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Jason Henry/The Bay Citizen. Michael Morgan conducted a rehearsal of the Oakland East Bay Symphony on Tuesday.

Oakland's Symphony Season Opens, Mixing It Up

BY KEVIN BERGER

Michael Morgan, music director of the Oakland East Bay Symphony, said he did not mean to brag. But with Occupy Oakland demonstrations tearing through the city this week, he said he “deserved some kind of Nostradamus award” for programming “The Age of Anxiety” into the orchestra’s concert on Friday, the opening of its 2011-12 season.

Mr. Morgan, 54, a man of passions and opinions, chose “The Age of Anxiety,” a Leonard Bernstein symphony based on a poem by W.H. Auden about lives fractured by war, over a year ago. His selection does not point to any occult powers of prognostication but to a natural harmony with the social and cultural currents of Oakland.

Connecting with the community is a popular topic in classical music today, as financially strapped orchestras struggle to shed their image as old, white and Eurocentric, and draw in young, diverse audiences. Mr. Morgan, who is black, has been showing the way for more than 25

years, first as an assistant conductor at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and for the past two decades as leader of the Oakland East Bay Symphony.

“Michael is a trailblazer,” said Aaron Dworkin, president of the Sphinx Organization, a nonprofit group that promotes diversity in classical music. “There are very few African-American conductors who have had the kind of tenure he has had in Oakland, have accomplished as much and have the respect he has in the field.”

There are very few black conductors, period. A 2011 survey of more than 300 orchestras by the League of American Orchestras, an advocacy group, turned up nine black music directors. In fact, the paltry share of black musicians in the nation’s approximately 1,200 orchestras – less than 2 percent – reflects the pervasive lack of racial diversity in classical music.

Since Mr. Morgan first picked up a baton, he has made it his mission to bring people of color into the symphony concert hall. To him, the orchestra is more than a vehicle for pretty music; it is a political tool for probing racial tensions and repairing them.

“Everything we do is a reflection of Oakland,” Mr. Morgan said. “And like many big places, Oakland is a fractious community. The thing I find most interesting about orchestras is using them to bring the town together. That’s why our programming is kind of wacky sometimes. We want the fans of this music and that music, who may never see each other in real life, to come and watch a concert together.”

The Oakland East Bay Symphony devotes a third of its annual \$2.5 million budget to education programs. Mr. Morgan appears regularly in Oakland schools to show children with the same skin color as his that classical music can strike serious grooves of its own. “We’ve been so lucky to have him,” said Phil Rydeen, manager of the Oakland school district’s performing arts programs. “He’s dynamic. The kids love him. So do the teachers. He’s helped make them better at their craft.”

His activism was bred in the bone.

Mr. Morgan grew up in Washington, D.C., where his parents, both government researchers, fought civic battles to improve the public schools that he and his younger siblings attended. Being gay, he said, has also shaped his political mission.

“All of my ideas about bringing people together come from seeing myself as outsider,” Mr. Morgan said. “Being black in what’s considered a white music culture, being gay in a straight culture. Everything to me is about asking, ‘How do you use your outsider status to bring more people together?’”

The “wacky” programs Mr. Morgan has assembled over the past two decades are conscientiously planned. Because of its small budget, the East Bay Symphony holds only six concerts a season. That causes Mr. Morgan to pack a world of ideas into each performance.

This season is a microcosm of his vision, which matches classic and 20th-century works with contemporary pieces by local composers. An April concert, “Notes From the Phillipines,” offers a Mendelssohn overture; Dvorak’s cello concerto, featuring the soloist David Requiro, a

Filipino-American who was raised in Oakland; and a new composition by Art Khu, a San Francisco jazz pianist and arranger.

Although Friday's concert may seem traditional, Mr. Morgan said, it is one of his most ambitious. Along with Bernstein's "Age of Anxiety," it features George Gershwin's "American in Paris," Duke Ellington's "New World-a-Comin'" and "Estancia," by the Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera.

The program, Mr. Morgan said, maps a story about race, music and culture in America. It takes off with art music in Europe, touches down on jazz, passes through an age of anxiety and takes flight with a Latin ballet. The program, Mr. Morgan said, "ends with us seeing America as the Americas."

Mr. Morgan then smiled as he described the ways the concert mirrored the Bay Area. "The Age of Anxiety" will feature the acclaimed pianist Sara David Buechner, his longtime friend and colleague, who was once David Buechner.

So to recap, Mr. Morgan said, "we have black conductor, transgendered pianist, and we're playing Bernstein, Duke and Gershwin. What more could you possibly want?"