

SYMPHONY REVIEW

An Orchestra Tests Its Own Mettle

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By Thomas Goss

Mahler's 5th is a symphony unlike any other. Each of the three sprawling sections is like unto a world in itself with its own distinct pacing and logic. The challenge of tying them together into a cohesive whole is one of the greatest for the conductor in all the symphonic repertory. The sheer excellence and level of commitment displayed by Alisdair Neale and the Marin Symphony last Sunday night showed it to be the right work and him the right conductor for this unusually talented group of musicians to prove their worth.

Part of this success was strategic. Neale treated the piece as a series of musical statements, not stage-managed but integrated with a fine sense of balance and an overall command of form. The panoply of instrumental solos in the first movement had a cumulative rather than patchwork effect, while the scherzo was actually funny, even sarcastic in its contrasts and collisions of mood. The finale, by turns comedic, heroic, and sloshing with its wide arcs, came through with sincerity and fulfillment. The artless little wind passages had as much effect as the crashing, tolling brass chorales. In it all was a sense of intellectual foresight and emotional honesty that owed more to Bernstein, perhaps, than to von Karajan. Yet Neale's sense of preparation, timing, and synergy is all his own. His is a keenly honed instrument that seems as fascinated with the way that music works as with the way that it plays.

Another part of this success was musicianship. There were moments of brilliance and transcendence wherein the term "regional orchestra" scarcely seemed applicable, as in the touching candor of the Adagietto, where the strings more than redeemed themselves for moments of uncertainty in the previous season. The string sound overall was first-rate, tight and precise with only traces of looseness in the scherzo, rich and full in both the gravity of the opening and the ebullience of the finale. The cello section was the real standout of the evening, executing its melodic passages with deep, chesty brilliance, particularly in the stormy response to the funeral march. The quality and presence of the strings pushed the dependable winds and brass to new heights, with great solo work all around, particularly in the double reeds, with oboist Margot Golding and English Horn player Laura Chrisp in warm effulgence. Bruce Roberts simply killed with his horn solos, while the presence of Carole Klein on trumpet was like Gabriel in judgment with clear, ringing pronouncements.

Choral work integrated and balanced

This Teutonic tour-de-force was balanced by the very French sparkle of François Poulenc's *Gloria* in the first half of the concert. Neale allowed some of the edges to show in this reverently brash work. Poulenc's spiritual oeuvre has a symphonic flair that is entirely un-

churchy. For all the extollations of piety, the devotion seems to reside in the instrumentality of the choral lines, and the Marin Symphony chorus was up to the task. The male voices were strong without booming. The female voices had a crisp smoothness which well complemented the lightness of the orchestral texture. Neale and chorus director Stephen McKersie worked the singers into the musical fabric with care and were rewarded with a musical landscape wherein all parts worked in the pursuit of the "idea," rather than at the expense of one another, a real hazard in oratorio performance.

Soprano soloist Pamela Coburn sang with a bright, fluid tone, penetrating in the upper register without shrillness. Her sense of both pitch and drama was precise and confident throughout, particularly in the treacherous, twisty opening of the Agnus Dei. Her easy manner and elegant perfection were a mirror for the success of the piece and of the entire evening's proceedings. Marin Symphony, simply put, has never sounded better.