

STAR-TELEGRAM
FORT WORTH SYMPHONY
OCTOBER 28, 2006

By Matthew Erikson

Guest conductor provides nice variation on theme

FORT WORTH -- The Dallas Symphony Orchestra may have a monopoly these days on guest conductors as it carries on its search for a new music director. But Friday evening at Bass Hall, guest conductor Alasdair Neale led the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra in a program of Vaughan Williams, Brahms and John Corigliano. The orchestra responded beautifully.

More critically, in Brahms' Second Symphony, Neale took more time to breathe between phrases. ... And from a listener's point of view (and one would gather, a player's too), it was nice to follow a contrasting style.

Guitarist Jason Vieaux shared some of the evening's spotlight in Corigliano's 1993 composition *Troubadours*.

Brilliantly orchestrated, the guitar concerto conjures up a series of atmospheres: ghostly textures in the beginning that function as a sort of time warp to the modal harmonies and medieval instrumentation of the piece's core. Vieaux nimbly mixed virtuosity with delicate touches in his cadenza.

The program's medieval theme began with Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. It was a fine showcase for the FWSO's stellar strings. Neale expertly steered the antiphonal ebb and flow. Violist Laura Bruton and concertmaster Michael Shih performed lovely solos.

SEATTLE TIMES

SEATTLE SYMPHONY DECEMBER 17, 2005

By Melinda Bargreen

Guest conductor packs a punch

Handel's masterpiece, the "Messiah," is a veritable chameleon among oratorios. The composer himself changed it repeatedly over the course of many performances, altering arias, assigning them to different vocal categories, and adding and omitting various pieces of the music.

The performers, too, can change "Messiah" from a stately, distant affair to something arrestingly dramatic. Happily, the latter is the case with the Seattle Symphony's current "Messiah" production, where a cast of outstanding soloists joins a conductor with some very decided ideas about how the oratorio should go.

Thursday night, Benaroya Hall, Seattle

The conductor is Alasdair Neale, whose relatively modest posts (for example, music director of the Marin Symphony in San Rafael, Calif., and the Sun Valley Summer Symphony) did not prepare listeners for the impact he made Thursday evening at the helm of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and Chorale.

Purists might not agree with everything Neale did, but the performance assuredly wasn't boring. He gave punchy, immediate cues to the chorus, which followed him like a flock of hawks, putting a lot of space between the notes and giving Neale all the dynamic contrasts he asked for (and there were lots of them).

This is a conductor with a real sense of drama. He directed the strings in some very stylish and highly accented phrasing and occasionally in some rhythmic exaggerations (notably in "Worthy Is the Lamb").

Intermittent applause proved awkward in this fast-paced production. There was, however, much to applaud: the stellar performance of the orchestra (Rick Pressley's trumpet solos have never been better) and the chorus (which did not go astray), and above all, the four vocal soloists.

Here were thrills galore, in the crystalline purity of Cyndia Sieden's fluent soprano, the surging drama of Brian Asawa's riveting alto solos, the lyrical brilliance of tenor Stanford Olsen and the marvelous drama of bass Jan Opalach. If you love good singing, this "Messiah" is a feast.

OMAHA WORLD-HERALD
OMAHA SYMPHONY
OCTOBER 23, 2004

By Ashley Hassebroek

Savor musical infusions of 'Grandeur'

An entire orchestra collaborating on a strain of repeated chords, each one louder and more intense than the one before.

A full brass section plowing through a stately melody in unison. Strings playing furious tremolos at such speed that the rosin from their bows is flying off their instruments.

Can you hear it?

This is loud, sumptuous music. It's unrelenting and merciless. It echoes through the concert hall with a force and pomposity that leaves audience members with tingling ears and butterflies in their bellies.

It's music the Omaha Symphony is defining this weekend as "Symphonic Grandeur." The orchestra produced these sounds Friday night at the Orpheum Theater during its second MasterWorks program of the year.

The blockbuster program, expertly led by guest conductor and music director candidate Alasdair Neale, included Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 in E minor. Both pieces are grandiose in the energy they require from the orchestra and the conductor, and in the sound they produce.

