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MUSIC REVIEW

Tour of Europe at Hollywood Bowl

By Richard S. Ginell
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The Nicholas McGegan Express rolled across the causeway Thursday night and pulled into the Venice station, the second stop on its four-city "Grand Tour" of Europe at the Hollywood Bowl.

Hitching onto this train was a neat concept for beating the August blues at the Bowl -- with the jolly, grinning elf of a conductor swaying back and forth at the controls in his animated wiggle-waggle way. On Thursday, the 15-year-old Mozart made a couple of brief cameos: the Overture and March from "Mitridate, rè di Ponto."

Indeed, the well-traveled composer from Salzburg will turn up in every city on the tour. But mostly, the agenda was Vivaldi and more Vivaldi -- which is what you would likely get if you were a real tourist in Venice.

McGegan tried to steer clear of the usual sights -- like those "Four You-Know-Whats" -- and toward some more obscure concertos among the hundreds that Vivaldi cranked out. A few of them existed for centuries as one-of-a-kind manuscripts that Vivaldi wrote on order for single buyers; the Concerto for Violin, RV 222, a marvelous piece, was given its first recording only in 2000. It was as if McGegan was leading us away from the Piazza San Marco into a secret out-of-the-way antique shop on a side street.

Most of the Los Angeles Philharmonic had the night off, leaving a chamber-size core of crack string players who brought a full, lithe, transparent sound to music usually left to the mercy of scraping period bands. Tempos were lively but never frantic, and mixing in relatively fresh material of pretty much the same quality did alleviate the syndrome of sound-alike Vivaldi to some degree, if not completely.

Concertmaster Martin Chalifour found plenty of virtuosic mazes to navigate in the Concertos RV 190 and RV 222 -- and did so with flair. Fellow violinists Camille Avellano, Johnny Lee and Varty Manouelian joined him in the Concertos for Four Violins RV 549 (from the collection "L'estro armonico") and RV 553, none shy about using "modern" vibrato for expressive purposes. Oboists Ariana Ghez and Anne Marie Gabriele played sweetly in the Concerto for Two Oboes, RV 535.

Next stop for the McGegan Express: Paris next Tuesday.

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