

REVIEW

Marin Symphony season wraps with robust Strauss program

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic
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The last time soprano Rebecca Evans sang with the Marin Symphony under conductor Alasdair Neale, in 2004, she gave a memorable display of improvisatory freedom in music of Rossini. She returned to the Marin Veterans' Memorial Auditorium in San Rafael on Tuesday to exhibit the very different -- but equally exciting -- virtues of nobility and tenderness.

Her vehicle on this occasion was the "Four Last Songs," Richard Strauss' ad hoc collection of luminous, autumnal settings, and she sang them with a light but lustrous touch. Her performance stood as the centerpiece in an all-Strauss program that brought the orchestra's season to a vivacious, emotionally responsive close.

Evans, who is due back at the San Francisco Opera in October to sing Pamina in Mozart's "Magic Flute," boasts a wonderful combination of clarity and tonal heft, which makes her a sterling Strauss interpreter (though her German diction could stand some sharpening). And in these beautiful stretches of clear-eyed retrospection -- a counterpart to the similarly moonlit final scene of the opera "Capriccio" -- Evans sang with a knowing authority that probed deep beneath the surface of the music.

She caressed the phrases of the opening "Frühling" ("Spring"), rising with ardent precision to the cresting high notes, then spun out a gorgeous line in the ensuing "September." Concertmaster Jeremy Constant offered splendid counterpoint in the billowing violin solo of "Beim Schlafengehen" ("Going to Sleep").

To encompass nearly the entire span of Strauss' compositional career, Neale preceded the "Four Last Songs" with the youthful Serenade for Winds, written when Strauss was a terrifyingly precocious youth of 17.

It has the implacable correctness of an exercise composition by a model student, but it's shot through with sudden bolts of ingenuity -- both formal and harmonic -- and it luxuriates in the kind of inventive facility that marked Strauss' entire career. Neale led a performance that emphasized the depth of instrumental color, sometimes at the expense of ease of movement; the results were solid and a bit ungainly.

After intermission came "Ein Heldenleben" ("A Hero's Life"), which is also a sort of summation of the

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composer's career, though this one comes at the halfway point. With its blustery self-regard -- the hero of the title is Strauss himself, depicted as a giant among men and artists -- and its thick orchestral writing, this is one of the most difficult to love of all the Strauss tone poems.

But Neale and the orchestra, once past an unsteady opening, made a persuasive case for it, tapping the music's strident gallop for rhythmic momentum and turning the composer's endless orchestral virtuosity to fine effect.

Constant shone once again in the prominent violin solos representing the composer's wife, Pauline, his playing by turns brisk and soulful, and the scene depicting the hero triumphing over his foes (i.e. music critics) made a theatrical clash. Best of all were the final pages, infused with a sense of serenity and ripeness that brought the evening -- and the season -- to a powerful conclusion.

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