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Guest conductor McGegan leads Cleveland Orchestra in Baroque evening

by [Zachary Lewis / Plain Dealer Music Critic](#)
 Friday October 24, 2008, 3:53 PM

Only one word can be used to describe completely the effect Nicholas McGegan has at the helm of the Cleveland Orchestra this weekend: transformative.

Guest-conducting an all-Baroque program on which the most recent work dates from 1775, McGegan temporarily transforms Severance Hall into an 18th-century palace and the orchestra into an early-music ensemble truly fit for a king.

For anyone who loves Baroque music, it's a rare and satisfying treat, and for dedicated fans of the orchestra, it's a chance to hear the group and several individual players in unusual roles.

Two of the four works on the program were conceived as celebrations of peace. Both Handel's "Music for the Royal Fireworks" and Rameau's opera "Nais," a suite from which is presented here, debuted in 1749, after the War of the Austrian Succession.

McGegan, music director of the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra in San Francisco, works wonders with both, conducting without a baton and communicating intentions through animated physical gestures.

Articulation in the Rameau suite Thursday night was as sharp as could be. Every figure came crackling to life, not only the dramatic personalities depicted in the opera but also the many ornaments and scalar passages adorning the music.

Yet for all the precision, the tempo was never rigid. A certain perky flexibility prevailed, ensuring that details such as the wind machine in the Overture and the magical interplay between piccolo and bassoon in the Menuets were never obscured.

Handel's famous "Fireworks" received equally evocative treatment, especially from the horns and trumpets, who rendered their bright, high parts with gleaming clarity.

For his part, McGegan kept the heat generally on high but took care to preserve the score's character. Thus "La Paix" ("Peace") emerged as an island of utter tranquility, and the two Menuets were characterized by a stately, realistically danceable sway.

If no Baroque program is complete without Bach, this one overflows, with works by not only by the preeminent Johann Sebastian but also by his son, Johann Christian.

Representing the latter is the lively Sinfonia Concertante in C Major, a concerto-like work for four soloists: violin, cello, flute and oboe. Principal players ably filled these slots Thursday night, contributing shapely performances as both soloists and members of the orchestral body.

Many of these same musicians also took part in the elder Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, with McGegan at the harpsichord presiding over a taut, dramatic account that occasionally suffered balance issues but nonetheless conveyed the music's intrinsic excitement.

REVIEW

Cleveland Orchestra
What: Nicholas McGegan conducts works by Rameau, Handel and J.S. and J.C. Bach.
When: 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday.
Where: Severance Hall, 11001 Euclid Ave., Cleveland.
Tickets: \$25-\$110. Call 216-231-1111.

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Here again, the conductor proved a catalytic presence, helping to transform Severance Hall one more time this weekend, from a royal stage into an intimate hall for chamber music.

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