

Cleveland Orchestra with Otto & McGegan (Nov. 23)

by David Kulma



On Friday, November 23, the audience in a packed Severance Hall heard violinist Peter Otto in beautiful performances of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* with The Cleveland Orchestra, led from the harpsichord by the jovial Nicholas McGegan. With McGegan on the podium, the second half featured some delightful ballet music by Mozart and a beloved Haydn symphony.

Antonio Vivaldi's concertos depicting spring, summer, autumn, and winter are each lovely tone pictures in three movements with accompanying descriptive sonnets. Played all in a row over 40 minutes, they become a strange Baroque tone-poem set, as if Bedřich Smetana's *Má vlast* — six symphonic poems celebrating Bohemia — had been preempted by a century and a half. And like Smetana's cycle, there are clear musical shapes that Vivaldi uses to create his musical paintings.

McGegan led a generally straightforward, stylish performance with a wonderfully polished chamber complement of strings. The lightness and brightness influenced by period performance practice were on display, and he took tempo liberties at major structural points to help break up Vivaldi's insistent rhythms. His harpsichord playing was clearly accompanimental, but he used the instrument's color options to good effect, especially the lovely lute stop for the slow arpeggios in *Autumn's* middle movement.

Otto, the Orchestra's first associate concertmaster, played with magnificent refinement throughout this concerto marathon. He was technically perfect with amazingly tuned double stops, lightning-quick scales, and ravishing slow melodies. Every once in a

while, he sweetened up the music with tasteful ornaments. All in all, this infectious and vivacious music was beautifully served by Otto, McGegan, and the Orchestra.



After intermission, McGegan stepped to the podium in front of a slightly larger ensemble with added winds for the “Chaconne” from the seldom-heard ballet music in Mozart’s *Idomeneo*. The first of five dance movements, this celebratory music in variation form was clearly intended as a wrap-up following the opera’s happy ending. McGegan led a spirited account full of joy and panache.

The evening ended with one of Haydn’s most endearing symphonies: No. 94 in G Major. Nicknamed “Surprise” for its unexpected loud chord — the 18th-century musical equivalent of a dad joke — Haydn’s bustling music filled with enjoyable wind solos never ceases to charm. The excellent Classical style that McGegan brought out from The Cleveland Orchestra — one of the best ensembles for this music — was just the right kind of light and witty.

Photos by Roger Mastroianni.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 3, 2018.

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