

Reviews

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Cleveland Orchestra offers taste of spring with Baroque masters

1 P.M.

REVIEW

Cleveland Orchestra

Feb. 15

Severance Hall

By Donald Rosenberg <mailto:%20drosenberg@plaind.com>
Plain Dealer Music Critic

Do we need a change of season, or what? The Cleveland Orchestra may have anticipated the situation when it programmed Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" this week featuring concertmaster William Preucil as soloist and Nicholas McGegan as conductor.

The four violin concertos that make up Vivaldi's popular collection were highlights of the Baroque program that McGegan led Thursday at Severance Hall. The noted British conductor and harpsichordist, in a welcome debut with the orchestra, also brought along works by Bach and Handel to keep our minds off mountains of snow.

Well, almost. Vivaldi uses novel dabs of tone painting to evoke climactic transformations in "The Four Seasons." The solo violin twitters and soars, the orchestra barks and thunders. Moments of clamor rub shoulders with stormy and sylvan vistas.

Happily, Vivaldi begins with "Spring" before moving chronologically and ending with that dastardly foe, "Winter." Yet, even here the music is so silken, breathtaking and inventive that the raging winds and icy flourishes don't provoke screams of "Southward, ho."

The concertos need a soloist who can fiddle furiously and turn poetic phrases into soothing songs. Preucil was an ideal protagonist, full of elegance and subtlety, with luminous command of line and the ability to send tempestuous passages aloft.

Perhaps the most apt episode was the slow movement of "Summer," in which the soloist dropped his sound to a whisper to convey the aura of utter relaxation. Elsewhere, Preucil communed in aviary matters with violinists Yoko Moore and Stephen Rose, entered vibrant conversation with cellist Desmond Hoebig and harpsichordist McGegan and savored Vivaldi's odes to the Weather Channel three centuries removed.

For some reason, the audience Thursday held its applause between concertos — and at the concert's end, until McGegan made a gesture signaling, "That's all, folks!" The conductor was a lithe and buoyant guide throughout the night. He led everything from the harpsichord, often standing to dance the rhythms,

and he applied nuanced shaping to music that appreciates his graceful energy.

Handel's "Entrance of the Queen of Sheba," from the opera "Solomon," had a seductive lilt as molded by McGegan and played so alluringly by the small ensemble, especially oboists Frank Rosenwein and Elizabeth Camus.

Rosenwein also was among the exceptional quartet of soloists in Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 2. McGegan set judicious tempos and gave the players ample space to set forth their nimble and tender statements. Trumpeter Michael Sachs managed his high-altitude duties with tasteful aplomb, and the second movement's interweaving utterances had warm champions in Rosenwein, violinist Ellen dePasquale and flutist Joshua Smith.

Bach's Suite No. 1 was another delectable Baroque encounter, replete with suave, articulate phrasing and stylish decorations. Oboists Rosenwein and Camus, bassoonist John Clouser and the strings seemed delighted to be part of McGegan's collegial artistic world. So were we.

The program repeats at 8 p.m. Saturday (and broadcast live on WCLV FM/104.9) and 3 p.m. Sunday.

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