

SLSO pairs conductor, Mozart to thrilling effect

BY SARAH BRYAN MILLER • Post-Dispatch Classical Music Critic > sbmiller@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8249 | Posted: Friday, October 7, 2011 4:15 pm

There are many reasons why listening to recordings can never really replace going to live performances: the spontaneity, the surprise in innovative programming that puts different works together in unexpected and enlightening ways, the chance of catching musical lightning on an otherwise ordinary evening.

This weekend at Powell Symphony Hall, we can add the pleasure of conductor Nicholas McGegan's company on the podium for (alas) the only time this season. Amazingly energetic and entirely engaged in the music, given to balletic movements and gestures that convey worlds of musical meaning, McGegan's presence onstage is virtually a guarantee that a good time will be had by all.

On Friday morning, McGegan was well-matched with the music in an all-Mozart program that opened and closed with a pair of familiar, spirited symphonies and used a pair of concertos as centerpieces.

He was well-matched with his musicians, too, as members of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra led by acting associate concertmaster Ellen dePasquale responded with near perfect playing.

The Mozart effect began with the first piece on the program, the Symphony No. 32 in G major, K. 318. Short and sparkling, it was performed with exciting energy and made a brilliant curtain-raiser.

The first of the morning's two concertos brought the welcome return of pianist Jeremy Denk. Denk is supremely self-confident in his approach, and with good reason: He's got the musical goods to justify the attitude.

His vehicle this weekend is the Piano Concerto No. 13 in C major, K. 425. It's one of those quintessentially Mozartean works in which inventions spill out too quickly for the composer to explore them all; he simply plays with each for a few measures before moving on to the next.

It was performed with elan by both Denk and McGegan, who seemed to be entirely in tune with one another in every sense: spirited in the first and last movements, with thoughtful solo passages complemented by the lilting, lovely playing of the orchestra in the middle.

The concert's second half opened with another concerto, the Horn Concerto No. 3 in E-flat major, K. 447. This one was performed by an in-house soloist, SLSO principal horn Roger Kaza.

Kaza's attitude was as modest as Denk's was assured, but his confident, near-flawless playing said it all. The horn is a notoriously tricky instrument that tends to keep its performers humble; Kaza demonstrated with seeming effortless how he earned the principal's seat here, and gave listeners a tour of the horn's range in his cadenza.

The final work on the program was the familiar Symphony No. 38 in D major, K. 504, "Prague." From the brilliant opening to the second Andante movement through the final Presto movement, the orchestra followed McGegan effortlessly in every measure, like a well-tuned Porsche in practiced hands, zipping along a curving mountain road. You may hear comparable performances on certain recordings, but adding the visual aspects of watching McGegan put this orchestra through their paces is a special treat.

Nicholas McGegan and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in an all-Mozart program

When 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday • **Where** Powell Symphony Hall, 718 North Grand Boulevard • **How much** \$25-\$112 • **More info** stlsymphony.org or 314-534-1700