

January 19, 2007

Remembering King

By Heuwell Tircuit

Music of human struggle, religious conviction, and ultimate joy was featured in Friday evening's concert by the Oakland East Bay Symphony, which honored the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Conductor Michael Morgan had chosen his program well for the occasion, and a large audience cheered him, his two soloists, and chorus to the echo for their realizations of King's idealism.

The program in Oakland's Paramount Theater opened with Wagner's love-tormented "Prelude and Liebestod" from *Tristan und Isolde*, followed by the West Coast premiere of Nolan Gasser's *Black Suit Blues*. The latter included roles for baritone Robert Sims, tenor saxophonist David Henderson, and the Oakland Symphony Chorus. Following intermission, Morgan led an uncommonly fine performance of Schubert's dreadnaught Symphony No. 9 in C Major, D. 944, known as the "Great C Major".

"I could have enjoyed an immediate encore of the entire symphony."

Morgan set appropriately broad but never stodgy tempos during the Wagner. The music emerged in passionate glory in a sonorously rich emotional performance that was always under control. The prelude was beautifully shaped, which is not an easy thing to pull off, and the music of the "Love Death" soared to its peak through a taut line. Only the latter seemed a tad too slow, as a matter of personal taste. I could hear no serious flaw in the whole.



I emphasize the hurdles to underline how fine Morgan's performance was at the Paramount. He skipped the long first movement repeat, which helped Schubert's masterpiece seem to fly by. But I was never aware of a hint of tedium, likely having been buoyed by my long love of the music.

Two of Morgan's major assets are his sensibility in tempo selection and an acute awareness of proper dynamics. He must be drilling the Oakland players to a fine sheen.

Unanimity during both crescendos and diminuendos was superb, the quiet passages were velvety soft, the loud passages sounded full bodied, with elegant timbre. The pity was that the orchestra offered only a single performance after clearly working so hard on it. I could have enjoyed an immediate encore of the entire performance.