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## Neale saves the day for ill conductor

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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Who says the high drama of last-minute cast changes has to be restricted to the world of the theater?

When conductor Carlos Kalmar bowed out of his San Francisco Symphony debut this week with a bad case of the flu, the company turned on a dime. In came former Associate Conductor Alasdair Neale -- who was already busy preparing next week's program with his own Marin Symphony -- to lead a program of unusual fare.

William Schuman's "A Song of Orpheus," a planned showpiece for principal cellist Michael Grebanier, obviously couldn't be changed, and Neale reportedly worked it up from scratch in two days' time. The rest of the program was tweaked into more familiar territory, with Dvorák's Seventh Symphony replacing the more rarely heard Sixth.

But on Wednesday night in Davies Symphony Hall, you would have had to listen awfully hard to detect anything out of the ordinary. Sure, there were a few passing moments of awkward coordination here and there, but for the most part, Neale and the orchestra slid right into the groove they had enjoyed together for so many years.

The result was an evening of invigorating and often beautiful music making, marked by the sort of bluff heartiness that has always been Neale's trademark as a conductor. That the whole thing was cooked up on the fly only made it more impressive.

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Grebanier shone in Schuman's 1962 fantasy, which he introduced to the Symphony repertoire back in 1986. It's a freewheeling treatment of a vocal setting from Shakespeare's "Henry VIII," beginning with a straightforward rendition of the song melody and then proceeding through a series of tender and virtuosic reinterpretations, punctuated by two cadenzas.

Schuman insists that the piece is not strictly a set of variations, and indeed the contours of the original melody don't play much of a role as the piece unfolds. But the distinctively lyrical, ruminative mood of the song -- and of the Shakespearean text, with its tribute to the power of music -- continues to infuse things.

Grebanier caught that mood most potently in the opening melody, done with a combination of deep-toned grace and rhetorical deliberateness -- you could hear the theme unfolding note by note, syllable by syllable, in a firm but gentle cascade.

The rest of the piece was shot through with delicate colors and brisk rhythmic byplay, marred only by some intonation problems in the upper range. In a piece celebrating musical eloquence, that quality came through most vividly.

The transparency of Schuman's orchestral writing served as a striking contrast to Dvorák's meatier and more dark-hued textures. The "Carnival" Overture, a substitution for Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 1, began the evening on a bright, crisp note; the dialogue between associate concertmaster Nadya Tichman and English hornist Adam Dinitz was particularly evocative.

Even better was the Seventh Symphony, marked by lustrous woodwind textures -- especially in the opening of the slow movement -- and boisterous but well-modulated rhythms.

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San Francisco Symphony: The subscription program repeats at 8 p.m. today in Davies Symphony Hall. Tickets: \$25-\$110. Call (415) 864-6000 or go to [www.sfsymphony.org](http://www.sfsymphony.org).

*E-mail Joshua Kosman at [jkosman@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jkosman@sfchronicle.com).*

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