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MUSIC REVIEW | NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

Making Handel Spark, Then Fanning the Flame

By STEVE SMITH
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Before the [New York Philharmonic](#) had played a note of its [Handel](#) program at Avery Fisher Hall on Thursday evening, the audience had a good idea of what to expect. This was partly because the conductor, Nicholas McGegan, is preceded by a stellar reputation as a Handel specialist. Even those unaware of his authoritative performances and recordings with the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, a period-instrument ensemble from San Francisco, might have heard him conduct a “Messiah” with the Philharmonic in 2003 or 2007.

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Rob Bennett for The New York Times
Christine Schäfer and Nicholas McGegan in a Handel program.

But mostly it was the way Mr. McGegan hustled to the podium, with a skip and a hop in his stride, that indicated what was in store. When it comes to conveying the vital spark in Handel’s music, Mr. McGegan has few peers. The program — a mix of opera arias featuring the German soprano Christine Schäfer and festive instrumental pieces — gave him ample opportunity to demonstrate the point.

Mr. McGegan did not try to make his trim complement of Philharmonic musicians sound like a period group: string players judiciously applied vibrato; horn players and trumpeters used modern valved instruments. For anyone grown accustomed to natural horns in Handel, hearing the radiant corona their modern descendants produced in the Concerto a Due Cori No. 3 in F took some readjusting. Fine detailing among the strings was initially lost in a golden wash.

Balances were sorted out reasonably quickly, allowing springy rhythms and keen articulations to register more clearly. Those qualities enlivened vibrant accounts of the inventive Concerto Grosso in C (“Alexander’s Feast”) and the boisterous “Music for the Royal Fireworks,” which concluded the concert.

Handel has kept Ms. Schäfer busy lately. She recently appeared in a Viennese production of “Partenope,” and an appealing CD of selections from “Alcina,” recorded with the Berlin Baroque Soloists for the CAvi-music label, will be issued here in May.

During the first half of the concert she deployed her light, clear voice with brilliance and agility in three selections from “Partenope,” though her characterization was curiously cool. (The same could not be said of the vivacious instrumental playing in “Qual farfalla.”)

Ms. Schäfer hit her stride in the second half, performing arias from “Alcina” (“Di, cor mio” and “Ombre pallide”), and “Se pietà di me non senti” from “Giulio Cesare,” with powerful dramatic insight and fierce technical command.

The program repeats on Saturday evening at Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center; (212) 721-6500, nyphil.org.

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