The Grieg concerto is full of crashing chords, marathon arpeggios that repeatedly trace the entire span of the piano, and adrenaline-evoking rhythms. It features 22-year-old guest pianist Orion Weiss, a student of Emmanuel Ax who received the 2002 Avery Fisher Career Grant.

Weiss played the famous concerto with a lively stage presence that animated the music he was making. The technically astute pianist gave power and drama to the piece through well-placed pedal work and dexterous, responsive fingers. Neale's accompaniment accentuated Weiss' interpretation through well-timed chords and careful phrases that followed the pianist's lead.

Friday night, however, Neale shined brightest during the Tchaikovsky symphony. The work, first performed in St. Petersburg in November 1888, is full of soaring melodies (the most famous one is played by the principal French horn in the second movement) and showy displays of orchestral color and virtuosity. In order for the powerful piece to be effective, however, the conductor must layer and balance the sound very specifically. Neale, who is presently the music director of the Marin Symphony in Marin, Calif., was remarkably specific.

The 42-year-old San Francisco-based conductor had a repertoire of cueing gestures more expansive than most conductors' music libraries, and an attention to detail that was head-spinning to hear. He was swift, decisive, expressive and extremely vigorous on the podium.

When the program was over, when most everyone else was exhausted, Neale seemed to have the energy for a couple more hours of "Symphonic Grandeur."

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE
SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY
NOVEMBER 28, 2003

By Joshua Kosman

Neale works a bit of magic to bring Haydn to center stage Conductor finds right touch to balance program

One of the reasons Haydn's symphonies don't show up more often on orchestral programs is that their size makes them hard to position within a conventional lineup. They're too meaty for a curtain-raiser (except when the program is ostentatiously all meat, like Tuesday's concert by the Berlin Philharmonic), but a little too slender to occupy that weighty final spot usually reserved for something big by Brahms or Tchaikovsky.

There are ways around this, though, and in his deft return to Davies Symphony Hall on Wednesday night to conduct the San Francisco Symphony, Alasdair Neale found one. He simply stared the problem down.

Leading a reduced but sturdy ensemble in Haydn's Symphony No. 103, the "Drumroll," Neale expanded the music's emotional and dramatic range to full headliner status, all without sacrificing anything in the way of intimacy, tenderness or wit. It was an impressive bit of artistic legerdemain.

Admittedly, the "London" Symphonies -- that remarkable final stream of a dozen compositions with which the elderly composer and an enthusiastic British public paid mutual tribute to each other's sophistication -- sit more easily in the spotlight than most. They're broad-scaled, public utterances, written with a robust solidity that gives them a sense of presence.

Still, it took a performance as canny and responsive as Wednesday's to keep the program from feeling unbalanced.

Neale, who spent 12 years as the Symphony's associate conductor and now leads the Marin Symphony, was making his first appearance with his old orchestra since stepping down in 2001. All his familiar virtues were again in evidence, particularly the trademark combination of expressive lyricism and rhythmic crispness.

In the first movement, launched with dry-eyed alertness by timpanist David Herbert, Neale negotiated smoothly between the brash rhythmic byplay of the Allegro opening and the coyly charming second theme, with its waltz-like lilt. Concertmaster Alexander Barantschik's dexterous violin solo crowned the variations of the second movement, and the finale, with its sly wit and slightly herky-jerky phrases, made a captivating conclusion.

The first and less satisfying half of the program was devoted to French music, beginning with composer Marius Constant's 1988 orchestration of the Ravel piano classic "Gaspard de la nuit." This turned out to be one of those cases where a difficult task is successfully dispatched without ever making it clear why it needed to be tackled in the first place.

Through most of the score, Constant finds ingenious ploys to render Ravel's utterly idiomatic keyboard textures in orchestral terms. Swirling celesta-and-harp filigree reflects the glittery piano writing of the original, and there are strokes like the contrabassoon opening of the third movement, "Scarbo," that are pure genius.

But unlike some of the classic piano-to-orchestra transformations -- beginning with Ravel's own treatment of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" and continuing from there -- this version never adds much to its source. Even in Neale's fluid, urgent rendition, the listener kept thinking back fondly to Ravel's piano writing.

