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Entertainment

# Big celebrations for Philharmonia Baroque

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**By: Janos Gereben**  
**Special to The Examiner**  
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SAN FRANCISCO — This year marks two interlinked musical milestones: Philharmonia Baroque has announced its 30th season, and music director Nicholas McGegan turned 60 in January.

Both are locals, but they are famous the world over.

Irrepressible McGegan — called “the Energizer Bunny of Baroque” by one reviewer — speaks of the Philharmonia and its distinctive mission in terms unexpected from the leader of “America’s period-instrument orchestra.”

“Thirty years ago, there was a greater sense of righteousness, a claim of musical purity,” he says. “We were more style-obsessed; some of the period-instrument groups appeared as the performing wing of musicology in dusty raincoats.”

The orchestra — which presents a program called “The French Suite” next week — is famous for historically informed performances, using instruments made as long ago as the Baroque period (1600-1750). At concerts, the program lists the instruments used by each musician.

For example, concertmaster Elizabeth Blumenstock is identified along with “Andrea Guarneri, Cremona, Italy, 1660,” while violinist Tyler Lewis plays an instrument created in Brescia around 1580.

Yet McGegan, who has added repertory beyond the Baroque era — Brahms at recent concerts — downplays what might be considered “authentic” in favor of vital music making.

“We should probe beneath the skin of music, strive for great performances,” he says. “Music for me is an emotional and exciting thing not to be tempered by correctness. Now that I turned 60, let the fun really begin.”



As Bay Area-based Philharmonia Baroque begins its 30th season this year, music director Nicholas McGegan, who recently turned 60, plans more, big “fun” for the acclaimed group. (Courtesy photo)

McGegan's programming philosophy includes works unfamiliar to many people, such as Rameau and Telemann, along with extremely well-known music, such as "Messiah," "which we aim to perform not like the other guys."

English-born "Nic" McGegan comes from a Scottish family. He began his career as a teenage pianist in London pubs and music halls, and remembers bowls of hard-boiled eggs on tables in the pub, available to eat or to throw at the pianist, depending on what moved the hard-drinking crowd.

McGegan's focus with the Philharmonia will intensify during the 2010-11 season because he's leaving other positions, including leading the International Handel-Festival Göttingen and cutting back on appearances with Drottningholm Theatre, the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

A high point in Philharmonia's upcoming season will be the March 2011 celebration featuring mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade, who will sing Baroque arias and the U.S. premiere of Nathaniel Stookey's "Into the Bright Lights," a musical setting of her own poetry.

Other guest artists include countertenor David Daniels and fortepianist Robert Levin, in the U.S. premiere of newly found fragments of a work by Mozart.

As some arts organizations are downsizing, Philharmonia is expanding from a seven- to eight-concert series, and to venues beyond San Francisco and Berkeley.

## IF YOU GO

### **French Suite, with Jordi Savall**

*Presented by Philharmonia Baroque*

**Where:** Herbst Theatre, 401 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco

**When:** 8 p.m. March 5

**Tickets:** \$25 to \$75

**Contact:** (415) 392-4400, [www.philharmonia.org](http://www.philharmonia.org)

*Note: Additional concerts are Saturday and Sunday in Berkeley; March 12 in Palo Alto; and March 13 in Lafayette.*

## **Philharmonia Baroque's 2010-11 season**

**Sept. 24-29:** Works by Mozart; Robert Levin, fortepiano

**Oct. 15-19:** Works by Bach; Lars Ulrik Mortensen, conductor and harpsichord; Maria Keohane, soprano

**Nov. 6-10:** Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" and works by Corelli, Pergolesi, Durante and Zavatari; Elizabeth Blumenstock, violin

**Dec. 3-7:** Handel's "Messiah," with soloists, the Philharmonia Chorale

**Jan. 15-21:** Works by Vivaldi, Handel, Telemann; David Daniels, countertenor

**Feb. 11-15:** Works by Spohr, Hummel, Mendelssohn; Gabriele Cassone, keyed trumpet

**March 4-9:** Works by Rebel, Stookey, Rameau, Gluck; Frederica von Stade, mezzo-soprano

**April 8-13:** Haydn's "The Creation," with Philharmonia Chorale; Bruce Lamott, director

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