

# Mostly Mozart, mostly mesmerizing

By Jeanie R. Wakeland

CONTRIBUTOR

**O**AKLAND East Bay Symphony Maestro Michael Morgan turned the first half of Friday's mostly Mozart program inside out, much to the surprise of the audience — and his musicians.

The only two works on the program before the intermission were Mozart's "Ave Verum Corpus" and a world premiere of the Adagio from composer Ann Lathan Kerzner's "Diary of the Damned."

Morgan decided to bracket the short Adagio with before-and-after performances of "Ave Verum Corpus" by the Oakland Symphony Chorus. He announced this cheerfully to the Paramount Theatre's audience, adding that this was the first time the choir and the orchestra had heard his plan, which he said he had decided upon after an earlier rehearsal.

The night's theme was judgment and redemption, ending with a second-half performance of Mozart's Mass in C Minor, and Morgan apparently wanted to end both halves of the concert with a sense of redemption.

But to Morgan's credit, repetition worked. The symphony chorus, an all-volunteer group with the discipline and maturity of professional singers, moved into its first version of the familiar and transcendent "Ave Verum" with ease and energy. Morgan beat a steady pace, neither too fast nor dragging, and the short, 46-bar work with its hushed, harmonic beauty set the tone for Kerzner's Adagio.

"Diary of the Damned" was Kerzner's doctoral thesis at the University of Pennsylvania, but the vibrant work shows mature talent and is refreshingly free of academic trends. The Adagio is the center of a three-movement work, which Kerzner says is about judgment, whether it be by a deity or from within.

The Adagio, for string orchestra, begins with a plaintive tune from a single violin before quickly moving to a lyrical and traditionally harmonic opening section. Still, the work keeps its introspective melody as it modulates from major to minor keys and the opening motif works its way through the sections of the orchestra.

The middle section has some Samuel Barber-like dissonances, with the dissonance serving the emotion of the piece rather than forming the basis of the harmonic structure. After building to a suitable climax, the opening tune is repeated, this time in a minor key and an octave higher, supported by the original lyrical harmonies. It ends softly with the harpist plucking slowing on her instrument, reminiscent of a clock reaching the hour.

By the standards of some of the contemporary pieces this orchestra has played, this work was not technically challenging. Instead, it offered the musicians a chance to show off their warm but clear sound and express some movie score-style emotion.

The symphony chorus' second version of "Ave Verum Corpus" seemed more subdued yet still intense after the orchestral Adagio. The voices seemed a bit richer, perhaps more warmed up.



**THE OAKLAND** Symphony Chorus performed Mozart's Mass in C on Friday.

Although the words of "Ave Verum" speak of Christ's suffering, the music has an elegiac quality that suitably ended the first part of the program.

The major work of the night was the Mass in C Minor. Here the chorus dominated, with the orchestra taking second fiddle. Although Morgan was on the podium, the architect of the mass performance is Magen Solomon, Oakland Symphony Chorus music director. She demands — and gets — professional-level discipline and sound from her 120-plus members, and it showed Friday night. From the moment they launched into the "Kyrie" to the final "Benedictus," the chorus presented a rich, modulated sound that responded to Morgan and to Mozart's dynamic Mass.

One highlight of the chorus' performance was the "Jesu Christe" fugue. The crisp waves of the motif moved from section to section, and the chorus members enunciated the devilishly difficult sixteenth-note trills clearly as if each section was one voice. The mass also features four singers, primarily the two sopranos, with little more than back-up singing from a tenor and bass.

Julia Hunt Nielsen, the soprano who sang solo in the "Kyrie," has a lovely young, if brittle, voice. She struggled a bit with sustaining her high notes at first but blossomed as the work continued. Soprano-Aimee Puentes also had a lovely though brittle voice, but she struggled a bit with breath control in some of longer passages during the "Sanctus."

Joshua La Force, a pleasantly darker tenor, was not much of a factor in the trio "Quoniam tu solus Sanctus," while poor bass David Britton sat patiently through the entire Mass to join in only with the quartet of soloists in the final "Benedictus."

In its supporting role, the orchestra provides bright and classical Mozartean warmth, without straying into Romanticism. Morgan's only falter was an overwhelming beat during "Qui tollis peccata mundi," that overwhelmed the chorus counterpoint at times.

In Friday's pre-concert performance, 17-year-old Marybeth Brown-Plambeck, an honorable mention winner of the June 2003 Young Artists Competition, performed the third movement of Lalo's Cello Concerto in D minor with promise, style and great musicality.

 **Oakland East Bay  
SYMPHONY**

**2003-2004 SEASON  
CONCERT #3 REVIEW**

*Oakland Tribune*

February 22, 2004