

Summery sounds fill Severance

Baroque music offers escape from winter. Conductor sparkles

By Elaine Guregian

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When I think of the Cleveland Orchestra and baroque music, I think of marathon concerts at Blossom Music Center. Not a bad association at all, especially in the throes of winter. But as pleasant as those summer events can be, this week's concerts at Severance Hall are a chance to hear a smaller version of the orchestra up close. Thursday night, it was possible to catch the kind of details that you'd never hear in that large outdoor setting. Conductor Nicholas McGegan has made a distinguished name for himself, perhaps most notably by leading San Francisco's Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra for the past 20 years. Thursday night, the English conductor made a Cleveland Orchestra debut that was one of the sunniest occasions I've seen or heard. McGegan has a way of beaming at his players that turns all the glory on them. At the end of the concert, when possibly he sensed that the audience wasn't sure if the many-movement Bach Suite No. 1 was done, he turned around, spread his hands palms up, and cocked his head with a grin as if to say, "That's all, folks!" It was a modest ending to a fabulous evening of playing. Whether you've heard Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* a lot or never before wouldn't matter. This version was dazzling, in large part due to its superb solo violinist, William Preucil, who is the orchestra's concertmaster. Preucil is a master of the long, continuous phrase. In "Winter," he drew out the supple line, then etched out the notes that needed emphasis, cutting them quick and hard as ice crystals on glass. The utter relaxation of Preucil's playing belied his virtuosity. The string orchestra that plays in *The Four Seasons* was reliably sensitive to McGegan's direction from the harpsichord. It was the small details that made this a sizzling performance. In the slow movement of "Winter," the plucked accompanimental figure made a gentle popping effect that's too delicate to stand out on a recording but was striking in person. The Brandenburg Concerto No. 2, which opened the program, also had some breathtaking playing from Michael Sachs on piccolo trumpet. It's just more spectacular when you hear this brilliant writing for very high trumpet in person. Sachs sounded terrific, and he was supported by fluid, attentive playing by the other featured soloists, Ellen dePasquale, violin; Joshua Smith, flute; and Frank Rosenwein, oboe. Principal cello Desmond Hoebig played the important continuo accompaniments with flair. More solo work bore mentioning in Handel's "Entrance of the Queen of Sheba." Here, oboists Frank Rosenwein and Elizabeth Camus blended sweetly. The crisp, sweet and always flexible playing McGegan brought out on Thursday sounded effortless, which is a compliment all its own.

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