

Posted on Thu, Sep. 28, 2006

CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW

New World soars under Alasdair Neale's baton

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With Michael Tilson Thomas and a glittering array of renowned conductors regularly mounting the New World Symphony podium, the artistry of Alasdair Neale (the ensemble's principal guest conductor) sometimes gets taken for granted. For sheer musical insight and artistic command, this gifted conductor sets a standard that is hard to surpass. His exciting performance of Prokofiev's Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Major on Sunday at the Lincoln Theater was deeply affecting rather than the superficial balletic run-through so often encountered.

Neale powerfully evoked the terror and agony of Prokofiev's wartime symphony. He built the opening Andante to a violent climax through gigantic blocks of sound. The contrasting secondary theme proved only a brief respite from the work's tragic cast. A sizzling clarinet solo highlighted the agitated Allegro marcato. The trio section's grotesque, mock lyricism was given fierce, ultra-intense treatment (particularly in the edgy violin figurations).

Neale balanced the haunting and disturbing arioso of the Mahleresque Adagio. After a pensive introduction, the concluding Allegro giocoso burned with relentless, overwhelming power. Neale and the players truly inhabited the music in an interpretation that was emotionally draining, yet profoundly moving.

Neale is a first-class orchestral technician and a musician of taste and discernment. His invigorating performance of the Overture to Mendelssohn's incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* avoided bombast. The music pulsed on a lush, flowing wave of string tone. Except for a minor horn fluff, the Nocturne soared in endless melodic ecstasy. Neale brought tripling lightness of pulse to the Scherzo. The famous Wedding March was stirring. Neale artfully illuminated Mendelssohn's dizzying, magical sound world. Over 160 years after its creation, the instrumental and thematic mastery of this music continues to astound, especially in so vibrant a performance.

Benjamin Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* brought grandeur and subtlety in equal measure. An extended harp solo was a bravura tour de force. The violins shone in brilliant cascades of tone in a beguiling waltz variation. From the broad statement of the Purcell theme to the final scintillating fugue, Neale offered an impress display of authoritative conducting and orchestral virtuosity.