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Alasdair Neale finds a comfortable fit as New World's most regular podium guest (http://southfloridaclassicalreview.com/2009/02/alasdair-neale-finds-a-comfortable-fit-as-new-worlds-most-regular-podium-guest/)

By Lawrence A. Johnson

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Alasdair Neale has been such a familiar presence for so long as principal guest conductor of the New World Symphony that he's one of those musicians in danger of being taken for granted. Perhaps his low-key, nice-guy persona has something to do with it—along with the long shadow cast by Michael Tilson Thomas, the New World's celebrated artistic director.

Yet Neale has led some memorable New World evenings himself, including richly eloquent accounts of both Elgar symphonies, a deeply felt reading of John Corigliano's Symphony No. 1 and a rafter-raising performance of John Adams' *Harmonielehre.*

The Scottish conductor will be on the podium again this weekend for one of his favorite if most grueling assignments, leading the New World's annual Concerto Showcase programs Friday and Saturday night at the Lincoln Theatre.

Over two evenings, seven members of the New World Symphony will be in the spotlight in separate concertos, which means a lot of hard rehearsal work in a short time, not just for the soloists but for their orchestral colleagues and Neale as well.

"I enjoy the week," said Neale, relaxing in the New World's green room after a rehearsal of Copland and Korngold earlier this season. "It's always tough for the orchestra. And when I'm doing seven concertos in two days I have to remember seven people's interpretations."

"But as hard as it is, it's just great to have a chance to showcase the talent of these extraordinary musicians. And they're so supportive of one another."

The judging that determines who gets to perform a concerto in these programs is "the hardest thing I have to do all year," says the conductor. "As I'm sure you've noticed, the level of the orchestra has grown over the years. The standard now is just mind boggling. We could probably fill four programs with good people. But we have to narrow it down to two."

With the consistent artistry of the individual musicians, the annual Concerto Showcase programs have served up some remarkable performances over the years. In 2005, two different performances wound up among the top ten events of the year: Dwight Parry's richly eloquent account of the Strauss Oboe Concerto and a blazing performance of Bartok's Violin Concerto No, 2 by Dan Carlson (The men have gone on to principal and associate principal posts in the San Diego Symphony and San Francisco Symphony, respectively.)

Since taking on the role of the New World's principal guest conductor in 2001, Neale says his duties have been "essentially the same," the most crucial of which takes place during the initial "boot camp" week with new fellows and preparingfor the season's preview events. "I conduct the orchestra more than anybody else except Michael, and one of my roles is to establish a standard and prepare them so that when Michael walks in they're already at a certain level."

Though Neale and artistic director Tilson Thomas communicate closely it's an odd relationship. "We're like ships that pass in the night," says Neale. "We're never here at the same time."

The annual rotating roster—a third of the orchestra is new every year—makes his position a challenge, but Neale has found that over his eight years with the New World the marked increase in the standard of players has helped. "The thing is, it's a constantly shifting cast of characters," says Neale. "But I think more and more people are aware of [the New World], and that in no small way accounts for the increasing level. It's always been very good but I noticed that in the last eight years, each year it gets better and better and better." He cites the exciting performance of Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*, which was played at last fall's preview concerts mere weeks into the season. "That is not an easy piece and they played the hell out of it."

Neale said he's struck every year by how quickly the group of motley individuals takes shape and comes together as a unified symphonic ensemble. "When they walk in the door and you have such a standard, the cohesion happens immediately," says Neale. "I never have to reinvent the wheel every year, even though there are a lot of new people. The culture has already been created here."

Neale worked with MTT previously for the second half of his tenure as associate conductor of the San Francisco Symphony, which began with six years under the previous music director, Herbert Blomstedt. "Talk about a hundred and eighty degrees! I don't think you could name two more different conductors or personalities."

