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Michael Morgan: Master at the Helm of an Entire Fleet

By Michael Zwiebach, Senior Editor & Content Manager

Conductor Michael Morgan looms as a major presence on the local music scene, being in charge of the Oakland East Bay Symphony (OEBS), the music director at Festival Opera in Walnut Creek, and music director of the Sacramento Philharmonic. And many people may not know that he traded in the opportunity to be a jet-setting, big name conductor for his present career. In his chat with SFCV, he talked about that choice, and why he loves what he's doing.

What was it like being assistant to Bernstein, Slatkin, Solti, and Barenboim? What did they teach you?

Well, in various ways, I've taken little bits from everybody, and not just musical issues, but how to be a music director and a leader of people and how to make decisions. And, in the case of Solti, who had such incredible loyalty to everyone he hired, following that example.

Of course, back in those days, I got to conduct everywhere, all of the big orchestras and all over the place, and basically landed here because it's just more fun to do. The big orchestras are nice, and it's prestigious to stand in front of them, but it's not always as much fun as this is. So I kind of like where I've landed.

What's the most important thing to being a great conductor on the podium?

The most fundamental thing is the ability to translate the way a piece should sound into physical gesture, which is actually a fairly rare talent – that's why there are so many conductors, and so few people who are really good at it. The other thing is figuring out what your real contribution to the field is, which is different for each person. Finding the thing that's important to you is what really makes you not just successful but also content in the success you're having.

How do you connect with an orchestra? Is there a secret?

The other thing about being a conductor is that it does take time. And so I find now that I pretty much connect with any orchestra I go in front of, even when I have rehearsal schedules that would have doomed things in years past. I just did a Cincinnati Symphony concert that had the most absurd rehearsal schedule – over weeks and very scattered and not really enough time – yet the concert came out great and we all had a good time doing it, just because I know how to handle those things now. It's just a matter of experience.

So conductors get better later in their careers?

Well, everyone does. I mean, nobody's any good at this until they hit at least 50, and even the greatest of the greats didn't really achieve that greatness until their 50s, 60s, 70s. So you can have a tremendous

amount of potential, like a Dudamel, but there's no point in confusing that with being a great conductor. You *aren't*, at that age – you grow into being one, if you have that kind of talent.

And the orchestras, particularly the very best ones, know that they're covering for us half the time, anyway. But as we get older, they're still covering up our weaknesses. I tell all my conducting students that you may be the person in the room who knows the most about any particular score that you are doing, but the collective wisdom of the orchestra is always greater than yours. And so, if you are open to learning from them, that's how you get better over time.

Is education where you found you could make your contribution to the field?

Yes, that's my contribution. By accident of the way I am, the way I speak about things, and the fact that I'm African-American, I can talk to people about classical music who might now otherwise listen. And so there's a chance for me to maybe bring some other people along. And so that became my mission in the field. And then to come someplace like Oakland, where you have a really fractured community – as you do in a lot of places – but the notion, then, of making a conscious effort to bring that community together through the mechanism of the symphony orchestra is what I can do.

Is all music one? Would you be okay with doing an even greater mix of styles at OEBS than you do now? Would you do Tower of Power charts, or things that, say, the Bang-on-a-Can All Stars play?

I think everyone should be shooting for the widest possible range of things that a symphony orchestra can credibly do. And the members of the symphony orchestra can do all those things; you just have to see how far you can expand your audience – you don't want to leave your audience behind, either. And, if you notice, the OEBS never does anything called a "pops concert," partly because our community is so diverse that it's very difficult to define what exactly would go on a pops concert in the East Bay. And then also because a lot of things that other people might relegate to a pops concert, we pull into our main stage series and play alongside the classics from the canon.

I notice you've been a big champion of Ellington's symphonic works for band. Have you been a fan of those pieces for a long time? Is that something you were dying to do when you came to Oakland?

Like most musicians with standard training, you begin with a respect for Duke Ellington. It's really only after you start to look into it that you realize that he's at a level with all of the major classical composers of his era. His technical level and creativity is right up there with the Bernsteins and Coplands. But I did not think that way going in; I actually discovered that over time.

You're going to be doing Filipino music next year, the way you've been doing Persian concerts the last few years. Did you discover musicians in that community who write symphonic music?

Someone brought to my attention the Filipino Jazz Festival in San Francisco and the fact that there was also a Filipino Jazz Festival in Manila. And I didn't know anything about it. And the attitude in programming for the OEBS is always the same; it's always looking around the room and asking, "Who is not here?"

So we reach out to various communities. We've done Persian, we've done Armenian, we've done Chinese, and we will add Filipino to that, connecting to another corner of our community in a way that is genuine. I mean, you don't just play the Marquez *Danzon* and expect everyone Latino to show up. You try to find out

what that community would actually embrace that a symphony orchestra can do, and then [you] reach out at the grass roots level, which requires a lot of guerrilla marketing.

You have to know how to approach them. Very frequently, just putting an ad in the *Chronicle* doesn't do it. You have to find out how they communicate among themselves and get into those media streams. And then people understand that it's a genuine effort to connect with them and not a one-off attempt to be multicultural for multiculturalism's sake. You don't expect all of them to come back; you expect a few of them to become part of your family, going forward.

You're in the Bay Area, and have been for a while; what do you do in your down time?

I just came back from New York, the last three or four days. I was there solely to see shows. I saw *Book of Mormon* one night; I saw a very, very small Off-Off-Broadway show that a friend of mine was in; and I'm going back in June to see, well, *Book of Mormon* again – I never do that, but I am! – and then a couple of other plays. I get a lot of ideas from watching theater and other performing arts and how they deal with bringing people together.

You seem to have really liked *The Book of Mormon*.

The show is far better than even the reviews. It is utterly fantastic. I mean, the South Park guys are very clever and they're actually quite good musicians anyway, so they write well in the style that they do. But what's surprising is that at the end of this really funny, very vernacular, very "parental-warning" show, you have actually a quite positive message about religion, which you probably didn't see coming when you stepped into the theater. And that's a great achievement.