

Cleveland Orchestra: conductor Nicholas McGegan talks about his two concerts this weekend

by Mike Telin



“It’s always a great treat for me to come to Cleveland,” conductor [Nicholas McGegan](#) said enthusiastically by telephone from San Francisco. “I love Blossom and Severance Hall, and The Cleveland Orchestra is one of the great orchestras in the world. Plus, I’m conducting repertoire that I love.” On Friday, August 21 at 7:00 pm as part of the Summers@Severance series, McGegan will lead the Orchestra

in works by Haydn, Handel, and Schubert. Then on Saturday, August 22 at 8:00 pm at Blossom Music Center, he will return to the podium for a concert featuring music by J.S. Bach, Haydn, J.C. Bach, and Mozart.

One piece is common to both programs: Haydn’s C-Major Cello Concerto, and McGegan looks forward to renewing his friendship with the soloist, TCO principal cello Mark Kosower. “I’ve known him since he was a teenager, so it will all be great fun.”

The Haydn concerto is both old and new: it was presumed lost until the score was discovered by Oldřich Pulkert in the Prague National Museum in 1961. “People knew it existed, because the first couple of bars are in one of Haydn’s own catalogues,” McGegan said, “and that’s all we knew until the 1960s. It’s one of the great musical discoveries of our time, and a masterpiece at that. It’s a wonderful foil for the D-Major concerto. The C-Major is a really outgoing piece, whereas the D-Major is more intimate.”

McGegan noted that two discoveries put Haydn in the headlines during the 1950s and 60s. “Besides discovering the Cello Concerto — and this is sort of a grisly thing — they finally reunited his head with his body. Haydn’s head had been stolen by medical

students the day after he died because they wanted to look inside the head of a genius. I think I prefer the cello concerto as a reason to get into the news.”

Friday’s concert will also include Handel’s Suite No. 2 from *Water Music*, “which is fabulous,” said McGegan, “and Schubert’s *Symphony No. 5*, which I don’t get to conduct that often.” The conductor had found that throughout his career, pieces come in waves. “I had a whole rash of Schubert threes and fours, so I’m on an inflationary path now because I have a few Schubert fives coming up. It’s going to be terrific to do it with an orchestra like Cleveland, which spends a good deal of its time performing Viennese music.”

Saturday’s concert will include Mozart’s *Symphony No. 31*, “Paris,” J.S. Bach’s *Orchestral Suite No. 3*, and J.C. Bach’s *Sinfonia in g*. “The Sinfonia is a little gem. J.C. Bach lived most of his life in England, and he did everything that his father would have disapproved of — or not have understood,” McGeghan said. “He traveled widely. He wrote operas. He became a Roman Catholic. And he didn’t have any kids. But apparently he was one of the nicest people on the planet.

“He was also a great influence on Mozart. They met in London in 1765 when J.C. would have been 30 years old and Mozart was nine. They hit it off immensely well and played piano duets together. What we think of as the ‘Classical Style’ is largely in J.C. Bach’s language. He’s the one who distilled it from the best of Germany and Italy. Mozart drank quantities of it and loved it. And with the Paris symphony we take all of this to France.”

McGegan said that over the two concerts it will be nice for the audience to hear music by Haydn — who admired Mozart and whom Mozart admired in return — and by J.C. Bach, who was part of this mutual admiration society as well. The conductor also thinks it is tremendously important to know who these composers were. “They weren’t just queen bees laying musical eggs every day. Just because they wore fancy clothes didn’t make them any less passionate, happy, or sad than the rest of us. Mozart could be very mischievous, and Haydn had a great sense of humor.”

Mozart also knew that his audience was made up of real people. “In his day if an audience liked something, they applauded it right then and there,” McGegan pointed out. “Mozart wrote that he intentionally included something in the Paris Symphony he knew the audience would enjoy, and they did. Those performances were much wilder than anything we could imagine today. I think that young people would come to more classical music concerts if they could make more noise.”

“I’m interested in music history, and I do feel it matters to know that these were real people, and understand why they wrote what they did, what it meant to them, and what they were trying to express,” McGegan said. “When I look at their manuscripts, I find it

amazing that they wrote all of this by candlelight. It's quite likely that Bach's family spent hours ruling staff lines onto manuscript paper because it could not easily be bought. You can see that in the scores of the Brandenburgs, where the lines are slightly wonky. And composers like Mozart and Bach had to make their own ink."

McGegan recalled seeing J.S. Bach's wine glass while visiting Eisenach. "It's a beautiful crystal goblet with a poem on it in praise of the composer. Apparently he would retire at night with a pound of tobacco and a pint of brandy and start composing. He also had a very fancy tea and coffee set. These people lived real lives, and had beating hearts, and that's what I want people to hear in the music — not just how clever it is, or how pretty it is."

How did Nicholas McGegan first become interested in early music? "One of the subjects I had to take as an undergraduate at Cambridge University was acoustics, or how musical instruments work and how concert halls make for good or bad sound. And if I actually understood anything about this I'd have a different career. The teacher of that class, Sir Nicholas Shackleton, had a tenant named Chris Hogwood who lived in the attic of his house. Nick collected eighteenth-century wind instruments, and since I was a flute player he lent me a flute. When Chris was home he once said, 'Well, I've got a harpsichord and you've got a flute. Let's play sonatas.' We did, and that's how I got turned on to early music. It's because of Chris, and I'm eternally grateful for it. Chris was very interested in all of this too, but he was a proper academic. I just play at it, but I do enjoy it."

This year marks the 30th anniversary of McGegan's association with Philharmonia Baroque, which is celebrating its 35th anniversary. "Next season is going to be great fun. One thing that San Francisco and Cleveland share is that both cities have very good period instrument orchestras. I'm delighted not only for the anniversary but also for the fact that we are really thriving and able to perform these concerts, some of which are pretty big. I feel so privileged to be able to do this. I now have a contract until 2020 when I will be 70, which means that half of my life will have been spent working with this orchestra. I can't think of anything better to do in my entire existence."

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