

Review



**SYMPHONY
REVIEW**

Marin Symphony

Rebecca Evans

Alasdair Neale

April 29, 2007



Rebecca Evans

The Essence of Strauss

By Michael Zwiebach

The end of the concert season always brings a spate of big, symphonic showpieces, as orchestras go into summer with a bang (and goose their audiences into subscriptions for next year). The Marin Symphony chose Strauss' symphonic poem *Ein Heldenleben* (A Hero's Life, Op. 40) as its grand finale, and you don't get much showier than that. The score has more audition excerpts per square inch than almost any piece in the repertory, and it packs a wallop. Under Music Director Alasdair Neale, the orchestra played exceptionally well in Sunday night's concert at the Marin Veterans' Memorial Auditorium in San Rafael. This was a performance any regional orchestra would be proud to own.

The concert turned out to be a kind of distillation of Strauss' career. It began with an early work, the *Wind Serenade in E-flat Major*, Op. 7 (1882). The composer, at 18 years old, was still influenced by his father's musical tastes, and the piece looks straight back to Mozart, as was becoming fashionable in late-19th-century Europe. It's pleasant and melodious music.

After dispatching this hors d'oeuvre gracefully, the orchestra brought on soprano Rebecca Evans to sing Strauss' last completed pieces, the *Four Last Songs* (1948). These sublime masterworks are the furthest thing from Strauss' showman manner, and their subject matter is exactly what we expect from a composer at the end of his career and life. There is no fear in them — they glow with warmth and contentment.

But the songs do require virtuosity from the singer handling their long lines. Evans, who has established a major career here to go with her successes in Europe, was a disappointing soloist. Her



Alasdair Neale



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voice is not entirely suited to the pieces. It's clearer and more effective in the upper registers, which is why she often sings the –ina and –etta roles in opera. (Her San Francisco debut was as Adina in Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*.) Kirsten Flagstad sang the *Four Last Songs* at their premiere. They lie heavily in the middle register and require climaxes and sustained notes that seem cruel to inflict on lighter, higher voices.

Singing within herself, rather than trying to channel Jessye Norman, Evans managed reasonably. She phrased expertly and took care of her enunciation. She floated beautiful pianissimos and was infused with the meaning and spirit of the songs. But she also found herself out of breath at the ends of some lines and, to conserve air, needed to back off some forte dynamics. These songs contain few passages where her voice could bloom and show its real qualities. Often, the sound seemed distant, and Evans was swamped by an orchestra that was held in check by Neale.

Unexpected Strengths

The orchestra's string section played beautifully in the songs, surprising this first-time listener with their warmth and presence. But then, these professionals staff many of the orchestras in the Bay Area. With Neale at the helm, they delivered high-gloss pianissimos and showed strength and unanimity in louder passages.

By the second half of the concert, the audience was ready for the tumult of *Heldenleben*. Completed in 1898, it is the crowning work of Strauss' series of symphonic poems, and quotes from nearly all of them. It has a measure of bombast but at the same time is the composer's greatest achievement in the genre. It possesses the logic and power of a symphony, which is what Strauss had in mind. Grounded in the key of E-flat, it is overtly linked to Beethoven's E-flat major symphony, the "Eroica."

The orchestra was primed for the main event and it tore into the work's first paragraph with all the vigor at its command. The horns blazed, the strings shouted out the opening theme, the counterpoint was made audible and well-balanced. Throughout the performance the sizzling energy never cooled, although the details weren't all as perfectly placed as at the opening. The winds in the cacophonous second section (the critics) were too careful and pallid, needing more individuality.

The brass sound lacked the fat, warm-toned, cohesive sound found in the best ensembles, but the players were on their marks,

handling the technical difficulties with aplomb. In the battle section, they got a bit carried away, and balances could have been better. Kurt Patzner, playing the insane bass trombone part, was superb in this section, with nary a false accent that I could hear. Jeremy Constant's violin solos, evoking the composer's wife, Pauline, were nicely characterized and multifaceted.

Neale's reading didn't reveal much new in the piece, though the big tunes were phrased appropriately. Some of the transitions were bland, some tempos a bit too rigid. His energy was infectious, however. The orchestra played its heart out for him, and the audience lapped it up.

In honor of the retirement of flutist Jeanie Chandler, after 38 years with the orchestra, she and harpist Dan Levitan played the second movement of Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp, in a solid performance.

(Michael Zwiebach holds a Ph.D. in music history from UC Berkeley.)

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