

## Marriage, divorce, musical tourism, and a bit of mystery: a conversation with Nic McGegan

by Mike Telin



Although conductor Nic McGegan has only worked with Cleveland Orchestra principal clarinet Afendi Yusuf on one occasion, he said it was pure heaven. “It was a couple of years ago when we did the suite from Schubert’s *Rosamunde*, which has a wonderful clarinet part and he just blew me away. You don’t hear clarinet playing that classy everyday. I’m thrilled that he’s going to play this concerto and I’m just so happy to be able to stand next to him.”

On Saturday, August 12, at 7:00 pm at Blossom Music Center, McGegan will lead Afendi Yusuf and The Cleveland Orchestra in a performance of Mozart’s *Clarinet Concerto*. The program also includes

Mozart’s Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro*, Elena Langer’s Suite from *Figaro Gets a Divorce*, and Mendelssohn’s *Symphony No. 4, “Italian.”* Tickets are available [online](#).

Saturday’s concert also marks Yusuf’s debut as a concerto soloist with his Cleveland colleagues. “That’s an extra treat for me,” McGegan said during a recent phone conversation. “And it’s one of those pieces which an audience always warms to, so it’s going to be great fun.”

Unlike a lot of Mozart’s music — which McGegan said was often written for a performance “next week” — this is not true of the clarinet concerto. “Obviously it dates from the last month he was alive, but it appears that he may have been thinking about it at least two years earlier.”

Referencing British musicologist Alan Tyson's book *Mozart: Studies of the Autograph Scores*, McGegan said that Mozart's manuscript paper in his scores contain watermarks that can tell you when and where the music was written. "It was first performed in October of 1791, but he wasn't writing it in September. Who knows? Anyway, it's an absolutely amazing piece."

The program will begin with another work by Mozart, the Overture to the *Marriage of Figaro*. "It's got some gnarly moments in it, so it's going to be very nice to actually rehearse it." McGegan recalled being at the Estates Theatre in Prague and seeing a bronze tablet on the floor of the orchestra pit noting where Mozart stood to conduct *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1787. "Everyone knows that he conducted the premiere of *Don Giovanni* at that theatre, but some months before he conducted *Figaro* standing right there."

The concert will also feature 21st-century music by Russian-born British composer Elena Langer — the Suite from her 2016 opera *Figaro Gets a Divorce*. In her composer notes, Langer says that "the opera is a mixture of Beaumarchais's *La mère coupable* and a dark comedy — *Figaro Gets Divorced* — written in 1936 by the Austro-Hungarian playwright Ödön von Horváth. The opera follows the fortunes of the Almaviva household and takes place in a highly turbulent world, somewhere and sometime in 20th-century Europe."

The opera and the Suite are new to McGegan and were brought to his attention by the Orchestra's artistic administrator Michael Gandlmayr. "He recommended it to me and I'm just thrilled to do it. I knew about Elena Langer from friends in the UK, she's quite a prolific opera composer and does works for all kinds of opera companies."

He added that the piece is not something that can be learned quickly. "You could say, 'Okay, this is in two, this is in four,' that kind of thing, but trying to get under its skin takes a little bit longer. But I'm always grateful to do something new. The music is just such fun and I am enjoying learning it."

The concert will conclude with a work that McGegan knows very well, Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony. "It's an absolute masterpiece and I've conducted it a lot. But he was a bit of a tinkerer — I think because he was one of the few composers who didn't have to publish anything to make money. And so of the late symphonies, the 'Scottish' was published, but 'Italian' wasn't."

In addition to being a remarkable composer, Mendelssohn was also an avid watercolorist. "Every time he traveled, he brought his watercolor paints with him. And he did lots of rather beautiful watercolors when he was in Italy. So he had his own private collection,

like we would have of holiday photos. Some of those watercolors were used to reconstruct his apartment in Leipzig — they knew where the furniture went, what color the carpets were, and what color the walls were.”

Although McGegan called it an apartment, he noted that the space occupies an entire floor of a large building and includes a salon that holds 50 people. “It’s very much about the domestic Mendelssohn. He had a cook who wrote out the menus every day. So you can see that, for example, he liked rice pudding. And he composed standing up — he had one of those standing desks. So it’s all there.”

McGegan said that when he travels, he enjoys visiting the places where composers lived. “Only one of Mozart’s apartments survives. It’s called Figaro House and it’s quite grand. But then the flat where Schubert died is incredibly small and cramped. It’s nice to see how these different composers lived and how they sometimes composed through a great deal of adversity, or in the case of Mendelssohn, lived very nicely. I think musical tourism is great.”

McGegan is also an avid reader of mysteries and has an extensive list of recommendations on his [website](#). His latest post is titled *Georgian Detective Fiction: Exploring the Violent Society of the 18th Century*. “One of my favorite writers is Simon Brett, and he’s written a whole series (*Blotto and Twinks*) of absolutely hysterical mysteries about two brother and sister children of some really impossible aristocrats in England. They’re set in the 1920s and it’s just laugh-out-loud fun. One of the great advantages of traveling and having a Kindle is that I can take a bunch of them along. Although sometimes I get into trouble for laughing on planes.”

Before saying goodbye, McGegan said that as always, he is looking forward to returning to Cleveland. “It’s always a joy to work with the Orchestra. And I particularly love having a soloist who comes from within the orchestra. That has happened several times.”

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