

Prom 25

PBO/McGegan

Royal Albert Hall, London

★★★☆☆

Nicholas McGegan's Prom with the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra marked the British debut of this San Francisco-based period instrument ensemble. It's no wonder they have created such a formidable reputation on the other side of the Atlantic: moulded by McGegan's impish, infectious direction for the past 20 years, the ensemble is a world-class outfit, and even in the cavernous acoustic of the Albert Hall, it revealed the depth and detail of its playing in music by Handel and Rameau.

The programme compared the different styles of the French baroque and Handel's unique fusion of Italian and German idioms. Both were impressive, but it was the sheer colouristic invention of a suite from one of Rameau's last operas, *Les Paladins*, that was most memorable. In 12 numbers, McGegan relished the variety of Rameau's music, from the charm of its lyrical lours and gavottes to the experimental energy of the faster movements. Turning the strings into percussion instruments with violent pizzicatos, the music depicted the exoticism of the troubadours, and the final contredanse had McGegan dancing on the podium, inspiring his players to vivid, communicative playing.

By contrast, eight numbers from Handel's *Water Music* had a bluff, straightforward energy, especially in the famous Hornpipes, but strangely, the music did not seem as rich as the Rameau. At its first performances, the *Water Music* was played on barges along the Thames; the Albert Hall is almost an outdoor acoustic, but the delicacy of the Philharmonia Baroque's playing was lost in the hall's vast space.

Tenor John Mark Ainsley sang arias from Handel's *Semele* and *Jephtha* and Rameau's opera *Dardanus*. He found a serene nobility in Jupiter's invocation of Arcadia, "Where'er you walk", and revelled in the virtuosic ornamentation of *Jephtha's* "His mighty arm". But again, it was the colour and chromaticism of Rameau's music that impressed most: the aching