

MUSIC REVIEW

Musical conspirators at Disney Hall

By Rick Schultz, Special to The Times
December 1, 2007

Flutist James Galway and conductor Nicholas McGegan are made for each other. Both are ebullient musicians, communicative and warm. They are also natural showoffs but in different ways. The compact McGegan bounces and hops on the podium, molding phrases with his hands. No baton gets between him and the orchestra. And Galway, resplendent in a metallic ruby dinner jacket and lime-green tie when he made his Walt Disney Concert Hall debut Thursday with the Los Angeles Philharmonic -- well, that provided sparkle enough.

McGegan's program, which featured two works each by Mozart and Schubert, got off to a fine start with Schubert's rarely performed seven-minute overture to "The Conspirators," an obscure one-act opera. With its stirring opening horns and delightful blending of instrumental colors, the piece made a rhythmically crisp, vivacious first impression.

The main event, Mozart's Flute Concerto in D major, K. 314, was due next. But McGegan suddenly announced that he was "tweaking the order" a bit. So Galway in Mozart's Andante in C major, K. 315, came before the concerto, instead of after intermission, leaving Schubert's Symphony No. 4 to fill the second half.

Clearly, Galway, who will turn 68 next week, didn't need a breather between pieces. The fit-looking flutist negotiated the challenges of Mozart with charm and elegance. In the Andante, Galway's almost vocal sound produced surprisingly rich textures, his well-balanced tone evident whether he was playing within the orchestral fabric or in front of it. It didn't hurt that McGegan, an accomplished flutist himself, was especially sensitive to this potentially airy instrument. In any case, the warm acoustics of Disney Hall enhanced Galway's song-like sonority. No need for amplification here.

Galway's reading of the Flute Concerto was less measured and more spontaneous than his account of the Andante, from his riveting, agile entrance and inventive first-movement cadenza to his affectionate rendering of the central Andante and thrilling note-perfect runs in the hell-bent Allegro. Soloist, conductor and orchestra were alert to one another throughout, making the most of Mozart's brilliant dynamic contrasts.

Galway, a showman with substance when he wants to be, reflected the flash of his jacket in his encore: the dance-like Badinerie from J.S. Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 2, performed at "Flight of the Bumblebee" speed -- a forgivable stunt that was all part of the exuberant package.

Schubert's Fourth Symphony wasn't as somber as its C-minor key or its composer's designation, "Tragic," might suggest. McGegan's fresh, uncluttered reading mined personal and lyrical touches in the inner Andante and Menuetto movements, suggesting the great Schubert to come. The Allegro finale came off best, with McGegan's impish verve energizing one of the teenage composer's finest symphonic inspirations and proving that a touch of showmanship can be a good thing.