Before intermission, Elmar Oliveira joined the orchestra for a tenuous and ill-tuned performance of Saint-Saëns' Third Violin Concerto. Neale drew wonderfully lyrical accompaniment from the orchestra, especially at the beginning of the gently rocking slow movement, but the performance overall never took off.

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY
NOVEMBER 2, 2002

By Sarah Bryan Miller

Last-Minute Conductor Provides First-Rate Results

Once again the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra had to call on a last-minute substitute conductor. And once again, the substitute did well by them.

Last time, it was American conductor David Robertson taking over for an ailing Hans Vonk at Carnegie Hall last February. This week, it was British conductor Alasdair Neale stepping in for Edo de Waart, stuck in Northern Europe because of the horrendous weather last weekend that shut down transportation there. Neale, blond and affable, is music director of California's Marin Symphony and the Sun Valley (Idaho) Summer Symphony. He leads with big, angular gestures and an air of authority. And he certainly seems comfortable with Beethoven, the composer of all three of this week's works.

Perhaps it was the relatively early hour of Friday morning's 10:30 a.m. "Coffee Concert," but the ensemble seemed to take a little time to settle in. The performance opened with the Overture to "Coriolan," Op. 62, a good choice as the curtain raiser for what followed.

The Concerto in C major for Violin, Cello and Piano, Op. 56, the "Triple Concerto," demands three well-matched soloists, balanced with orchestra. It made for a fine opportunity to showcase the talents of Peter Otto, a member of the first violin section who joined the orchestra last season; Ilya Finkelshteyn, a member of the cello section from 1997 through last spring (he's now the principal cello with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra); and Seth Carlin, professor of piano at Washington University.

The three, all superb musicians, lacked some of the smooth sense of togetherness one finds in chamber ensembles that have played together on a regular basis, and there was a little uncertainty in spots in the first movement.

But everything was in place by the second movement. It opened with a beautiful solo from Finkelshteyn, seconded with playing of equal quality from his colleagues, which continued through the finale.

The Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92, also had its messy moments early on, but Neale and the orchestra soon hit their stride. There was nobility and expansiveness and a good sense of contrast in the second movement. The third movement was sprightly, although there was a definite sense, here and elsewhere in the concert, that the horns were having an all-around bad day.

Neale took the finale movement at a faster-than-usual pace, creating a real sense of excitement, and bringing the performance to a strong finish. It was a fine debut for an interesting young conductor.

ANDANTE.COM
ON JOHN ADAMS' *LE NIÑO* · ADELAIDE FESTIVAL
MARCH 4, 2002

By Sandra Bowdler

A Southern Hemisphere *El Niño*

The 2002 Adelaide Festival has had rather a rocky road. After two seasons run by the popular, and somewhat populist, Robyn Archer, the organizers for this year had entrusted the biennial event to the American director and perpetual enfant terrible Peter Sellars. But the match was not to be, and after a very public imbroglio, Sellars resigned and the festival was taken over by the widely respected arts administrator Sue Natrass.

The scant classical music offerings this year were limited to a chamber music program, consisting of excellent music surrounded by a miasma of unparalleled New Age looniness, and a performance of *El Niño* by the American composer John Adams.

El Niño premiered in Paris in December 2000, apparently as a tribute to the millennium and as a seasonal Christmas offering. It is probably best described as an oratorio, and it was presented in that fashion here - except that it was accompanied by a film directed by Sellars. The subject matter is the birth of Christ, and birth in general, focusing on a woman's point of view. The texts derive from several sources: the Bible, the New Testament Apocrypha, chunks of the Wakefield Mystery Cycle and a snatch of Hildegard of Bingen, and a number of poems by Latin American women (including Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral and 17th-century scholar Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz). These texts canvas various episodes prior to the Christian Nativity as well as events afterwards including the Flight into Egypt, the Slaughter of the Innocents and the Adoration of the Magi. Also included are some of the apocryphal legends such as Jesus and the dragons, and the palm tree which bent down to allow Mary to sample its fruit.

