

[print](#) | [close](#)

## McGegan, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra offer joyous performance

By Sarah Bryan Miller

POST-DISPATCH CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Friday, Mar. 13 2009

Most of us ascribe emotional content to the instrumental music that we hear. While it's probably true that there's nothing (for example) inherently passionate about the key of B major or ill-tempered about G minor, as some maintain, our minds and hearts are still affected by different tones and harmonies and the ways in which they're used.

This weekend's concerts by conductor Nicholas McGegan and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra demonstrated that: the deceptively calm depths of Ralph Vaughan Williams' "Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis," the quicksilver sport of Carl Nielsen's Flute Concerto and, especially, Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 in F major, "Pastoral."

Vaughan Williams was a masterful composer with a special affinity for older English music, particularly folk tunes and the music of the Anglican Church. The "Fantasia," written in 1910 for string orchestra, works with Tallis' haunting tune (best known as "I heard the voice of Jesus say") in ways that are purely beautiful and somehow quintessentially English.

The players were divided into two groups, with a small contingent of strings posted on risers behind the main orchestra. McGegan conducted with admirable understanding, bringing out all the loveliness in this gorgeous score.

There was fine playing from a quartet, both in their work as soloists and as partners: principal viola Jonathan Vinocour, concertmaster David Halen, assistant principal cello Melissa Brooks and principal second violin Alison Harney. The entire string section had a marvelous sheen and depth in its playing. In the final measures, you could have sworn there was an organ lurking somewhere.

Nielsen's 1926 Flute Concerto offered something completely different: a dialogue — and, sometimes, argument — for solo flute and other instruments.

Principal flute Mark Sparks showed off his spectacular chops, demonstrating a superb technique, golden tone, good sense of humor and a certain cockiness in a concerto that demands almost nonstop virtuosity, sometimes in the service of a musical argument and sometimes just for its own sake. Bass trombone Gerard Pagano was his able adversary; McGegan and the orchestra were in on the fun.

Beethoven is specific in what he seeks to describe in the "Pastoral," from "Awakening of cheerful feelings on arriving in the country" to the concluding "Happy, grateful feelings after the storm," but the emotions go beyond that: there is a profundity and a deep, abiding sense of joy throughout this symphony.

McGegan is thoroughly at home in this music. Every aspect was well-considered: his treatment of the themes, his tempos and the overall sweep of the music.

Nicholas McGegan and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra will offer an introduction to and performance of Beethoven's "Pastoral" at the Touhill Performing Arts Center, University of Missouri-St. Louis, at 2 p.m. Sunday. \$15-\$35; call 314-516-4949 or visit [www.touhill.org](http://www.touhill.org).

[sbmiller@post-dispatch.com](mailto:sbmiller@post-dispatch.com) | 314-340-8249

---

If you enjoy reading about interesting news, you might like the 3 O'Clock Stir from STLtoday.com. Sign up and you'll receive an email with unique stories of the day, every Monday-Friday, at no charge.

Sign up at <http://newsletters.stltoday.com>

---