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EARLY MUSIC REVIEW

[Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra](#) / September 14, 2008

[Colin Ainsworth](#) / [Sophie Daneman](#) / [Meredith Hall](#) / [Nicholas McGegan](#)

## Lessons in Love

By [Georgia Rowe](#)

The Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra opened its 28th season in an amorous frame of mind last weekend in Berkeley. Instead of one of the large-scale Handel oratorios that have traditionally launched the early music ensemble's seasons in past years, Music Director Nicholas McGegan conducted a double bill of beguiling 18th-century works composed for the stage, each depicting the pleasures (and folly) of love. The results were aptly seductive.

On the program were Jean-Philippe Rameau's one-act ballet *Pygmalion* and Thomas Arne's masque, *Comus*. With McGegan presiding over the orchestra, the Philharmonia Chorale, and an outstanding trio of vocal soloists, the pairing proved a well-conceived, handsomely executed, and exuberant choice. Sunday evening's performance at Berkeley's First Congregational Church was the second of five; music lovers can catch one of the repeat performances, scheduled for Sept. 16 in Lafayette, Sept. 19 in San Francisco, and Sept. 20 in Palo Alto.

For many in the audience, *Pygmalion*, the program's featured work, was probably the more familiar of the two titles. Ovid's mythic tale (from *Metamorphoses*), of a sculptor who creates a beautiful statue and promptly falls in love with it, has inspired numerous retellings, George Bernard Shaw's and Lerner and Loewe's among them. It elicited a particularly unified response in Rameau and librettist Ballot de Sauvot.

The attractive Overture, often performed alone as a concert curtain-raiser, is only the tip of the iceberg. Sunday, McGegan conducted it briskly and with obvious affection, and his players responded with the kind of buoyant, dynamic playing that characterizes this orchestra's finest work.

### Heart's Follies

Rameau begins the ballet proper at the moment just after the Statue is completed; Pygmalion, alone, takes time out to rail at Love in a long monologue ("Fatal Amour"). After a brief interruption from Cephise — who chides him for rejecting her, then stomps out — the magical moment arrives: Cupid waves his torch and, accompanied by a silvery flute duet (tenderly played by Stephen Schultz and Mindy Rosenfeld), brings the Statue to life. Love is declared, a dance lesson from the Graces is given, and pantomimes and general rejoicing ensue.

It's all lovely, if, from a feminist point of view, a trifle one-sided: After the Statue sings her love for Pygmalion, she quickly reverts to her former mute state. It's left to Pygmalion and the chorus to wrap things up, expounding (at length) on the joys of gratification.

Inequality aside, Sunday's performance was thrilling. At McGegan's urging, the orchestra played with tremendous verve and precision, and the vocal soloists were first-rate. In his Bay Area debut, Colin Ainsworth impressed as a Pygmalion of remarkable strength and agility. The Canadian tenor sang "Fatal Amour" with firm, ringing tone and

ardent phrasing. His large voice was always audible, yet his soft singing was just as clear. In his concluding ariette, “Regne, Amour” (Reign, love), the juiciest line, “Epuise ton carquois” (Empty your quiver), was both softly floated and pointedly direct.

As the Statue, soprano Meredith Hall entered in a flame-red dress, struck a pose, and looked — well, statuesque. Her high, flexible voice is brilliant in color and texture, and she delivered her vows of love to Pygmalion with exquisite poise and melting beauty. Sophie Daneman’s bright-toned soprano enlivened both Cephise and Amour.

## **Apostrophizing Chastity**

The evening’s first half was devoted to *Comus*. Arne’s 1738 masque, based on a poem by Milton, was the composer’s first major work for theater, and it hit the mark with unmistakable dramatic flair. This ostensible tribute to chastity dallies in the realm of sensual pleasure for what seems a very long time before making its points about virtue.

The title character, the son of the Greek god Dionysus, apprehends a Lady traveling in the forest, lures her to a cottage, binds her to a chair (no, really), and plies her with drink. Guided by a generous Spirit and the water nymph Sabrina, her brothers come to the rescue in the nick of time.

Contemporary audiences may find the story risible, but the score, comprising short songs and orchestral numbers, is a tantalizing blend of pastoral charm and florid expression (Handel was evidently so pleased by it that he was moved to write *L’Allegro, il penseroso, ed il moderato* soon thereafter). McGegan’s reading doubtless earned the work some new converts. Hall sang gloriously as the imperiled Lady, and Daneman contributed sweetly in several roles, including the lilting Euphrosyne. Ainsworth sounded positively Handelian in “Nor on beds of fading flowers.”

Between numbers, McGegan turned to the audience, assumed the role of Comus, and recited excerpts from Milton’s text with an amusing blend of incisive wit and lascivious glee. If the conducting thing doesn’t work out for him, a second career as a thespian awaits.

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Georgia Rowe is a Bay Area arts writer. Her work has appeared in *Opera News*, *Gramophone*, *The San Jose Mercury News*, *The Oakland Tribune*, *The San Francisco Examiner*, and *The Contra Costa Times*.

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