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McGegan, SLSO, complete back-to-back Bach weeks

By [Sarah Bryan Miller](#)

POST-DISPATCH CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Sunday, Jan. 20 2008

Nicholas McGegan and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra completed their two-week sojourn through works by and inspired by Johann Sebastian Bach with a pair of the Brandenburg Concertos and two 20th-century pieces for double string orchestra.

On Friday morning at Powell Symphony Hall, McGegan doubled as conductor and harpsichordist in the Brandenburg No. 3 in G major, BWV 1048 and No. 6 in B-flat major, BWV 1051.

Before beginning No. 3, McGegan told the audience, "This may be the smallest version of (the orchestra) you've ever seen. It's the Jenny Craig version, definitely slimmed down." Indeed, there were two more civilians sitting on stage — 13 lucky volunteers and one usher — than performers.

Like a good pinot grigio, it was bright, crisp and refreshing. McGegan's tempos in the first movement were driving but never driven; the third was absolutely joyful. Between them, McGegan offered a perfect harpsichord improvisation.

If No. 3 had a slimmed-down orchestra, the ensemble for No. 6 was downright skinny, with two viola soloists, three cellos, one double bass and harpsichord. (It could have been even smaller; the cellists arrived onstage to find themselves without scores. There was a slight delay while the librarian retrieved their music.) The only fault with the weekend's program was that it left the listener a little hungry for some brass and woodwinds.

Violists rarely get to step out; new principal Jonathan Vinocour made the most of the chance to shine in a fine, seemingly effortless solo debut. He and assistant principal Kathleen Mattis led with élan, as McGegan bounced energetically at the harpsichord.

The Brandenburgs were again matched with works whose ancestry could be traced to Bach, if not quite as obviously this weekend as last. Both were written for double string orchestra: Bohuslav Martinu's 1938 Double Concerto for Strings, Piano, and Timpani, and Sir Michael Tippett's Concerto for Double String

Orchestra, written in 1938-39.

The Martinu is a beautifully complex composition, though nervous and nerve-wracking in places. It's an insistent piece of music whose piano soloist sometimes joins the swirling conversations of the string choirs and sometimes steps out on its own.

Peter Henderson, a frequent performer with the orchestra, was assured and precise in his playing, blending with the ensemble and standing apart as called upon. McGegan led with as much transparency as he demonstrated in the Bach.

The Tippett was the final, immensely likable work on the program. It combines folk-songlike tunefulness with moments reminiscent of Ralph Vaughan Williams' aching loveliness. McGegan brought it all together with a degree of clarity that helped to tie it in successfully with the rest of the program.

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