El Niño is scored for three soloists (soprano, mezzo-soprano and bass-baritone); three countertenors (who often sing together but also assume lesser dramatic personae such as the three individual Magi); chorus and full orchestra. Both the soprano and the mezzo give voice to the persona of the Virgin, while the man sometimes sings Joseph and sometimes a third-person narrator. The music is recognizably John Adams, with a characteristic repeated-chord opening, but it incorporates a range of influences, particularly Latin-accented rhythms. Several of the poems have gorgeously lyrical settings for one or both of the female soloists, accompanied only by strings, and the three countertenors (as the Three Magi) get to sing some beautifully soaring lines. Most striking are several passages where the tempo accelerates and more instruments are gradually brought into play, along with the chorus and sometimes the soloists, building into a crescendo that remind this listener of nothing so much as the finale of a Rossini opera. (The chord changes are, of course, rather different.)

Chinese-born Australian soprano Shu Cheen-Yu sang with admirably crystalline diction and accuracy, though her voice has a tendency to shrillness in the higher registers. Kirsti Harms, a local Adelaide singer, has a wonderfully even mezzo voice, strong on both low and high notes. (Well, it sounded strong, but the venue does have an "acoustical enhancement" system installed for the 1998 Festival's Ring cycle.) Yet, doubtless partly because they were anchored to their music stands, neither woman evinced the intensity of emotion one might have expected, particularly in comparison with Lorraine Hunt Lieberson's blistering rendition of the mezzo part in the original Paris performance.

Bass-baritone Herbert Perry, imported from the U.S., brought a compelling authority to bear with his confident, resonant singing. Of the three countertenors who on this occasion made up the Theatre of Voices, Paul Hillier's protean American ensemble, Daniel Bubeck (who sang Balthazar) has a particularly lovely voice, but it is amazing how sweet three countertenors singing together can sound.

The orchestra played particularly well under Alasdair Neale, negotiating the variable rhythmic streams and changes of tempo with ease. The State Opera Chorus sounded rather diffuse at first, but showed more signs of togetherness in part two. The children's chorus, which sings at the piece's conclusion, had little to do but did it quite nicely (though they were evidently told to show up at the theater in whatever they happened to be wearing that day).

All this was fine - but there was the film to contend with. Sellars evidently intended to convey a meta-narrative, set in the present day, with California and Mexico somehow representing Judea and Egypt. As a storyline, the film was not helpful. In the first part, it was difficult to work out who was supposed to be Mary and who was supposed to be Elizabeth (Mary's cousin and the mother of John the Baptist), but perhaps one wasn't supposed to. Further on, Mary was clearly a young woman with a pierced lip, and Joseph a young Latino policeman. Nothing much happened - there was a lot of Peter Sellars-style writhing, which can be tolerated from opera singers on a stage but hardly passes muster as dancing in the more objectified medium of film. The only part of all this that appealed was an interlude on a beach depicting the Three Wise Men (represented by two females and a male): their tender regard for the child seemed, for once, to have some emotional relationship with the text and music.

Several people decamped from the audience during the performance, one group after about only ten minutes in. Perhaps they were unprepared for contemporary music in general or John Adams in particular (though his style is generally quite accessible), but one can't help but think that they were driven out by the film. It may seem odd to suggest that interesting music, satisfactorily performed, can be made unbearable by the addition of a further dimension - but the damned thing was interminable and distracting and made the proceedings seem twice as long as they were. One looks forward to a movie-free performance of *El Niño* some time in the future.

**MIAMI HERALD
NEW WORLD SYMPHONY
DECEMBER 15, 2001**

By James Ross

Conductor Neale Puts Music in Motion

Just once, I heard Igor Stravinsky conduct his music. It was the *Pulcinella* Suite Alasdair Neale chose for his Thursday night concert with the New World Symphony at the Lincoln Theatre - an alluring Stravinsky/Mozart bill that will be repeated there tonight.

My night with Stravinsky, in 1965, had the fragile but agile composer, not a great conductor, nevertheless coaxing his 1920s score from the willing Chicago Symphony with darting movements and spidery hands. He looked like his music, and his quick, precise motions turned his slight body into the emotion he wanted the sound to express. Neale extracted *Pulcinella* from the New World with slightly more motion, but not much. His performance highlighted the music's tart verticality, its Pergolesi melodies Stravinsky admiringly adapted, and the musicians caught the jaunty, caustic wit, the buffoonery and the glitter. It was brisk, mostly brilliant, with that piquantly derisive trombone.

