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## McGegan, SLSO offer stylish 'Messiah'

By Sarah Bryan Miller

POST-DISPATCH CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Saturday, Dec. 12 2009

The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra kicked off its holiday offerings this weekend with a work that is a classic of both the church and the concert hall, George Frideric Handel's great oratorio "Messiah."

It has wide appeal: Powell Symphony Hall was close to being filled on Friday night, with an audience that wasn't made up primarily of orchestral series regulars.

The performance was led by Baroque specialist Nicholas McGegan, the SLSO's principal guest conductor in all but name, and definitely the choice for music of this period.

McGegan led a brisk, non-lugubrious reading to satisfy both the purely musical and the primarily religious fans of this classic. He trimmed it considerably but (mostly) judiciously; a couple of the arias were missed, but not the repeats in the others that can make the da capo form seem so interminable. That brought the running time down neatly to two hours and 25 minutes.

McGegan assembled three-fourths of a good solo quartet. Few tenors have the beauty of tone, intelligence of expression, musicality and effortless vocalism of the excellent James Gilchrist: when he sings "Comfort ye," the audience believes there's cause for hope.

Countertenor Daniel Taylor has an unusually pretty voice, with none of the hooty edginess that's so common among falsettists. He brought dramatic conviction and clean singing to his solos. So did the soprano, Dominique Labelle; her "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion" was impressive, but she sang with a sincerity that made it about something more than just vocal display.

Bass-baritone Nathan Berg sang inconsistently, with some ugly, edgy vowels that detracted from his singing. He had a tendency to bark, and his coloratura was messy; when he sang "I will shake the heavens and the earth," he shook himself right out of the proper key.

Amy Kaiser's chorus, a somewhat smaller group than usual, was in top form, navigating their long runs cleanly, nailing virtually every entrance with spot-on attacks and never flagging at the top of the range.

Baroque practice calls for small forces, which makes it difficult to do this music authentically in a concert hall. Under McGegan's intelligent leadership, the SLSO turned into a good Baroque band. Configured as a chamber ensemble, with Vera Parkin on the portative organ and Maryse Carlin on harpsichord, captured the proper Handelian spirit.