

Morgan, OEBS mark 25 years with sparkling ‘Candide’

By [Joshua Kosman](#)



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The thing about hearing the music for Leonard Bernstein’s “Candide” — especially in a performance as vivacious and committed as the one Michael Morgan and the Oakland East Bay Symphony gave it on Friday night to conclude their 25th season together — is that it doesn’t really end when the musicians stop.

Hours and even days later, those infectious tunes are still rattling around in your memory. Those angular but logical rhythms, the suavely tender melodic phrases, and of course the scintillating tick-tock of “Glitter and Be Gay” — good luck getting them out of your head anytime soon.

Though then again, why would you want to? The rocky path “Candide” had to traverse in the years after its 1956 premiere, through countless versions and revisions and overhauls of one sort and another, were all about fixing the libretto and the dramaturgy. Throughout it all, the essential elements of Bernstein’s score remained unimpeachable.

And that in turn means that a concert version with the musical elements linked by narration, such as the OEBS offered at the Paramount Theater, may be an optimal way to experience the piece, which is drawn from Voltaire’s satirical novella. Let the peregrinations of the naive title character — through Europe to South America and back again, and through war and religious persecution and countless changes of fortune — be condensed into a few lines of knowing description.

Let the narrator wink at the conventions of the picaresque, and even include a few timely japes about contemporary political life. All that counts, surely, is the opportunity to savor the charms and expressive sure-footedness of this fantastical score.

I’m not sure Bernstein ever pressed all the musical contents of that teeming storehouse in his head — the waltzes and barcarolles, the operatic clichés and Broadway tropes, the lyrical sweetness and tart irony — into such a persuasively neat synthesis. Part of the reason the score lingers in the memory for so long is that every music you encounter for days afterward reminds you of something from “Candide.”

Morgan obviously shares that regard for Bernstein’s inventiveness, at least to judge from the gleeful passion with which he shaped the performance; I can’t recall when I’ve heard a conductor sound so much like a kid at Disneyland. The difficult overture bustled and hummed, and the big showpieces — particularly the Act 1 auto-da-fé, with its ebullient depiction of the Spanish Inquisition — had a wonderful sense of spaciousness without sacrificing anything in the way of rhythmic clarity.

To top it off, Morgan assembled a first-rate cast of singers, led by tenor Thomas Glenn in the title role. This was a fervent and emotionally translucent account, marked by pristine tone and plenty of expressive warmth. Soprano Shawnette Sulker was an excellent Cunegonde, singing with polished clarity and practically bringing down the house in the sparkling coloratura of “Glitter and be Gay.” Baritone Robert Sims gave a marvelously sonorous and silky performance as both the optimistic Pangloss and his cynical counterpart, Martin.

There were fine contributions, too, from Tami Dahbura as the Old Lady, Hadleigh Adams as Maximilian and Katy Stephan as Paquette, and Lynne Morrow’s Oakland Symphony Chorus provided robust singing in the choral episodes. But ultimately this was Morgan’s triumph, an exciting display of his own enthusiasms being brought to life.

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