The Symphony in Three Movements, the other Stravinsky endpiece (framing Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 4 in D major and the Haffner Symphony, No. 35, in the same key) is much later Stravinsky, written for the New York Philharmonic in 1945. It is strikingly alive, bristling with activity, glistening with an angular brilliance, unmistakably *The Rite of Spring* revisited.

Neale's performance was one of the most supercharged, clarifying interpretations of the piece I've encountered. He boldly stressed the blocklike planes of sound on which it is built and there was tremendous rhythmic punch. Yet he left plenty of air and space for the harp, flute and clarinets to muse in the andante interlude.

Mozart was also extremely well-treated. The fourth of his five violin concertos tossed off at Salzburg when he was less than 20, was played with consummate courtliness by Cho-Liang ("Jimmy") Lin who had just the right resilience, grace and flair.

But the Haffner to me was the evening's peak, and demonstrated that Neale, rather than being a showy conductor, is, refreshingly, one who likes to show off the music. He has the gift of making you seem to hear a familiar score for the first time. His Haffner was dramatic, fast-paced, darkly brusque - a little like a cold, fresh wind blowing in your face. There wasn't a dead spot in it and lots of lustrous string and woodwind work.

**MIAMI HERALD
NEW WORLD SYMPHONY
OCTOBER 2, 2001**

By James Ross

New World Kicks Off with Vivid Variations

Alasdair Neale, the New World Symphony's new principal guest conductor, led the season's first concert by the full orchestra at the Lincoln Theatre on Saturday night, and it crackled. He chose orchestral variations, beginning with Brahms' Haydn Variations and ending with Elgar's Engima Variations, which share a satisfying richness of symphonic texture.

The transparent centerpiece, Alberto Ginastera's Variaciones concertantes of 1953, evokes Argentine music and the gaucho guitar without actually quoting folk tunes. The New World's musicians, including 33 new players, made it more than a showcase for virtuosity, the ravishing harp answering the ardent first cellist, the winds, brass and strings putting a superlative polish on the score's kaleidoscopic colors.

Neale's interpretations were profoundly expressive. His deceptively matter-of-fact, brusque conducting style penetrated far beneath the surface of the music. His approach to the Brahms Haydn Variations was in the true Brahms tradition. There were bold definition and clarity, but also an eloquent breadth that lingered on the chorale-like writing and the darkly Brahmsian wind-brass colorings. It was broad-shouldered Brahms of deep-rooted strength.

Elgar, like Brahms, was a full-blown romantic, and Neale's tack in this classic English score, too, was expansively lyrical, but with no loss of momentum. In fact, it was terrifically jubilant and exciting in the boisterous variations and unfailingly lucid in structure. But it was also tender of heart with, if not the most poignant Nimrod section I've heard, one with a Scotsman's instinctive understanding of reverence and restraint.

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE
SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY YOUTH ORCHESTRA
MAY 22, 2001

By Allan Ulrich

**Youth Orchestra Marks 20th Birthday With Triumphant Mahler
Climax to Neale's 12-year Stint as Music Director**

Inspiring was the first description that came to mind. Profoundly musical was the second, and, in the long run, it will be the more significant. Sunday afternoon in Davies Symphony Hall, the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra marked its 20th anniversary by lighting candles for itself and for Gustav Mahler, too. His Symphony No. 2 in C Minor (called the "Resurrection"), in a triumphant performance, completed the regular season and marked, also, the climax of Alasdair Neale's 12-year tenure as music director.

Yes, that's right, Mahler's Symphony No. 2, with its immense orchestra; five-movement, 95-minute span; its huge chorus; two vocal soloists; and encompassing vision. This is not a work professional orchestras tackle blithely, and it is certainly not common fare for an organization composed of teenagers.

