

Los Angeles Times

MUSIC REVIEW; McGegan's 'Grand Tour' gets off to an amiable start; The conductor makes London his first stop with a winning if sometimes nutty program at the Bowl.

Tuesday night, Nicholas McGegan began a four-capital, four-concert "Grand Tour" of 17th and 18th century music at the Hollywood Bowl with great Handel, weird Haydn, juvenile Mozart and the audience singing "Rule Britannia!" at the end. Ah, England.

McGegan is a conductor of many expressions, all of them smiles. Heart-rending music is conveyed with a look of beatific warmth. Stirring music is encouraged through good-natured, gung-ho grins. Light, infectious music is produced with an air of irresistible whoop-de-do. When he asks a pair of oboes in a chamber-sized Los Angeles Philharmonic to bow in recognition of their fine solos, he beams as if he were the happiest, proudest papa in the land.

McGegan is the well-known British music director of the Philharmonia Baroque period-instrument orchestra in the Bay Area. And he is the kind of frolicsome, funny tour guide you follow almost anywhere, whether to the musical great sites, oddball byways or tourist traps he hit in his London program.

I, for instance, felt more sympathetic than I might have otherwise toward a few excerpts from Thomas Arne's 1740 "Alfred" -- with its dopey jingoistic text, "Masterpiece Theatre" atmosphere and the "Rule Britannia!" finale -- after we were told by McGegan in his hilarious remarks that it was written for a then prince of Wales who wasn't "the brightest bulb in the royal firmament" and who enjoyed playing cricket indoors because he could afford to break a lot of windows.

The first half of the program was Handel, and that needed no defense. Tenor arias, with John Mark Ainsley as soloist, dominated. Handel's vocal music has been in vogue of late mainly because of a host of splendid sopranos, mezzos and countertenors singing it. Handel didn't tend to give tenors the best stuff in his operas -- which are the hottest Handel these days -- but he was forced to be more egalitarian in his oratorios. And addictive new recordings by Ian Bostridge and Mark Padmore of such tenor arias are suddenly turning the tables on the ladies and the higher-pitched men.

Like Bostridge and Padmore, Ainsley is a light British tenor comfortable in the 17th, 18th and 20th centuries. Of these three singers, he is the most traditionally dramatic. But his job Tuesday was a tough one: walking on unwarmed-up to sing the highly florid "His mighty arm" from "Jephtha." The temperature in the Bowl fell rather quickly as night came on, which also had to play havoc with his voice.

For the most part, Ainsley got through the trial quite well. A few rough patches probably would have gone unnoticed had he not been put under the acoustic microscope of the microphone. Happy conductors are always fast conductors, so "His mighty arm" flew by, and Ainsley's coloratura was full of excitement. "Where'er you walk," from "Semele," is one of the most heart-stoppingly beautiful things Handel wrote, and Ainsley made that evident.

Members of the Pacific Chorale were on hand for the Coronation Anthem: "Zadok the Priest" and bits of "Judas Maccabaeus," the latter with Ainsley, and they remained fresh at even McGegan's most breathless tempos. Breathless but not thoughtless. McGegan is a Handel conductor who, while never being less than electrifying, is also dramatically probing. His smiles are those of a great clown, full of layer after layer of profound meaning.

The second half did need defending. The obscure short madrigal "The Storm," which Haydn wrote during a stay in London, has some quirky harmonies but proved unusually predictable for such a master of surprise. Next came Mozart, who wrote his first symphony and first aria ("Va, dal furor portata") on his first visit to the English capital. He was a remarkably precocious 8, a boy genius. Now he is a god of music, worshiped the world over.

But in 1764 he was just 8. I can't believe he didn't have plenty of help from his musician father. McGegan had the Philharmonic playing with exceptional grace and enthusiasm (which is a terrific Fred Astaire-like combination) all evening and got the maximum degree of likability out of this mediocre music. Ainsley did what he could with the commonplace aria.

Then came the Arne, its pompous patriotic spirits shot through with McGegan's good cheer and great humor. The singalong wasn't all that impressive. I didn't see any Union Jacks waving. Fireworks would have been nice, but there were none.

Tuesday, ultimately, belonged to Handel, but thanks to McGegan, good times didn't depend exclusively on good music. What a merry bus this is that, through next week, will wend its way to Venice, Paris and Vienna.

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