

Review: Oakland East Bay Symphony sparkles in celebratory season opener

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“This is one conductor who eschews the glitz and mega-budgets that often come with the territory, and his audience loves him for it -- they'll follow him anywhere...The audience cheered. Morgan is their conductor. The OEBS is their orchestra. After 25 years, it's still a match made in heaven.”

There was a sense of jubilation at the Paramount Theatre Friday night, as the Oakland East Bay Symphony launched its 25th anniversary season. The hall was mostly full, the orchestra sounded fresh, and music director Michael Morgan was in an ebullient mood -- ready to inaugurate the organization's second quarter-century.

And why not? Twenty-five years in, Morgan and his musicians continue to represent this city's most heartening success story. Even as orchestras around the country are struggling -- or going out of business altogether -- Oakland East Bay is staying afloat on the sheer power of Morgan's musical enthusiasm and devotion to the community.



Conductor Michael Morgan led the Oakland East Bay Symphony on a triumphant 25th-season opener Friday at Oakland's Paramount Theatre. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News Group) (ANDA CHU)

This is one conductor who eschews the glitz and mega-budgets that often come with the territory, and his audience loves him for it -- they'll follow him anywhere, whether he's reveling in American music (Bernstein's "Mass," anyone?), exploring the far corners of the Romantic repertoire (all-Armenian concerts), bringing young talent "side by side" with the orchestra, or jazzing it up with big-name pop stars (past concerts have included appearances by Carlos Santana and the late, great Isaac Hayes).

Friday's season opener saw Morgan returning to two of his core interests. Opera, represented

in selections from works by Verdi and Wagner, filled the program's second half; with Canadian soprano Othalie Graham as soloist, the conductor paid tribute to both composers' centenary years. Before intermission, works by Aaron Copland and Mason Bates demonstrated Morgan's deep roots in American music.

Each approach worked like a charm. Morgan has always had an affinity for musical drama -- he serves as music director of the Sacramento Opera, and until recently held a similar post at Walnut Creek's Festival Opera -- and he started the second half with a gripping performance of Verdi's Overture to "La Forza del Destino." This is exciting music, and he marshaled his forces well; the strings sounded insinuating, the woodwinds played brilliantly and the brass swaggered with Italianate flair.

Graham, making her OEBS debut, joined the orchestra to sing "Ritorna vincitor!" from Verdi's "Aida." Looking regal in a bejeweled, burgundy-colored gown, she deployed her large, gleaming soprano with urgency and expressiveness as the Ethiopian slave torn between love for her homeland and passion for the Egyptian warrior, Radames.

The Wagner selections came next, beginning with "Siegfried's Rhine Journey" from "Gotterdammerung." If Morgan didn't always achieve a full, weighty Wagnerian sound, the individual contributions -- woody horns, singing woodwinds, warm, burnished violins and earthy low strings -- were persuasive.

Graham returned for Brunnhilde's "Immolation Scene" from "Gotterdammerung." The soprano hasn't yet developed the sheer power and laser edge that distinguish a great Brunnhilde from an aspiring one, but she sang unimpeded and with considerable conviction. For his part, Morgan led a luxuriant, richly detailed orchestral performance, filling the hall with brooding, atmospheric, liquid waves of sound.

The concert's first half began with a big, heart-on-the-sleeve performance of "Appalachian Spring." Copland's ballet score -- which was on the first program Morgan ever conducted as Oakland's music director -- remains one of the conductor's calling cards, and he elicited characterful playing from the orchestra, relishing the composer's poignant melodies and sinewy rhythms. The OEBS woodwinds sounded especially poised and lovely.

He also led a terrific performance of Bates' "Mothership" -- a beguiling work for orchestra and electronica that poses the orchestra as a kind of orbiting spacecraft, where individual instruments -- marimba, clarinet, cello and trumpet -- step out, touch down and "dock."

Propulsive and engaging, it's a jazzy crowd-pleaser, and under Morgan's energetic direction, it achieved full liftoff. In his prefatory remarks, Morgan noted that OEBS was the first professional orchestra to play a piece by the Berkeley-based Bates, who has since gone on to wide recognition as a contemporary composer. The moral of the story, said the conductor, is that "true fame begins in Oakland."

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