Yet over the past two decades, to virtually everybody's enormous surprise and satisfaction, the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra has altered expectations of a student orchestra. It has also reaffirmed that in a period when serious music is in danger of fatal neglect by the media and funding agencies, there is a growing generation that still cares deeply. With such artistic potential among the young, survival of our musical life is more than a possibility. It seems part of the natural order.

To reaffirm the bond between generations, the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra management blurred the line between professional and nonprofessional.

Vance George's Symphony Chorus served in the choral finale as it would during a subscription concert of the parent orchestra, and two esteemed singers -- soprano Nicolle Foland and mezzo-soprano Florence Quivar -- were engaged for the occasion.

till, from the opening measures, it was the players' relationship with Neale that paid the most dividends. Even the important international orchestras don't always phrase with such unanimity or respond to their conductor with voicing and balances of such pristine clarity. Detail everywhere -- contrapuntal string figures, chirpy wind contributions, myriad percussion contributions -- struck the ear with the force of revelation. You could start with the violins' scrupulous diminuendi and the cello's spine-chilling spiccato in the first movement funeral march. You could cite the even staccato attacks of the brass in the lyrical second movement. You could rejoice in the pungent winds in the ironic adaptation from "Youth's Magic Horn" in the third.

Neale's cueing of entries and his firm beat are a dream to watch. If the conducting inclined to the emphatic, the performance was direct and unmannered, always resistant to sentimentality and always sensitive to a grand design. Space between notes, the moments of repose, mattered as much as fortissimo roars (the start of the finale), and the final exaltation, the rebirth suggested in Mahler's own verse, engulfed the hall.

True, the afternoon was sprinkled with moments that reminded you that these musicians still had much to learn. The offstage horns sagged a bit in pitch, and the concertmaster seemed to acquire more confidence as the afternoon proceeded. But this assuredly was the

"Resurrection" Symphony in all its variety, its folksy interludes and its heaven-storming affirmation.

The soloists left a mixed impression. Quivar's understanding of the "Urlicht" (Primal Light) poem in the third movement rivals anyone's, yet the singer's instrument has lost support where it counts most. Foland contributed reliably, but, for the sake of contrast, the soprano here ideally should possess a brighter, more angelic timbre. George's choristers were expectedly magnificent in projection, blend and range of dynamics. The standing ovation was as much for them as for the orchestra.

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE
SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY
JANUARY 29, 2001

By Joshua Kosman

Neale Bids Adieu to Symphony With Superb Elgar

Chalking things up to nationality is a cheap ploy, no doubt. But listening to conductor Alasdair Neale's magisterial performance of Elgar's Second Symphony in Davies Symphony Hall on Saturday night -- one Englishman probing the soul of another -- it was hard to avoid such thoughts.

In his final season with the San Francisco Symphony, Neale continues to offer timely reminders of what local audiences will soon be missing. The fluid precision of his beat, his command of both large-scale shape and momentary detail, and the almost self-effacing tact with which he mounts an expressive argument are virtues that can illuminate a wide range of orchestral music.

And Elgar's broad, emotionally volatile Second Symphony calls for just that combination of qualities.

Its combination of propriety and sentimental self-revelation -- the way the composer seems to pour out his heart and observe standards of musical decorum at the same time -- strikes a contemporary listener as distinctively British. Neale, leading the San Francisco Symphony for the last time as associate conductor, did himself and the work proud.

The tone and shape of Elgar's writing are all too easy to misconstrue. As with so much of his music, the dominant mood of gloom and tetchiness can become oppressive if approached without sympathy -- a sympathy that understands how much is implied by what Elgar leaves unsaid.

Yet under Neale's dynamic leadership, both the expansive lineaments and the delicate undercurrents of the symphony stood revealed in all their glory.

Nowhere was this more true than in the vast panoramic sweep of the slow movement, a funeral oration of deep feeling and terrible urgency (among the movement's honorees was King Edward VII, who had died in 1910, the year before the premiere).

Swell of Emotion

With the string sections playing at their considerable finest, the movement's turbulent swell of emotion carried a listener along. Neale charted the music's course with unerring force.

