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Main Feature Story - Friday, January 19, 2007

Feature: The baton's in his hand

The Marin Symphony maestro discusses his first conducting gig at 14 and his long-held belief that he's 'gotta sing!'

by **Jill Kramer**

A profile of Gustav Mahler hangs on the wall of Alasdair Neale's dining room, drawn by an artist who was in the audience for what Neale considers the highlight of his career. It was the night when, as music director of the San Francisco Youth Orchestra, he led the young musicians in a performance of Mahler's *2nd Symphony* that brought down the house. It was also his farewell concert as director of that group. He left that post to take command of the Marin Symphony, where he is now in his sixth season.

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At 44, Neale can expect many more peak musical experiences. He also directs the Sun Valley Summer Symphony and guest conducts with orchestras across the United States and abroad. He's the principal guest conductor of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and the New World Symphony in Miami. During the 12 years he led the San Francisco Youth Orchestra, he was also associate conductor of the San Francisco Symphony.

I met with Neale at his elegantly furnished two-story San Francisco townhouse the day before he and his partner were to leave on a three-week round-the-world vacation. He was looking forward to seeing his parents in Edinburgh and his brother in London, then going on to Bangkok, where the couple visits every two years or so. On a previous trip, they brought back yards and yards of luscious Thai silk they had made into drapes, red in the living room and copper in Neale's office. A dramatic cherry-wood spiral staircase leads from the upstairs living area down to the office and the music room, where Neale keeps his piano. The walls are lined with shelves full of bound music scores, books and CDs. A closet somewhere down there holds his flute and cello, which he regrets he hasn't had time to play in years. Neale is sandy-haired with a ruddy complexion and speaks with just a trace of an unidentifiable European accent.

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What's your style of conducting? Do you get dramatic? Or are you more reserved?

It's hard to be objective. If the music is dramatic, I try to be dramatic, and if it's reserved I try to be reserved. I try to mirror whatever psychological state is happening in the music.

Did you happen to see that story in the Sunday New York Times about the scientist researching audience responses? His theory is that our brains respond differently to live music than to recorded music because we react to the visual cues of the conductor.

I haven't read it yet, but it piques my interest. It's an interesting theory. You know, you have tremendously kinetic conductors like

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Michael Tilson Thomas or Leonard Bernstein, and then you have somebody like James Levine, who's very minimalist, particularly these days. He sits on a chair when he conducts and makes very controlled and small-scale movements. And yet the results are tremendous. So I'm not sure there's a magic formula. Ultimately, I think the whole art of conducting is pretty much inexplicable. I've read various articles and comments and at the end of the day, I have no idea what makes good conducting work.

How do you learn it?

Mostly by experience. It's sort of like driving a car. You can read all the instruction manuals on what to do, but ultimately you've got to get behind the wheel. You see how the gas pedal feels, how the brake feels, how the steering wheel feels. And hopefully not by crashing the car, but by making mistakes you learn how to drive it. But that takes a long time, I think. My teacher always said it takes as long to develop a good conducting technique as it does an instrumental technique—which is to say, you know, 15 years. I still find I'm learning, all the time. There are times when I think I'm doing something wrong and I have to figure out, what can I do to make this sound better. I do find that, as I get more experience, I am definitely learning from that. But we're lucky as conductors, in that we have a pretty long shelf life. I think as you start getting into your 50s you start coming into your prime.

When was your first conducting experience?

Very, very young. I was very lucky. It was in Edinburgh. The first time I was in front of a group of players I was 14.

My goodness! How did that happen?

I was playing in a youth orchestra that essentially ran itself. I had already started composing when I was 11. I'd studied orchestration and I was studying scores, not with a view to conducting, just because they interested me. I'd take scores out of the library and buy an LP and listen to them and follow along. And the people in the orchestra knew that and I guess they needed somebody to take a little woodwind rehearsal one day and they asked me. And that's how it all started. Then they asked me to take a string rehearsal, and then they asked me to be assistant conductor and then the conductor left. And by the time I was 16, a junior in high school, I had my own orchestra.

Wow.

So I was lucky to have that initial experience. Because starting to conduct is almost a Catch-22 situation. Nobody wants to put you in front of an orchestra if you have no experience, and the only way to get experience is to be in front of an orchestra. So somehow or other you have to overcome that. Other people will band together a group of their friends and ask them to do them a favor and play a concert. But I was lucky in that I just sort of fell into it.

Tell me about your background. You were born in Edinburgh?

