

## Nicholas McGegan returns to Severance Hall for a “terrific concert for families”

by Mike Telin



Whether it's the sounds of birds, whales, or summer storms, for centuries humans have turned to the natural world for musical inspiration. While there is a seemingly endless list of nature-inspired works, one that stands out as a perennial favorite is Antonio Vivaldi's set of violin concertos — *Le quattro stagioni* (“The Four Seasons”).

This weekend at Severance Hall, you can hear the sounds of chirping birds, rippling creeks, barking dogs, buzzing flies, and storms when violinist Peter Otto, guest conductor Nicholas McGegan, and The Cleveland Orchestra reunite for three performances of Vivaldi's groundbreaking work. The program, which also includes music by Mozart (Chaconne from *Idomeneo*) and Haydn (*Symphony No. 94*), will be presented on Friday and Saturday at 8:00 pm and Sunday at 3:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

For McGegan, these concerts are extra-special for a number of reasons. “For me, working with The Cleveland Orchestra is like being given a Rolls-Royce and an infinite supply of gas,” the affable conductor said during a telephone conversation. “I think this is my tenth visit to work with them, so I hope we're good pals by now. And this will be a terrific concert for families who are looking for something to do during the Thanksgiving weekend.”

McGegan looks forward to once again collaborating with his longtime friend. “When I first met Peter, he was playing in the first violins of the St. Louis Symphony, but then he was whisked away to Cleveland. Then in July of 2010, I was conducting a concert at Blossom — Peter was playing *The Seasons*. So when I was asked to do this concert and

they told me that Peter was going to be the soloist for *The Seasons*, of course I was just thrilled. I've done the piece very often, in fact I just did it last month. But doing it with Peter is just tops. He's a wonderful musician and great fun. He's full of musical fantasy which is what that piece really needs."

McGegan added that he also has a "selfish reason" for being excited about the Vivaldi. "Sometimes I only conduct it, but this time I'm playing harpsichord and conducting, which is much nicer. It's a very small group, and as a conductor you have next to nothing to do because it is chamber music — so I get to jam along with everyone."

When *The Four Seasons* was published in 1725, the work was a leap forward in the evolution of the violin concerto and as an example of program music. "I think it's a masterpiece," McGegan said, "when you consider that the concerto as a genre, and particularly the violin concerto, wasn't more than a decade or two old when this was written. When people of the 18th century first heard these, they must have thought they were really out there."

What is it about *The Four Seasons* that continues to captivate listeners? McGegan pointed out that in addition to writing "fabulous tunes," Vivaldi wrote music that is ear-catching. "Even if it's just a little rhythm — like in 'Winter' — it stays with you. Of course it's great fun to hear him imitate bird songs or rivers or fountains or the summer bugs — they're still with us — and the stomping of feet and skating are things that people still do. He had a wonderful way of turning these things into music, and memorable music at that."

McGegan always enjoys conducting the symphonies of Haydn — the "sheer happiness" of his music is something he finds "greatly appealing." And knowing what we do about Haydn's personality, the composer is at the top of McGegan's dinner party list. "You could pretty much count on Handel eating all your food, or on Mozart disgracing himself with the girls, and Wagner would only talk about himself. But Mendelssohn, he could talk to people in almost any language, and Haydn, he would just be good fun."

Written in 1791, Haydn's *Symphony No. 94* ("Surprise") is the second in the group of works known as the London Symphonies. "I adore all twelve of his last symphonies," McGegan said. "You can say that it has a 'popular touch,' but it is a sophisticated piece. He masks his cleverness in good humor — it's Haydn at the top of his game."

Although Haydn's music was well known and often performed in London and Paris, due to his employment with the Esterházy, his ability to travel was limited — until 1790 when he made his first of two visits to London. "Somebody told me that when he went to England, it was the first time he was allowed through the front door of a nobleman's

house — he had always been a servant,” McGegan said. “When he arrived in London he was a rock star. He was extremely happy and not long after he got there, he began a relationship with a rich Scottish widow twenty years his junior” — that was [Rebecca Schroeter](#). “There are at least twenty of her love letters to him that survive. He kept them, he said, ‘to practice his English.’”

McGegan, himself a Brit, said that Haydn somehow knew what the Brits would like. “We like things that are slightly naughty — a big bang in the middle of a slow movement. Haydn said that he was going to give them something that would make them talk for the rest of the evening. And almost every one of these symphonies has one of those magic moments. But when you get to things like the Minuet, it couldn’t be more Austrian if it tried — it’s complete folk music.”

In addition to gaining him even more fame, those two trips to London were also lucrative. “Last year I was recording some Haydn in the Esterháza Palace. I got there a couple of days early and went to the house that Haydn bought with the money he had made in London. His wife insisted that he buy it, as she said, for her widowhood, but he outlived her. It’s a beautiful house, and he added the second story. They went back and scraped the paint and found what the original colors were, and they’ve restored it as much as they can to what it was like when he lived there. I went there in the morning, and in the afternoon I went about three-quarters of a mile south to the tiny little apartment where Schubert died. The contrast between the two is just tragic.”

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