Elsewhere, too, Neale demonstrated a powerful sense of what the score needed to make its points cogently. The first movement proceeded with surefooted directness from one surging crest to the next, observing the formal niceties as road signs while letting the expressive subtext carry the real burden of the discourse. And the symphony's odd finale, mixing introspection and bombast in unpredictable proportions, sounded deeply persuasive in this account . . .

HANNOVER NEUE PRESSE
SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY
FEBRUARY 5, 1999

By Henning Queren

Star Pupil in Tails Conducts Mahler
Kuppelsaal-concert with Alasdair Neale

A rescuer in tails: star maestro Michael Tilson Thomas had the flu (104 degree fever), and could not conduct the San Francisco Symphony in the sold-out Kuppelsaal. In his place, a young, unknown conductor, Alasdair Neale (36), conducted a Mahler symphony of the highest caliber.

It's always like this with the star pupils: as soon as the master is not around, they become fearless. Things can go wrong (as in the Geothe-ballad) or it turns into a giant success (as in the Kuppelsaal). The challenge is enormous: Mahler's five movement Fifth Symphony belongs among the highest peaks of the mountains of the symphonic world. With a length of over an hour, it places extreme demands on orchestra as well as conductor.

Neale approached Mahler from an emotional perspective, loosening and tightening the symphonic reigns more than usual. The famous Adagietto (heard in the Visconti film *Death in Venice*) was stretched to a full twelve minutes, the usual is a maximum of eight. In the third movement, he fully realized the score's instruction "Stürmisch bewegt, mit grosser Vehemenz" until the ears began to hurt.

His interpretation and style of conducting reminded on a bit of the great Leonard Bernstein. Neale, conducting without baton, occasionally opened his arms so wide as if to embrace the entire orchestra. He played the air violin when the strings were very busy and stomped his feet to the entrances of the percussion.

Reservations arose only in the quality of the orchestra. The musicians from San Francisco do not belong to the world-class American orchestras like Chicago or Boston just yet. Too many mistakes in the brass section ensured that fact. The first trumpet had a miserable day, probably due to the flu, quite often missing notes by far.

Flawless: Before the intermission, first-rate violinist Gil Shaham played Samuel Barber's Violin Concerto, a work of late-romantic gluttony bordering on film-music.

**SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE
SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY
RECORDING OF KERNIS' *COLORED FIELD*
FEBRUARY 25, 1996**

By Joshua Kosman

**CLASSICAL CDS
S.F. Delivers Kernis' 'Field'**

KERNIS: *Colored Field*; *Still Movement With Hymn* Julie Ann Giacobassi, English horn; San Francisco Symphony; Alasdair Neale, conductor; Pamela Frank, violin; Paul Neubauer, viola; Carter Brey, cello; Christopher O'Riley, piano; Argo: 448 174 (\$14.99; TT 70:37)

FOUR STARS

Aaron Jay Kernis' English horn concerto "*Colored Field*," written for Julie Ann Giacobassi and premiered here in 1994, must count as one of the San Francisco Symphony's most distinguished commissions. Exciting, highly charged and exhilaratingly ambitious in both its musical and moral dimensions, "*Colored Field*" combines the emotional drama of the concerto with the expansiveness of the symphonic style, producing an effect of unflinching gravity and dark beauty.

Kernis is among the few composers today who would dare to take on issues of good and evil -- of the large-scale travails of our world and the possibilities for redemption -- in the context of a wordless orchestral score. "*Colored Field*," with its haunted pastoral episodes, sinister dances and Old Testament thundering, makes its points with uncommon eloquence.

This premiere recording does credit to all concerned. Giacobassi renders the concerto's long solo melodies with superb dexterity and panache, and tempers her instrument's broad, plaintive tone with a touch of acid. Conductor Alasdair Neale leads a brilliant performance, angular and taut in the jazzy syncopations of the central "*Pandora Dance*" and full of grim fury in the concluding "*Hymns and Tablets*."

Filling out the disc is "*Still Movement With Hymn*," a potent elegy for piano and strings that was performed here earlier this month by the Dunsmuir Piano Quartet. The score itself, with its anguished climaxes and interludes of serene mourning, is exquisite; but the performance by Pamela Frank, Paul Neubauer, Carter Brey and Christopher O'Riley is shrill and surprisingly ill-considered.