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Fewer musicians get better sound

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While one half of the Philadelphia Orchestra last week was classically inculcating [children](#) with *Peter and the Wolf* during the day, the other half was spending nights with gently strong-willed guest conductor Nicholas McGegan.

Splitting the ensemble and sending players in different directions can happen now that the labor contract allows it. It's one of several work-rule changes aimed at saving money.

But a happy acoustical consequence is that fewer musicians on stage nets a better sound for the audience, and, at least for the three *Peter and the Wolf* concerts and the one McGegan performance I heard, a tighter ensemble.

Can the musicians hear one another better when there are fewer of them? It seemed that way Friday night in Haydn's *Symphony No. 100*, the "Military." Using fewer musicians is not a practicable solution to [Verizon](#) Hall's inconsistent acoustic, unless we want to spend the next few seasons hearing nothing but Haydn symphonies.

But on this night it worked. McGegan got not only a clean sound, but also a lean, light one, with an obvious concentration on soft articulation - all of which put the orchestra further away from its 20th-century Romantic lushness. The sound even traveled in a balanced way in the hurdy-gurdy second movement, unusual for its four busy percussionists and a lone-trumpet triplet figure (echoing later in Mendelssohn and Mahler).

McGegan pointed to Schubert's connection to Haydn by programming the *Overture in C Major* "in the Italian style," D. 591, which opens in a Haydn mood before the Schubertian melody kicks in. Another rarity I was grateful to hear: bits of ballet music ("Chaconne" and "Pas seul") from Mozart's *Idomeneo*, K. 367.

Stephen Hough was the soloist in Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 21 in C Major*, K. 467. With so many college-age listeners in the audience, you had to think that this piece has become a cultural generation marker.

Many are too young (this one among them) to have encountered the second movement in a 1967 [art](#) house watching *Elvira Madigan*. What no one could have missed, though, was Hough's strong sense of legato that closed the gap between notes so narrowly they almost seemed to elide.

Which is not to say his take on the piece was retiring or placid. Hough is an activist, injecting ornamentation into his part and adding material to it in a way that, if not improvised on the spot, strongly suggested he was doing so.

Hough's cadenzas were strong statements of individualism - the one in the third movement to a greater degree than the first. In a way, his playing in the rest of the piece was even more strongly personal. He wanted us to know that Mozart is polite but never boring, and the beauty he creates is not so profound that

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