

In Memoriam: Conductor Michael Morgan (1957-2021)



Michael Morgan with the Oakland Symphony Orchestra

Michael Morgan, whose commitment to music education, community connections, and social justice transformed the orchestras he conducted and the way we think about orchestras' roles and impact, died on August 20 in Oakland, California from a severe infection following a kidney transplant in May. He was 63. Morgan had served as music director of California's Oakland Symphony Orchestra since 1991; he was also music director of California's Bear Valley Music Festival and the Gateways Music Festival in Rochester, New York. In addition, he was artistic director of Oakland Symphony Youth Orchestra and music director emeritus of the Sacramento Philharmonic and Opera.

Michael DeVard Morgan was born in Washington, D.C. on September 17, 1957. He began studying piano at age

eight, conducted his junior high school orchestra at age 12, and while in high school was a conductor of the D.C. Youth Orchestra. He studied composition at Oberlin Conservatory of Music and was mentored at Tanglewood by Gunther Schuller, Seiji Ozawa, and Leonard Bernstein. In 1986, he was appointed the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's assistant conductor; in 1992, he made his New York Philharmonic conducting debut. At the Oakland Symphony his programming ranged from canonic works to new music and programs celebrating Native American and LGBTQ+ communities. His three-decade commitment in Oakland made a deep impact on an entire generation there, and spurred new models for how orchestras interact with their communities.

After his death, there were many heartfelt tributes to Morgan.

Oakland Symphony Executive Director Miekko Hatano wrote at the orchestra's website, "This is a terribly sad moment for everyone in the Oakland Symphony family. We have lost our guiding father." Oakland Symphony Board Chair Jim Hasler added: "Michael's impact on our community and the national orchestra field cannot be overstated.... We have been blessed over the past 30 years, as Michael built the foundations of an Oakland Symphony dedicated to diversity, education, artistic collaboration and a celebration of music across genres and cultures."

Morgan was scheduled to lead the Gateways Music Festival, which features professional classical musicians of African descent, in Rochester in April 2022 and at its Carnegie Hall debut the same month. "How we will face the Gateways Carnegie Hall debut without him, I do

not even know,” wrote Gateways Music Festival President and Artistic Director Lee Koonce. “But the fierceness of his excellence, from his first day on the podium, to 25 years of Gateways, to his debut with the San Francisco Symphony just two months ago, is what made this moment possible. If not in body, we will carry Michael Morgan with us in spirit.”

Violinist Kelly Hall-Tompkins wrote: “Sharp of wit and brilliant of artistic mind—that was Maestro Michael Morgan. I had the great honor of working with him as concertmaster and soloist, from my student days straight through to the present moment.... Through his vast knowledge of the Black composers that many in the field are only now beginning to seek out, I discovered and played my first notes of symphonies by Florence Price, William Dawson, Olly Wilson and contemporary composers such as Carlos Simon.”

Jesse Rosen, former League of American Orchestras president and CEO, wrote, “Like many, there is a hole

in my heart since Michael’s passing. He used to kid that we knew each other since we were in diapers—not quite true, but a good 40 years. Beyond my sadness, though, is the awe for Michael as a transformative leader of the entire orchestra community. Before Michael, many orchestras subscribed to the not very helpful idea that bigger is better and that there was one version of success: big budget, new concert hall, long season, famous guest artists. Just read *Autopsy of a Symphony Orchestra*, which chronicled the demise of the Oakland Symphony in 1986, to see where that approach led. Michael took the reins there in 1988 and wisely never looked back. It was Michael, more than any single person I can think of, who firmly established a new ethos that the life of an orchestra must be marbled together with the life of its community, with the music and the experience of the artists and audience at the absolute center. Today, that vision animates the life of the orchestra community, and we have Michael to thank.”

League of American Orchestras President and CEO Simon Woods commented, “I believe that I first met Michael Morgan on a panel at a League Conference in the late 1990s, and I always had a very special affection for him. He was a tremendous musician who turned the Oakland Symphony into a unique community asset and a model for other orchestras. Beyond that, he was a great human with a huge heart. Just last fall the two of us did a long Zoom discussion for the Oakland Symphony. Michael as usual was perceptive, passionate, insightful, funny, and, above all, generous of spirit. The world always seemed a better place when you were with him. I feel humbled and honored to have shared space with him, and although it’s hard to process that he’s gone, he leaves wonderful memories and an indelible legacy across our field.”

Morgan is survived by his mother, Mabel Morgan, and a sister, Jacquelyn Morgan. At press time, plans for a memorial service were pending. [S](#)

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