



## MARIN'S SHADOWY WORLD PREMIERE

### On a Tragic Fairy Tale, Reconceived

By Paul Hertelendy

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**SAN RAFAEL**---I like the spirit of the Marin Symphony---not one of the oldest or biggest or wealthiest in the San Francisco area, by any means. But one which presents world premieres while garnering rousing ovations for its Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4. Which is about as diverse and contrasting as you can get.

Its latest such evening featured an unpredictable new work by a 35-year-old composer from Israel and New York. Avner Dorman set out to write something inspired by a tragic Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, but the music took surprise turns in other directions. He was thus forced to add the first word to his baffling title, “(not) The Shadow,” (sic) for the premiere opus unveiled at the Marin Symphony Nov. 14 and 16.

Dorman is a colorist who weaves some of the Middle East into his music; his musical language is traditional enough not to offend any one. He evokes many moods and scenelets, drawing on the “Shadow” tale of the Learned Man, his sinister Shadow figure, and the depressing way they change roles in the text, with the doomed Learned Man ultimately “turned against himself,” as Dorman told his audience.

It's an episodic, multi-faceted 19-minute musical opus with exuberant and effusive moments by way of bookends, a well-constructed *pièce d'occasion*. There are strong conflicts sounded by brass and giant tamtam, with the orchestra crying out over the tragedy at hand. These are offset against moments of extreme tranquility and some delicious dissonant flutes. Minimalism recurs, with on-going ostinatos by the piano (running the danger of overdone piano accompaniment, potentially a crutch in place of orchestral writing). The large percussion section brings on a more violent minimalism. A drum conveys a Middle-Eastern flavor, just before a rapid-fire coda and, yes, the inevitable “blows of fate.”

Overall, it's an effective, colorful piece, once again demonstrating that compositions often have a mind of their own, overruling or reshaping the composer's ideas---a refreshing instance of the consciousness and imagination trumping rational sequences in the mind.

Music Director Alasdair Neale cleverly programmed Tchaikovsky's Fourth on the same program, bringing on more blows of fate from the brass---tragic at the opening, and mollified at the end. It got a standing ovation that could only be described as huge and deserved. The finale features the Russian folk tune “The Birch Tree” quotation, five descending notes stepwise.

This music clearly runs hot in Neale's blood, and he led it with passion from memory, as if he were from Russia, not England. The bassoon solos were nicely rendered by Carla Wilson.

The concert centerpiece was inoffensive, the tidy, neoclassical Viola Concerto by Neale's countryman William Walton. Playing from memory, soloist Jenny Douglass was drowned out by the orchestra much of the time---one of Neale's few miscalculation on this particular evening. But she worked through the lengthy part of this neatly pleasing, coming into her own in the finale with the *arioso*, and a sultry and seductive conclusion. Douglass is a regular member of the ensemble, and at the end there was a three-way shower of affection between players, conductor, and Douglass.

The Tuesday-night attendance at the 2,000-seat Marin Center was disappointing---less than half a house. Sunday nights fortunately do much better.

Now in his 10<sup>th</sup> year here, Neale is a Marin institution by now. He leads a disciplined group notable for its fine-spun violin sound. Lest you think there is a distinctive sound in any of the Bay Area's many orchestras (once you look past the three elites of symphony, ballet and opera in San Francisco), note that many of the musicians belong to the cloud formations of the “Freeway Philharmonic,” that plucky band of commuting freelancers playing five sets in Marin, some in Oakland, a few more as far away as San Jose, and so forth, working to produce a viable annual income. Given the proximity, and given all the cities intent on their own orchestra, the Philharmonic

freelancers stand to benefit---provided that their leg power, bow arms, and auto pistons don't give out first.

**MORE MARIN PREMIERES---At the season finale May 1 and 3, the Marin Symphony will play yet another premiere, Ranjbaran's "Mithra."**

**Marin Symphony, under Music Director Alasdair Neale at the Marin Center, San Rafael, Nov. 14 and 16. For info: (415) 479-8110, or go [online](#).**

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Paul Hertelendy has been covering the dance and modern-music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area with relish -- and a certain amount of salsa -- for years.

These critiques appearing weekly (or sometimes semi-weekly, but never weakly) will focus on dance and new musical creativity in performance, with forays into books (by authors of the region), theater and recordings by local artists as well.

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