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## An inspiring Music Hall 'Messiah'

### Concert review

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You've heard the "Hallelujah Chorus" many times, but never like this – with brisk tempo, pointed timpani and clipped diction.

Conductor Nicholas McGegan, renowned for his historically informed performances of baroque music, joined the reduced forces of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, May Festival Chorus and a quartet of fine soloists for Handel's "Messiah" on Thursday in Music Hall. Although it's a staple of holiday performances, unbelievably, this was the first Cincinnati Symphony subscription concert of the great oratorio.

McGegan's view stressed lightness, clarity and warmth – and, as is often heard in "authentic performance," exceedingly quick tempos. But, rather than a dry exercise, this was a performance rich in expression. If his tempos at first seemed too quick, by the end, they gave the music a freshness of spirit that proved to be exhilarating.

The British-born conductor, who is music director of San Francisco's Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, has made a project of conducting "Messiah" around the world for the 250th anniversary of Handel's death (1759). His Cincinnati performances are trimmed of several numbers – especially Thursday's concert, which fit into a two-hour evening. (The reason, a CSO spokesperson said, was because it was a week night.)

A scaled-down group of 75 singers from the May Festival Chorus filled risers behind the orchestra. The orchestra of about 30 players was arrayed on the front of the stage, centered by harpsichord and portative organ, both performed by Heather MacPhail.

The oratorio is organized in three parts: The Advent of the Messiah (sometimes called the Christmas section), the Passion of Christ, and the Resurrection.

The chorus, prepared by Robert Porco, was buoyant and expressive, singing with admirable polish, as well as sonic beauty. The quick tempos of Part I resulted in some rough patches, but the chorus' lightness and communication, even in the most treacherous passages of counterpoint, more than made up for them.

The singers enunciated the English text so clearly that the projected surtitles were unnecessary. The words "Wonderful, Counselor," in "For unto us a Child is born," erupted like bursts of light. "Behold the Lamb of God" in Part II had a dark quality that was quite moving.

Soprano Dominique Labelle's "I know that my Redeemer liveth" was a joy to hear, and she soared through the florid passages of "Rejoice greatly" with radiant purity.

Mezzo-soprano Marietta Simpson, who was a longtime favorite soloist of choral legend Robert Shaw, handled her leaps and flourishes with aplomb, if her voice didn't always carry. Her finest moment was "He was despised," a deeply felt portrayal of the crucifixion.

Tenor Norman Shankle was the most short-changed by the cuts, but was consistently expressive.

One of the evening's highlights was the bass air, "The trumpet shall sound," with Christòpheren Nomura, who has appeared with Cincinnati Opera, and principal trumpet Robert Sullivan. Each artist embellished their solos wonderfully, and together their artistry was stunning.

On the podium, McGegan was an animated, involved leader who coaxed warmth and detail from his forces. He conducted without a baton, at times bouncing in place as the chorus articulated a text, and sawing along with the cellos. The final chorus made a glorious summation – all too soon.

Before the concert began, the audience gave arts patron Louise Nippert a standing ovation for her gift of \$85 million to the orchestra and other arts groups, announced last week.