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Symphony concert offers lighthearted joy

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Nicholas McGegan has all the fun.

The Milwaukee Symphony's frequent guest conductor was back in town Friday. As usual, he's leaving the gloomy Romantics and Expressionists to other maestros and sticking with music of surpassing beauty and rollicking good humor. This time around, McGegan brought John Adams' Chamber Symphony, Beethoven's brilliant Symphony No. 1 and Mozart's sublime Clarinet Concerto in A.

The MSO's own Todd Levy, the clarinet soloist, was luxuriously in his element amid the creamy, dreamy flow of Mozart's melodies. His flawless, pianissimo reading of the return of the principal theme was a special moment in the first movement.

He and McGegan made an exquisite porcelain figurine of the piece. That approach is something of a cliché with Mozart; as a rule, his music is too vigorous for it. But it fits this concerto. The gentleness of Levy's solo lines and the

delicate transparency and balance in the orchestra made the concerto the very image of an elegant and civilized heaven.

The concerto is a long, sweet, varied song. Beethoven's First has more mass, muscle and momentum. It is a long, energetic and varied dance peppered with jokes and surprises. At least, that's how McGegan hears it, and Friday's lively and effortlessly tidy performance made it stick. If he wanted to make high drama of it, McGegan could have given more weight and accent to the finale, to make us feel the effort of pushing out all that sound. But he didn't, and the tunes tumbled and cartwheeled exuberantly over the beat to a belly laugh of a climax. Adams says he came to his own Chamber Symphony as a result of his child watching 1950s cartoons in the next room as the composer studied Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony. The cartoon influence is clear in the jagged rhythms, the percussion sound effects and the frenetic nature of the outer movements, but I hear more Stravinsky than Schoenberg in this piece. Think "A Soldier's Tale" blending with honky-tonk, ricky-tick, jazz and up-tempo dance music of the 1940s.

McGegan darn near broke into a jitterbug on the podium, such was the energy of this performance and the Looney Tunes wackiness of the music. Adams' Chamber Symphony was rewarding, challenging virtuoso work for McGegan and every one of the 16 musicians involved, and but pure fun for the rest of us.

This program, given as a matinee Friday at Marcus Center Uihlein Hall, will be repeated at 8 Saturday. E-mail Tom Strini at tstrini@journalsentinel.com.