

Music review:

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## Michael Morgan triumphs in Shostakovich Eighth

By Joshua Kosman

For years, Michael Morgan has nursed an ambition to conduct Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony, that broad-beamed and dramatically ambiguous product of the darkest years of World War II. And on Friday, leading the Oakland East Bay Symphony in the Paramount Theatre, he finally saw that goal come to fruition.

If only all of our dreams could be realized so successfully.

In Morgan's hands, the full scope of this powerful opus — its anguished evocations of the battlefield, its restless search for some kind of apotheosis or redemption, and its perplexing culmination — registered with wonderful immediacy. The orchestra sounded both full-voiced and keenly incisive, and it was evident that the sheer act of working together in preparation for this performance had been a rich collaboration for all concerned.



*Soloist Richard Glazier and Conductor Michael Morgan*

It was evident, too, why this symphony was a mountain that Morgan had left unscaled for so long. The mere scale and formal layout of the undertaking is daunting, with five expansive movements arranged in an odd and potentially lumpy sequence that joins the last three in a single sweep.

Then, too, there is the matter of tone — always a bit of an enigma with Shostakovich. The grim marches and biting scherzos are straightforward enough, perhaps, but the opening movement, with its bleak, meandering string melodies and sudden bursts of lyricism, is hard to get right.

Even more slippery is the finale, which defied the wartime expectations of critics and commissars alike by avoiding a sense of triumphalism in favor of a serene and contemplative peace. This is music that can easily sound anticlimactic if not handled with care.

Yet Morgan and the orchestra traversed all the symphony's twists with eloquence and care. The first movement, which is the piece's most intricate opening argument, sounded richly cogent; Morgan lent the music a delicate but unflagging rhythmic pulse, and the long English horn solo that punctuates the movement was delivered with wondrous poignancy by Denis Harper.

The brisk central movements that followed were as taut and abrasive as anyone could wish, while sustaining a humanistic poise just below the surface. Eric Achen's sweet-toned horn solo in the fourth movement was just one delight among many.

And then came the finale, and all the clouds seemed to disperse in a moment. Not just the harmonies but the very orchestral texture itself shifted, giving way to a spirit of fresh immediacy from the bassoons and then the strings. Morgan shaped this with delicate urgency, shepherding the piece to its modest but radiant conclusion.

The first half of the program boasted its own sort of rewards, in the form of an exuberant account of Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F. Pianist Richard Glazier brought vitality and wit to the solo part, and Morgan and the orchestra — particularly trumpeter William Harvey, whose solos in the central slow movement were transfixing — made a robust partnership.