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SLSO, McGegan in Bach & followers

By ***Sarah Bryan Miller***

POST-DISPATCHCLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

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When listening to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, it's easy to subscribe to the Greek astronomer Pythagoras' view of the cosmos: The stars and planets swing serenely in their appointed courses, creating the music of the spheres, which surely sounds like that of Bach.

Bach's sonic world is orderly, clear, precise and inviting. Conductor Nicholas McGegan is definitely at home in it. On Saturday night at Powell Symphony Hall, he led a small band of musicians from the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in the Brandenburg Concertos No. 2 in F major, BWV 1047, and 5 in D major, BWV 1050, with idiomatic ease.

The players responded with some superb performances. No. 2 has a quintet of soloists: concertmaster David Halen, David Washburn (principal trumpet of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra), principal flute Mark Sparks, oboe Philip Ross and harpsichord Maryse Carlin.

Although there were occasional balance issues, particularly in the nicely zippy first movement, all filled their roles well. The second movement featured a beautiful trio for flute, oboe and violin; Washburn showed off his chops in the third, with clean, agile playing.

No. 5 let Carlin move to the front with Halen and Sparks, where she offered first-class playing in her extended solo passage. The three were nicely matched, in musical sympathy with one another, for a splendid conclusion to the concert.

McGegan brought just as much clarity to the two Bach-inspired works framed by the Brandenburgs on the program. Alfred Schnittke's 1985 Concerto Grosso No. 3 sounds at times like Bach on acid, with ghostly echoes of the master throughout and some fascinating sonorities for its small orchestra of strings, keyboards (Carlin again, a triple threat on harpsichord, piano and celesta) and bells.

It showcased the talents of assistant principal second violin Kristin Ahlstrom and first violin section member Emily Ho. In contrasting gowns of black and

white and completely in tune in every way with one another, they wowed the audience with their technical expertise and flair.

The ancestry of Heitor Villa-Lobos' "Bachianas brasileiras No. 1" is even more clear. Eight members of the cello section alone on an otherwise empty stage with the conductor gave a stylish, lyrical, thoroughly enjoyable performance, with the ending Baroque-meets-Brazil fugue perfectly executed.

The house was almost full, with only a few scattered seats left open; perhaps this is the first fruits of the \$99 "Winter Pass" program. The applause of about 2,500 listeners rolled down like thunder on the deserving musicians — an exhilarating sound.

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