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Symphony throws a party, with kilts and beer

By ***Sarah Bryan Miller***

POST-DISPATCH CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

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The promise of Celtic tunes and free beer helped bring a large and varied audience from children to businesspeople to Powell Symphony Hall on Thursday night, when the informal Classical Detours series went Scottish (well, nominally, at least) with its first-ever guest conductor, Nicholas McGegan.

McGegan, clad in basic black like the orchestra, noted with approval the men in kilts in the audience. He included his own Scottish touch with a bow tie and pocket handkerchief, in the Robertson tartan.

"You don't want to wear a kilt to conduct," he said. "It's particularly hard on people in the front row."

One pitfall of the Classical Detours format: Because only the theme and not the program is advertised, nobody knew going in that they'd have a chance to hear Peter Maxwell Davies' wonderful, witty "Orkney Wedding, With Sunrise."

It's great on recordings, but it's even better live. A depiction of the party-hearty aftermath of a wedding, it ranges from the merely tipsy to the falling-down drunk, with odd slides in the strings and the brass whooping it up. At the end, a bagpiper in full Highland dress marches down the aisle to the stage and finishes up in the soloist's spot there. It's all musically tricky for the players, but a ton of fun for the audience.

McGegan and the orchestra did a terrific job, with particularly graceful work from a solo string quartet headed by associate concertmaster Heidi Harris. Piper Chris Apps, who wore a tall Black Watch-style feather bonnet with his kilt and plaid, played well, although he started down the aisle a bit late for the fullest impact.

The other high spot was violinist Angie Smart's brilliant reading of the final movement of Bruch's "Scottish Fantasy." Smart executed it with strength, technical expertise and a lot of pizzazz.

Hearing section players as soloists helps to underline the bench strength of

this orchestra. Smart looked stunning, too, in a lovely strapless Sarum blue gown with plaid ribbons trailing down the back.

The program also included a winning reading of Mendelssohn's familiar "The Hebrides" Overture, and Hamish McCunn's "Land of the Mountain and the Flood." McCunn's very Victorian work is filled with both craggy pentatonic tunes and floods of pseudo-Wagnerianisms. It was worth hearing once.

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