I was actually born in London but my family moved to Edinburgh when I was 10, so I went to high school there. I played flute and then the cello. And then I did my undergraduate at Cambridge and studied music there. And I got a ton of conducting experience on the side. Because it's an academic major, you don't get credit for conducting. But there was a lot of music-making that went on there.

What did your parents do? They're both musically inclined. My mom actually taught music in the grade-school system. My father's a scientist, a research chemist. But they both sang in a local amateur chorus. My mom would always have the classical music channel on the radio in the house, so I grew up with classical music as part of the furniture.

Do you remember what pieces you heard?

I remember going to my first orchestra concert, when I was 9. It was [Antonin] Dvorak's *New World Symphony*. I remember being so impressed by the English horn solo in the second movement because I thought I would be so nervous if I had to play that! And my mother would sometimes play Chopin's nocturnes and waltzes on the piano in the next room as [my younger brother and I] were



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going to sleep.

So you must have known most of your life that music was going to be your career.

Actually, no. Music was always central to my life, but I never planned it to be my career until later. There was a moment when I suddenly realized, this is going to be my life, and it was joining the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain when I was 14 or 15, I think. The very first rehearsal, we were rehearsing Stravinsky's *Firebird* and there's a moment about 10 minutes into the piece—everything's been pretty soft and there's a moment when the music dies away to nothing and then there's this enormous, sudden crash from the full orchestra—it's the "Infernal Dance of King Kashchei"—and that sound was like a bolt of lightning. It was the most exciting thing I had ever heard in my life. I almost jumped out of my chair, even though I knew it was coming. But I had never before had the experience of being in the middle of such a sound. I was playing flute, so I was right in the middle of the orchestra, surrounded by all these instruments. And I realized, oh, my goodness, this is what I have to do. This is going to be my life. But the decision to be a conductor was much more gradual. I just kept on doing it and then, midway through my senior year I had to decide, what am I doing next? And I thought, well, I guess I should probably apply to conducting school. I know it sounds very California, but I just sort of go with the flow. And it's worked pretty well, so far.

What brought you to the States?

A specific teacher, Otto-Werner Mueller. He, at the time, was teaching at Yale. I went there on the recommendation of a friend from Cambridge who's a cellist and who had gone to Yale to study and he wrote to me and said, this is a great conducting teacher, you need to audition for him. So I got on a plane to go to New Haven in 1983. And I had no intention of staying. I figured I'd do a couple of years and just go back to Europe. But it wasn't long before I really actually liked living in this country. I liked the people, I liked the attitude and I could imagine staying longer. And I gradually realized that there also were a lot more opportunities here. I've never pursued a career in Europe, but my impression at the time was that it was sort of hard to get jobs over there. But I was lucky. I stayed at Yale for three years and immediately after that I was able to get a job on the faculty at Yale, teaching conducting and being music director of the Yale Symphony Orchestra, which had a lot of incredibly talented players. So I really could develop my repertoire over the course of the three years that I was with them. I took them on tour and did some really great pieces, and it just got me really behind the wheel. And then in 1989 I got a call from San Francisco, saying, we're having assistant conductor auditions, are you interested?

They sought you out!

They had gotten my name through the grapevine, I can't remember how. And I thought, sure! I'd heard San Francisco's a beautiful city. I had no idea how beautiful it was until I got here. I remember coming from the airport and getting the first view of downtown. And I looked and thought, Oh! Now I *really* want this job! And for the next 12 years, I was the associate conductor with the San Francisco Symphony, and with the Youth Orchestra.

You know, you barely have any accent.

That's what most people say, yeah. I have a pretty good ear for mimicking and I'm sure that's part of it.

I'm sure you do!

But of course when I go over to Britain people meeting me for the first time absolutely assume I'm an American.

Do you sing at all?

Yes! I love singing and singers, and working with choruses. When I was at Yale, my secondary study was in voice. I had a church choir job. And I sometimes think of that as the road not traveled—what if? Because I really enjoy singing and developing my voice. Actually I sing a lot when I'm rehearsing. If I can, I'll sing the phrase the way I want it, rather than dissect it and describe it—"I want

you to do this with this note" and so on.

It seems that singing would be more effective.

I like to think that it is. Because then they can sense the inflection in my voice, where I want the phrase to dip a little bit, or where I want the vibrato to intensify. I just find it takes out one layer and makes it one level more immediate. But I can't help singing—there it is. Gotta sing!

Do you sing for fun?

