

## Music review: Marin Symphony excels with Wagner

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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It's possible to hear a musician perform regularly for many years without knowing everything he's capable of. Who could have guessed, before Tuesday's season-ending concert by the Marin Symphony, that conductor Alasdair Neale had such a thrilling way with Wagner?

It isn't that Neale has been hiding his light under a bushel all this time - that's not part of any conductor's job description, or psychological makeup. But through more than a decade with the San Francisco Symphony, and since taking the helm in Marin in 2001, Neale has never had any particular opportunity to show his mettle in the Wagnerian realm.

So the all-Wagner second half of Tuesday's concert, including fluidly eloquent and dramatic accounts of both the "Siegfried Idyll" and the Prelude and "Liebestod" from "Tristan und Isolde," came as a growing and welcome surprise. This was music making marked by both efficiency and spaciousness.

The "Siegfried Idyll," Wagner's sunny birthday present to his wife, Cosima, is one of the composer's few uncomplicated musical creations, and Neale took that quality and ran with it. Probably recognizing that tonal lushness was not an option (especially in the muffled acoustics of the Marin Veterans Auditorium), he opted instead for buoyancy and lightness.

The result was a performance that emphasized both the music's transparency and the ebullience of its constantly rising thematic material. And if the string playing was a little patchy in spots, the winds and brass more than picked up the slack.

The "Tristan" Prelude was, if anything, even more impressive, a series of surging, beautifully controlled waves that carried the music forward with compelling urgency. Soprano Christine Brewer, who joined the orchestra for the "Liebestod," is an artist for whose voice I have not acquired a taste, but there was an undeniable clarity and stateliness in her delivery.

And her singing in the Wagner was in any case more persuasive than her ungainly contributions to David Carlson's song cycle "The Promise

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of Time," commissioned for the orchestra as part of the Magnum Opus commissioning project.

Carlson's three songs, set to poems by Susan Kinsolving, are almost direct lifts from Romantic forebears: respectively, Wagner, Verdi (the "Dies Irae" from the Requiem) and Richard Strauss (especially the "Four Last Songs"). Carlson has worked a similar vein in the past with more persuasive results; here, the writing is rhythmically foursquare and harmonically tame.

Neale began the evening with a lovely and generous gesture, turning over the podium to the up-and-coming young conductor Edward "Teddy" Abrams, an alumnus of the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra now connected with the New World Symphony. He led an exuberant and crisply shaped account of Barber's Second Essay for Orchestra.

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