



Review: Oakland Symphony delivers global triumph

By Sue Gilmore
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It was two out of three for the Oakland East Bay Symphony's concert in the Paramount Theater Friday night — and that's not bad at all, considering the winning pair were post-intermission performances of Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring" and Nolan Gasser's new "World Concerto for Cello and Orchestra" that ranged from the simply superlative to the absolutely superb.

The best news from the evening is that the Petaluma-based Gasser's work, a commissioned world premiere, definitively accomplished everything it set out to do, and then some. It showcased the prodigious talents of Maya Beiser, an Israeli-born American cellist of French and Argentinian descent, whose sinewy strength and ringing tone made her playing stand out in relief throughout the three-movement work, even when her melodic line was enfolded in the embrace of the full orchestra.

It also highlighted, as Gasser clearly meant it to do, the unique character of each of three instruments considered "exotic" to Western ears — the Indian sarangi, a box-shaped short-neck bowed lute played from a cross-legged sitting position; the Chinese erhu, a two-stringed violin with a quivering, high-pitched wailing sound like a disembodied female voice; and the Arabian oud, a plucked, lutelike instrument with a resonance rich enough to approach the sonorities of an acoustic guitar.

So it was a sort of whirlwind global tour the concerto took us on, a gimmicky conceit, to be sure, but one that yielded rich rewards because the music was so mesmerizing. Credit goes to Aruna Narayan Kalle, Jiebing Chen and Bassam Saba in equal measure for their mastery of the sarangi, erhu and oud; some of Chen's extended passages of unbroken melody were exquisitely haunting, and Saba's forcefully rhythmic fingerwork on the oud cast its own dizzying spell.

The evening's triumph belongs as well to visionary conductor Michael Morgan, who kept this concerto's disparate and ever-evolving elements on track with a dynamism and precision and purposefulness that gave ample testament to his thoroughgoing study of its demands. If the work is to have its deserved life in the repertoire, Morgan's magisterial ushering it into being for a first audience is largely responsible.

But there were two experts at the Paramount's podium Friday night. Oakland East Bay's assistant conductor Bryan Nies took the orchestra through as marvelously evocative a reading of Copland's "Appalachian Spring" as I've ever been privileged to hear. From the moment it softly opened, cool clarinet rising out of the mists to float above the low hum of strings, Nies extracted a perfectly calibrated performance of this revered piece of Americana. He was attuned to its many shifts of tempo and mood, guiding it through those broad-shouldered, striding passages crackling with energy and the rollicking, scampering moments of Revivalist fervor right back down to the hair-raising stillness of the close, with its hushed flute and the gentle tink, tink, tink from the xylophone. It was fabulous.

The concert opened with Morgan conducting the Brahms Symphony No. 3 in competent but uncaptivating fashion. The major problem was a lack of cohesion, especially in the two lumpy outer movements. It lumbered along in episodic bursts

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rather than unfolding in the organic flow Brahms is famous for. It sounded like a different ensemble than the Gasser's brilliant group; I could only conclude that the cello concerto got the bulk of the attention in rehearsal time.

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