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Oakland East Bay Symphony: Nobody falls asleep when Michael Morgan's conducting

By Richard Scheinin

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Leave it to Michael Morgan, conductor of the Oakland East Bay Symphony, to lead a "Messiah" sing-along with a klezmer band, as he did in 2006. Or put Carlos Santana on stage as a soloist with the orchestra, as occurred in 2010. Or conduct a concerto for sitar and orchestra, composed by Ravi Shankar, as Morgan will do next spring.

There is only one Michael Morgan, music director for nearly 24 years of Oakland East Bay, which opens its 25th season Friday at the Paramount Theatre. He thrives on Beethoven and Brahms, but also views classical music as an art form on the move, mirroring its community. Which is why his audiences – the most diverse group of classical listeners in the Bay Area -- get to experience gospel choirs, Armenian dancers and brand new works by Filipino, Israeli, Palestinian and Chinese composers.



Michael Morgan conductor of the Oakland East Bay Symphony poses for a photograph at Oakland Technical High School in Oakland, Calif., on Thursday, Oct. 24.

"To me," Morgan says, "the main job of a symphony orchestra, beyond producing excellent concerts, is this: to really pull a community together through its music. I want to bring different parts of the community into the room to sit together and listen. And music is the catalyst."

Morgan, 56, trained under three giants in the field: conductors George Solti, Daniel Barenboim and Leonard Bernstein. At age 29, in 1986, he debuted as a guest conductor with the New York Philharmonic. But it is in Oakland that the Washington, D.C., native has grown roots, championing new works with the goal of making classical music accessible to all. As a gay black man -

- not your typical profile for a classical conductor -- he feels that he is an outsider elsewhere, but an insider in the Bay Area, free to pursue his musical mission.

It's not some wild-eyed experiment. Morgan is a respected conductor of traditional repertory. Opening night at the 3,000-seat Paramount will include works by Verdi and Wagner, whose bicentennials are being celebrated this year, along with Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring," the first piece Morgan ever conducted with Oakland East Bay, in January 1991.

It also will include "Mothership" by Mason Bates, perhaps the most successful 30-something composer in the U.S., commissioned by major orchestras in Chicago and San Francisco -- and championed by Morgan ever since Bates was a virtual unknown. As the season continues, there will be gospel and Tchaikovsky

and a March 28 program pairing the Shankar concerto with music by Philip Glass, Beethoven and Juhi Bansal, a 29-year-old Indian composer raised in Hong Kong and now based in the Los Angeles area.

Morgan always "has his ear to the ground," Bates says. "Michael will consider composers that a lot of orchestras would not even think about, because maybe they haven't followed the traditional path, coming out of an established university or a conservatory with a pedigree. And that kind of fearlessness is unique to him and the orchestra."

Inevitably, some programs pan out better than others; going outside the box is a risk. But risk also generates excitement, and the audience "is happy to be there," says violinist Dawn Harms, Oakland East Bay's co-concertmaster. "Sometimes at a classical concert, you look out at the audience, and they're half asleep. Not our audience; they love the music and what it represents."

Sitting in his studio in Oakland's Piedmont Avenue neighborhood, Morgan sketches out his family history. Father Willie Morgan was a cancer researcher with the National Institutes of Health near Washington, D.C., where mother Mabel Morgan worked in grant-making, also in the health field.



Conductor Michael Morgan of the Oakland East Bay Symphony speaks to the audience during their Young People's Concert at Oakland Technical High School

Half a century later, their all-embracing musical tastes -- everything from Arthur Prysock to Patsy Cline -- still echo in their son's studio. The score to Wagner's "Götterdämmerung" lies open on a coffee table. On an adjacent shelf, there's a beaded shekere, a West African percussion instrument. Morgan took up piano in third grade. In seventh grade, a public school orchestra teacher named Hermann Suehs encouraged Morgan's interest in conducting: "I was always taught that if you want to go do something, then do that."

He entered the Oberlin Conservatory of Music at age 17, studied under Bernstein at Tanglewood at age 19, and at 28 became an assistant conductor under Solti with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He spent seven years in Chicago -- the first five under Solti, the last two under Barenboim -- then, in 1990, signed his contract with the Oakland East Bay Symphony.

He ticks off potential projects for future seasons: Bernstein's "Mass" (a "life-changing" work, sprawling and "beyond category," which Oakland East Bay performed in 2005), more by Stephen Sondheim (the orchestra did "Follies" in 2008) and Mahler's cosmic Symphony No. 2. He also tosses out this idea: that actor-songwriter Darren Criss, San Francisco native and star of television's "Glee," might compose a piece for the orchestra. "It's something he could do in-between projects," Morgan says.

He's a dreamer with a loyal audience that "wants to see you go out on a limb I can't imagine leaving it," he says. "I just can't imagine leaving this orchestra, because it works perfectly. We're all still having a good time."