

## Conductor Nicholas McGegan returns to Severance Hall

by Mike Telin



“I just got back from Portugal last night, so I’m playing catch-up here,” conductor Nicholas McGegan said during a telephone call last Sunday morning from his home in San Francisco. “I’ve been away for two weeks so I’m going through the mail and all that stuff. But I’m in California and the sun is shining so it’s all well. I leave in the morning to come to Cleveland.”

On Friday, November 17 at Severance Hall, McGegan will lead The Cleveland Orchestra in an 11:00 am matinee and a Fridays@7 performance. On Saturday the 18th McGegan and company will present a full-length concert beginning at 8:00 pm. For program and ticket information click [here](#).

“I’m looking forward to Cleveland because I’ve got Marc-André Hamelin coming, who is wonderful. I can’t wait. We spent part of the summer together at the Van Cliburn Competition. He was one of the judges and I was conducting the Mozart round, so the poor guy had to listen to me conduct twelve Mozart concertos. We’ve never worked together, just socialized, so this is going to be such fun.”

I asked the brilliant and witty McGegan to share his thoughts about this weekend’s music.

**Mozart’s *Piano Concerto No. 9* (“Jeunehomme”)**

Calling it the “Jeunehomme” is almost certainly wrong. The lady in question was called Victoire Jenamy. She was the daughter of a famous choreographer, Jean-Georges Noverre, and married Mr. Jenamy. She happened to be passing through Salzburg and Mozart wrote this concerto for her. She seemingly was a brilliant pianist. Sadly, there are lots of portraits of her father but none of her that we know of. Believe it or not, I do have a copy of her wedding certificate with her signature on it. She must have been fabulous for Mozart to write her such a glorious piece — one that is so unbelievably original. All Mozart is beyond originality but, for example, just the way the piano comes right in must have made people drop their wine glasses at the first concert.

Then to have that passionate, dark slow movement and this amazing last movement — which is extremely hard with lots of hand crossings in it, which is not done every day. And then having a beautiful, almost second slow movement in the middle of the last movement. And most unusually for a Mozart concerto, it’s got loads and loads of cadenzas — he wrote out several versions for each one, which means that he obviously thought very highly of the piece and played it himself. Of course, he wouldn’t need any written cadenzas. He said to his sister, “I just play the first thing that comes into my head.”

I’ve done it probably more than any of his other piano concertos except the d-minor, which is perpetually requested. That doesn’t mean I don’t like the d-minor, but it’s lovely to do this one, which I have a very special affection for. It’s a milestone in Mozart’s development as a composer. You can say that pieces he wrote before this are miraculous and wonderful but you can hear the conventions in them. In this one, all the conventions are thrown out the window from the word go. It’s a fantastic piece from the first note to the last.

The wonderful thing is that Marc-André also composes, which means that he has more of an insight than I do into Mozart’s imagination. I just sit there and be grateful and go, ‘Wow.’

### **Mozart’s *Symphony No. 36* (“Linz”)**

I absolutely adore it. It’s somewhat of a milestone symphony in that it ushers in his later ones that sit in a separate category from the rest.

He must have been in a pretty dark place at the time. The reason he left Salzburg is that he heard that his young son had died. He needed the money so he took the commission. It was written at lightning speed in less than a week.

Unlike most of his later symphonies, we don't have the manuscript. The usual version that is done is one that was published several years after he died. I know that a cello/bass part survives in Leopold Mozart's handwriting. For this concert I'm using a better edition than the one that is usually used. It includes some of the things that Leopold Mozart did — and did not do — to the bass part.

It's the first of the really grand symphonies. There are earlier ones that are marvelous but they don't have trumpets, drums, and bells and whistles, like the later ones do. Being asked to do it with The Cleveland Orchestra is like being asked to drive a Maserati. You're not going to say, 'No, I'd rather take a bicycle.'

### **Rameau's Suite from *Dardanus***

I do a lot of Rameau and I'm always happy to do it. This was not his first opera but one of the earlier ones, though there really is no "early" Rameau opera because he didn't start writing them until he was 50, by which time most people in the 18th century were dead. He was a harmonist and a theorist as well as a cathedral and church organist.

This is also a suite I do quite often. It's wonderful because a lot of Baroque music was written for small forces, like the Brandenburg's, but this is written for big forces and therefore it's very suitable for a modern symphony orchestra.

We're just doing a few of the dances and the chaconne at the end which is just remarkable. It's Rameau at his grandest. A lot of the time he can be cranky and weird, but that's because he *was* cranky and weird. It was said in a book that he was only kind to anyone by mistake. Perhaps that is a bit harsh, but he was not an easy person to deal with, shall we say.

*Mike Telin: You've been coming to Cleveland for many years now: what is it about The Orchestra that makes you want to return time and again?*

Nic McGegan: First, it is one of the great orchestras of the world and second, you're playing in one of the great halls in the world. It's particularly fun because I know a lot of the musicians and so it's nice to see one's pals again.

It's great for me because I'm working with these glorious musicians, and I hope it's great for them that I'm doing repertoire which they don't get to play as much as Beethoven, Brahms, and Bruckner. The Orchestra has a fantastic wind section and Mozart writes great wind parts. And a lot of the music I conduct is very witty and, shall

we say, that's not a hallmark of Bruckner. I love listening to Bruckner symphonies but I would never want to conduct one. I love doing what I do.

I've done quite a few concertos with soloists from the orchestra, so it's like having a fabulous dinner party with people you know will get on. And if Mozart's doing the catering, it's just going to be fun.

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