

Conductor having a good old time
By Donald Rosenberg
Plain Dealer Music Critic

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CLASSICAL MUSIC

PREVIEW

Cleveland Orchestra

What: Conductor-harpsichordist Nicholas McGegan makes his debut with the orchestra leading works by Bach, Vivaldi and Handel, with violinists William Preucil and Ellen dePasquale, flutist Joshua Smith, oboist Frank Rosenwein and trumpeter Michael Sachs.

When: 8 p.m. today; repeats 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 3 p.m. Sunday.

Where: Severance Hall, 11001 Euclid Ave., Cleveland.

Tickets: \$29-\$80. Call 216-231-1111.

Nicholas McGegan has a quality that is hardly common in his field. He's downright jolly.

The British conductor, harpsichordist and Baroque flutist brims with good cheer, especially when discussing the music and musicians that keep him blissfully engaged.

"I'm not working with the Cleveland Orchestra," he said the other day in his dressing room at Severance Hall. "I'm having fun with them."

But not only that. Several decades in the limelight as an interpreter of early music confirm that McGegan takes his art very seriously. His list of recordings exceeds 100, many with San Francisco's Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, the period-instrument ensemble of which he has been music director since 1985.

Although he's making his debut with the Cleveland Orchestra this week leading works by Bach, Vivaldi and Handel, McGegan is no stranger to Cleveland. In the early 1990s, he was a guest conductor of the Ohio Chamber Orchestra, and he appeared as harpsichordist with his chamber group, the Arcadian Academy, at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

McGegan, 57, played modern flute and piano until he enrolled at Cambridge University in the late 1960s. It changed his life.

"One of the things you have to do at Cambridge, apart from drinking a lot of beer

and passing your exams, is take a course in acoustics," he said. "That supposed link between music and math, I've never been able to get."

He received help from Professor Sir Nicholas Shackleton, an expert on acoustics, who introduced him to the Baroque flute. It didn't hurt that an occasional boarder in Shackleton's house was conductor Christopher Hogwood, who became a McGegan chum and hired him for his Academy of Ancient Music.

"I was at the bottom drawer of it all as a player," said McGegan of the burgeoning early-music movement. "It was tremendously exciting to do the first performance of such-and-such a piece on original instruments in the U.K."

McGegan ventured to the United States at the invitation of another prominent British early-music conductor, Trevor Pinnock, who was teaching at Washington University in St. Louis. Pinnock needed someone to take over his classes.

"I stayed five years," McGegan said. "I've been in the States ever since, going slowly west."

His first concerts with the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra led to his appointment as music director, a post to which McGegan refers in more colorful words.

"I was hired as a sort of benign tyrant, which caused a bit of a riot," he said.

McGegan had to convince his laid-back players to wear tails - and even shoes. His own experiences as a performer of early music had involved "a lot of on-the-job training," he said. "Conductors were maybe three pages ahead in the treatise book than we were."

But musicians caught up, thanks to musicologists and others who helped expand the repertoire, as well as to technology, including the compact disc, that disseminated enormous amounts of neglected music. Thirty years ago, McGegan said, violinists played only about 25 of the estimated 300 Vivaldi violin concertos now known to exist.

McGegan, who has residences in Berkeley, Calif., and Glasgow, Scotland, is quick to point out that early-music practitioners once weren't nearly as flexible as they would become.

"In the '70s and early '80s, the early-music movement was a bit priggish, stuffy," he said. "Play it as the composer intended. We were paragons of style. And actually no one really knows."

In other words, it's impossible to tell exactly how long-deceased composers wanted their music played. Early-music advocates opened up the possibilities in terms of pitch, articulation, phrasing, color and balance.

Where most modern orchestras once "played the music all the same," McGegan said, they have learned from period ensembles, and vice-versa.

"The cross-fertilization has been entirely positive," he said. "Period ensembles now are more interested in content and not just the surface style. Just by hearing, modern orchestras are as stylistically clued up as anyone."

To make sure that modern orchestras understand his approach, McGegan travels with his own instrumental parts. Markings, he said, should be clear, so that the conductor doesn't waste the players' time.

McGegan is particularly delighted that his program at Severance Hall features orchestra players as soloists.

"It's wonderful," he said. "One isn't flying anyone in from outer space to play solo. The harpsichordist is terrible, by the way. That's me."

Breath.

"Only kidding."

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Photo Caption: PEGGY TURBETT THE PLAIN DEALER

Conductor Nicholas McGegan, who leads the Cleveland Orchestra in a series of Baroque concerts this weekend, is eager to correct misconceptions. "I'm not working with the Cleveland Orchestra," he says. "I'm having fun with them."

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