Not really, no. Because one really would have to practice and keep the voice in shape, and I just really don't have time to do that any more.

Do you still play?

No! Not at all. Again, not enough hours in the day. My flute is downstairs somewhere in the closet. It hasn't seen the light of day for many years. But if I were to take it out and try to play, it would be too depressing because you lose the strength of the muscles in the lips. It's like being an athlete. If you're a marathon runner and you haven't run a marathon in five or six years, you can't just pick up and run 26 miles. Your muscles won't be able to do it. On the other hand, your fingers still have motor memory. Because sometimes when I'm studying, I'll finger something either on the cello or on the flute. For instance, when I'm studying a cello part and I want [the cello section of the orchestra to produce] the particular color of one string versus another string, I'll try to figure out the fingering [*moving his left hand fingers across his chest, as if on the neck of a cello*] to propose to the section. I don't usually need to do that because they're professionals, they know how to do that. But if I conceive something as practical, I can say, here's a good place to go over to the A string. But I do find you remember that because you've gone through that pattern so many times. I haven't played cello since I was in college.

And you don't miss it?

Yes! I miss it enormously. I miss playing in an orchestra. I miss making sound, I guess. But, you know, you can't do everything. And I'm perfectly happy doing what I'm doing. But there's a different kind of sensation that comes from actually drawing a bow across a string, or blowing into a flute. And that's something I've just had to give up.

Tell me about the upcoming Marin Symphony concert January 28 and 30.

There are three pieces. The first one is a world premiere. It's part of this Magnum Opus commissioning project we're involved in, which is funded by a very generous philanthropist named Kathryn Gould. She put together the idea of getting three orchestras [the Marin, Oakland and Santa Rosa symphonies] to commission a series of composers as a consortium. All three orchestras will do the same piece, so you guarantee at the very least three performances of any of the pieces chosen. So the piece I'm doing this month will be done either this season or the next season by both Oakland and Santa Rosa. It's a means of insuring that a piece gets more than one hearing. Because a lot of pieces are performed once and then put on a shelf. This piece is by a Latvian composer named Peteris Vasks, called *Sala*, which is an elegy. I've been studying it and it's very beautiful and solemn.

What else is on the program?

Mozart's *Haffner Symphony No. 35*. And then something I'm very much looking forward to, Rachmaninoff's *3rd Piano Concerto* with this fantastic young soloist, Orion Weiss. One of the things I'm lucky to be able to do in Marin is draw on the experience that I have working with other orchestras, whether it's the San Francisco Symphony or guest conducting or in Sun Valley, where I work a lot with soloists and I'm able to bring them to Marin. This young man is exceptionally talented. I was just completely bowled over by his playing and I think he's going to bring down the house with the Rachmaninoff *3rd*, which is the biggest challenge in the repertoire.

What are you looking forward to for next season?

We haven't yet announced the season, but we are going to be doing a collaboration with the Mill Valley Film Festival, and one of the soloists is going to be Elizabeth Pitcairn, who is the owner of the famous "red violin" [the Stradivarius whose history inspired the 1999 movie, *The Red Violin*], which she will be playing on our stage.

Is there really a difference in the sound that violin produces?

Well, it's a Stradivarius. How it compares to other Strads, I don't know, but it's certainly got a great story behind it.

Is there a moment that stands out for you as the highlight of your career so far?

Yes. It would be the performance that I did in May of 2001 with the Youth Orchestra, of Mahler's *2nd Symphony*. Because of the incredible emotional impact it had. It's one of my favorites and it had been a dream of mine to conduct it ever since I heard it and studied it for the first time when I was 13. But to do it with a youth orchestra is unheard of. Because it's so difficult.

How old are the kids in the Youth Orchestra?

Anywhere from 12 to 20. So that's young to be doing a piece like that. This youth orchestra is tops, but even for them, to do Mahler 2 is incredibly ambitious. And they pulled it off in a way that I just could not have imagined. It was electrifying. It was the 20th anniversary concert, and it was my last subscription concert as music director. The San Francisco Symphony chorus was there and the house was packed to the gills. The orchestra played indescribably wonderfully, and the ovation that followed was just like a tidal wave and it just never ended. It was tremendously powerful and rewarding. It was an experience that the kids will carry for the rest of their lives as well.

The Marin Symphony performs one Sunday and Tuesday evening each month through May 1. The next concert is Sunday, January 28. For information call 415/479-8100 or log on to www.marinsymphony.org.

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