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## Symphony a delight in spirited performance

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It's not often that the **St. Louis Symphony** Orchestra's calendar lines up with the liturgical one, but the two coincided nicely last weekend.

Friday, of course, was Halloween, perfect for a spooky Classical Detours concert. Saturday, All Saints' Day, brought the first of two performances of George Frideric Handel's 1739 oratorio "Ode for St. Cecilia's Day."

The conductor for the week's performances was the matchless Nicholas McGegan. It's almost guaranteed that anything he conducts will be a delight, and so it proved on Saturday evening at Powell Symphony Hall.

The program opened with Mendelssohn's overture "Fair Melusine," a pleasant curtain-raiser, and then moved to show off a well-matched quartet of soloists from the SLSO's own ranks.

Franz Joseph Haydn's Sinfonia concertante in B-flat major for oboe, bassoon, violin, cello and orchestra, op. 84, is a thoroughly agreeable work, and it received an excellent reading from McGegan, the orchestra and soloists Barbara Orland (oboe), Andrew Gott (bassoon), Alison Harney (violin) and Melissa Brooks (cello).

McGegan kept the music clean and spirited. All of the soloists played well; Gott's playing was particularly fine.

The second half was an almost unmitigated pleasure. The "Ode" brought visual interest as well as a charming score, with Amy Kaiser's **St. Louis Symphony** Chorus joining the orchestra, a pair of vocal soloists and three continuo players: Maryse Carlin on harpsichord, Nancy Mayo on the portative organ and Lucas Harris playing a very, very large bass lute.

Soprano Laura Claycomb looked as though she'd just stepped out of a Pre-Raphaelite painting, with her masses of curly red hair and a romantic gown of midnight blue. She and tenor Thomas Cooley both had impeccable musicianship and beauty of sound, but their voices were on the light side for the size of the hall. Claycomb suffered some passing intonation issues.

The words, in praise of music, are by John Dryden, and move fancifully between religious and mythological sources. They were projected on the large overhead screen, but all of the singers were admirably clear in their diction.

The soloists received superb support from McGegan and the orchestra. Several of the principal players performed duets in which they were equal partners with the singers,

including cello Daniel Lee and flute Mark Sparks. Lee made the most of a splendid part, playing with extraordinary beauty and sensitivity, on the soprano aria "What passion cannot Music raise."

The chorus was in generally good form. The sopranos splattered a bit in their first outing, but recovered to make a good showing in the rest of the oratorio.

With its combination of spirited performances and well-chosen music, the program was one of the best so far this season at Powell.