(http://southfloridaclassicalreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/nealeconducting.jpg)

While Neale enjoyes a regular profile with the New World. the San Francisco resident keeps busy with his other posts, leading the Marin Symphony in California and the Sun Valley Summer Symphony in Idaho, as well as a post he maintains with the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

"The hardest thing is to remember names and faces with four different orchestras," he says. "But it's not as crazy as you would expect-basically it's a month stretch in each place. It's not quite as nomadic a life—nothing like a soloist. I just don't know how they manage to live their lives when they're constantly on the road."

Neale was born in England, and his family moved to Scotland when he was ten. "In terms of blood, I'm three-quarters Scottish and one-quarter English, so I would say I'm British. Even though I'm also an American citizen and have lived in the States since 1983." Which likely accounts for no trace of an English or Scottish accent. "When I go back to England people immediately assume I'm American, They have absolutely no idea I was born there."

Neale's mother was a grade-school music teacher and

amateur pianist, and, in the time-honored British tradition, both parents sang in amateur choruses. “Music was always a part of the furniture growing up,” he says. “We always has the classical music station on and I grew up surrounded by those sounds.”

Playing flute in middle school, Neale joined a youth orchestra called the Caritas String Orchestra at age 13, where the conductor was a young Donald Runnicles, later to be music director of San Francisco Opera. “All these years after, we’re both in San Francisco working across the street from each other,” he laughs. ”I suppose it was in the cards.”

In Runnicles’ absence one day, young Alasdair was asked to lead the youth orchestra wind rehearsal in—of all things—Nielsen’s Symphony No. 1. “That was quite intimidating. Then they asked me to do string rehearsals. Then Donald left one day and hat was my first conducting job at age 14.”

More experience came as a player with his term in the National Youth Orchestra of Britain, and by age 16 Neale had his own small orchestra. “I was really quite lucky,” he recalls. “You can read all the books you want on conducting but it really is like driving a car—you have to get behind the wheel and learn from your mistakes.”

Such as? “Probably inefficient use of rehearsal time. And also just developing a sense of confidence in front of an orchestra so you can put your ideas across with some degree of authority.”

At Cambridge, Neale had many invitations to conduct, but was still undecided on a future course, and considered becoming a music teacher. His academic supervisor firmly told him: “You shouldn’t do that. You need to become a conductor.”

Neale came to the U.S. where he had his most influential musical training under the fearsome Otto-Werner Mueller at Yale. “He looked like Frankenstein without the bolts,” Neale recalls. “He was six foot four and very Teutonic.”

Intimidating though Mueller was personally, his teaching formed the foundation for Neale’s musical career. “He was intellectually rigorous and taught a very clear, coherent technique,” he says. “He was tough as nails but it made me realize what it really meant to study a score thoroughly from the inside out.”

After graduation he spent three years teaching at Yale before getting a call to interview for the associate conductor opening at the San Francisco Symphony, which he took as lark for a free trip to the West Coast. “Coming out from the airport, I remember seeing the skyline for the first time, and I thought, “Oh, I *really* want this job. I fell in love with the city immediately.”

Neale lives in the city’s marina area, having recently married his long-term partner. ”Let’s hope it sticks-not the relationship, I mean the marriage—with Proposition 8 working its way through the courts.”

Among Neale’s fondest memories over his eight years with the New World is the aforementioned season-closing performance of John Adams’ *Harmonielehre,* which, he believed, captured the orchestra’s unique blend of qualities: technical gleam, unjaded enthusiasm and openness to new music.

”Even in this country there’s always a bunch of people sitting there thinking, ‘I should be playing the Mendelssohn concerto instead of this stuff,’” he says. “But every last player in the orchestra really got this Adams piece. I have to tell you that the mixture of technical prowess and energy was truly incredible.”

Alasdair Neale conducts the New World Symphony and soloists in Ravel’s *Tzigane,* Bartók’s Violin Concerto No. 2, Schumann’s Cello Concerto and Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto on Friday night. Saturday’s program includes Lutoslawski’s Piano Concerto, Wieniawski’s Violin Concerto No. 1 and Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto. Both concerts begin at 7:30 p.m. at the Lincoln Theatre, Miami Beach. $28-$78. 305-673-3330; www.nws.edu (http://www.nws.edu/) .

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