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Posted on Sat, Jan. 23, 2010

Mozart masters at the Kimmel

By David Patrick Stearns
Inquirer Classical Music Critic

Not so long ago (it seems), pianist [Robert Levin](#) and conductor [Nicholas McGegan](#) were the juvenile delinquents of the early-music world.

In contrast to John Eliot Gardiner's rigid righteousness and Gustav Leonhardt's priestly sobriety, Levin and McGegan often seemed to be having a subversive party to which the audience was invited. Musically, that translates into freewheeling spontaneity that's released rather than inhibited by doctrine. Now in their 60s and giving an all-Mozart [Philadelphia Orchestra](#) concert, they're much the same, only better, and clearly haven't visited reform school.

Levin departed from the printed program by inviting the audience to jot down Mozartean melodies at intermission, on which he improvised. That's not unusual for him or other classical artists - from the *first* half of the 20th century. But Thursday at the Kimmel Center, results were geographically specific.

Some 15 years ago when I heard Levin do this in New York, the submitted melodies were quirkier and more original than the conventional solidity that came his way in Philadelphia. But Thursday's improvisation (incorporating several of the tunes) was richer - intense, vital, meaningful music with a Bach-cum-Reger density full of dark corners and sharp edges.

In *Piano Concerto No. 18*, Levin scaled back the grand-piano sound to resemble a Mozart-period fortepiano. Color was minimized by cool, clean attacks on individual notes. Sound dry? Not with the Levin/McGegan brand of physical involvement: While leaning and levitating, the implied motion of any given phrase was clarified.

The music's seams sometimes showed, but in Mozart, revealing the music's exalted craft is a source of expression that also counteracts the glossy blandness that can set in amid the concerto's sparkling surfaces and circumscribed range of keys.

McGegan reversed the typical Philadelphia Orchestra performance equation most obviously in the *Symphony No. 40*. Instead of using sound as a primary means of expression, he released the power of the notes with a less saturated tone and his typically impetuous sense of rhythm. There was no need to probe the music for extramusical significance because so much Mozart was heard in any given moment. In some of the best playing of the season, the orchestra was effortlessly disciplined. Woodwind playing was gorgeous.

What a contrast the symphony made with Mozart's incidental music to *Thamos, King of Egypt*. This is basically a film score, and though good music, it shows the composer reacting to somebody else's drama rather than creating his own. He must have really needed cash that day.

Contact music critic David Patrick Stearns at dstearns@phillynews.com.

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RANI BEACH

Nicholas McGegan conducted the orchestra in an evening of Mozart.

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