. You could hear the rocking boat and booming gunfire and scampering prey and chattering teeth and whistling winds and rustic dance music and more in wondrously flexible and vivid playing. Frank Almond dazzled in the solo part and shared conducting duties with McGegan, who was at the harpsichord.

The little string orchestra, as a whole or section by section, played with soloistic expressiveness. Every last note of the four concerti, down to the most routine element of continuo, was bursting with life. Time flies when you're having fun; Vivaldi's year passed in a flash.

McGegan opened with Thomas Adès *Three Studies from Couperin*. In his glosses on works by the French Baroque composer, Adès sets two tiny orchestras at odds. One often plays the same music a half-beat behind the other, to create a disorienting, trailing-image effect. The music sounded familiar and utterly strange at the same time, like a half-remembered dream of a song you know well.

Schubert's *Symphony No. 4* has picked up "The Tragic" as a nickname. It does open with a glowering adagio in a darkly minor key. But the piece lightens step by step; the speedy fourth movement almost sounds like an *opera buffa* finale.

McGegan drew a gleaming, precise reading, warmed throughout by an acute awareness of the melodic curve, from the ever more brilliant MSO. The pliant beauty of the Andante melody had special charm.

After that, McGegan took the Menuetto at a scherzo pace that would have put dancers on the floor in comic heaps and a breakneck finale like something out of Rossini or the Marx Brothers. Based on this performance, I would suggest changing this symphony's nickname from "The Tragic" to "The Antic." It fits when McGegan is conducting and music is fun.

This program, given at Marcus Center Uihlein Hall, will be repeated at 8 p.m. Saturday and 2:30 p.m. Sunday. For further information, visit the [MSO website](#)^[2]; for tickets, call the Marcus box office, 414-273-7206. To read an interview with McGegan, [click here](#)^[3].



[1]

Nicholas McGegan. Photo from Minnesota Public Radio website.

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