

# Berkeley, Berlin, Berlioz

## Nagano on the move

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published: June 05, 2003

Backstage at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall — one of the world's less-inviting concert venues — the usual day-before-the-concert chaos reigns on a Monday night in late April. The critics and the connoisseurs have come to town for the premiere of the Violin Concerto by the young Korean composer Unsuk Chin, who is currently, as they say, "hot"; now it is not going to happen. As conductor Kent Nagano will explain to a sellout crowd at tomorrow's Berkeley Symphony Orchestra concert with his well-known soft-spoken humor, only one violinist on the planet is capable of confronting Ms. Chin's fiendish technical demands, and that violinist, Tibor Kovac, had called in over the weekend to report the onslaught of tendinitis. Finding a proper substitute for a major new work is no easy matter — as the Los Angeles Philharmonic has also discovered several times this past season. Nagano, with a sizable assist from UC Berkeley's electronic guru David Wessel, has concocted a reasonable substitute, a tape-only composition by Ms. Chin that will fill Zellerbach's vast space with four-channel ersatz percussion.

The crisis properly dispatched, Nagano has a few — but only a few — minutes to chat. He is just in town from concerts with his European anchor, Berlin's Deutsches-Symphonie, which he had brought to Los Angeles last season for the memorable performance of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. After the Berkeley concert he will drop in on the Los Angeles Opera to prepare for the performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* that opens this weekend and runs through June 20. By then it will be time to get to work on Hector Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust*, which Nagano will conduct at the L.A. Opera's season opener next September. Oh, and by the way, during his stay in Los Angeles this month he will be anointed the company's music director, the first possessor of that important title. Strong hands on

the podium were not always the top priority of the company's founder, Peter Hemmings; they have become more so under Plácido Domingo's hegemony — even though Domingo's own occasional podium stints have not exactly lit lights.

Berlin, Los Angeles, London, Lyons, Paris: The 51-year-old Nagano certainly moves among the major gigs, yet he has also been conductor of the Berkeley Symphony for 25 years and has no plans to stop. The BSO, as it is lovingly referred to by the natives, was founded in 1969 (as the “Berkeley Promenade Orchestra”) by a hopeful maestro, Brit-trained, named Thomas Rarick; the *L.A. Times*' Mark Swed was one of the first conductors. The “Prom”'s stock-in-trade was an easygoing performing style in street clothes and a passion for overreaching. (In a performance of Mahler's Fourth Symphony, the percussionist made up for the absence of the prescribed sleigh bells by banging his keys against a music stand.) Nagano, fresh from music studies at UC Santa Cruz, came on as conductor in 1978. He put the players in matching socks, and adopted the more formal name and a more serious programming. The first concerts were in the 750-seat First Congregational Church; in 1989 the orchestra moved to the 2,015-seat Zellerbach. (Tom Rarick, by the way, went on to become lieutenant governor of the state of Indiana.)

Over takeout and iced tea in his dressing room, Nagano tries to define the ties that bind him to underdog Berkeley as well as top-dog Berlin and Los Angeles. “Actually, I regard working here as a privilege, and that's because the players also feel that way. A good percent of the players have been here since I came, and that kind of loyalty comes to mean a lot. We have an interesting age gap in the orchestra: some who've retired from the San Francisco Symphony and other orchestras, plus a lot of students. It's fascinating to watch the way the one age group has such an influence on the other. There's a human value here, and I don't sense it anywhere near as clearly in my other orchestras.

“Beyond that, there is the chance to explore, to experiment, that I don’t find in other orchestras. Here is Berkeley; up in those hills there are scientists, Pulitzer winners, Nobel winners, radical thinkers. This affects the way I plan the season for the BSO. We give maybe six concerts a year. We do a certain portion of the standard repertory — tomorrow night we play two contemporary works plus two by Mozart. But I have the chance here to look for composers who may be making a stir somewhere. Take Unsuk Chin, for example. She has had a lot of performances in Europe, and I’m sorry you won’t hear her concerto tomorrow. We got eight curtain calls when we did it in Berlin, and we’ll bring it back here in a year or two. She was once composer in residence with my Berlin orchestra.”

In a city that supports nearly a dozen full-time orchestras while fighting off the demons of poverty, Nagano has found a distinctive niche for his Deutsches-Symphonie. The orchestra’s history goes back to prewar Berlin, when it played under Wilhelm Furtwängler at the Berlin State Opera. After WWII it re-formed with American support as the Orchestra of RIAS (Radio in the American Sector), whose conductors included Ferenc Fricsay and Lorin Maazel. It kept the “radio” identity until recently; Nagano has been its conductor since 2000.

“In a sense,” Nagano recalls, “the orchestra has carried on the Furtwängler mission. You think of him as a conductor of Beethoven and Brahms, but he also had a keen appetite for the new music of his time. Even so, we’ve had to bring that appetite up to date. Obviously, Schoenberg’s music would have been proscribed in earlier days, and so I organized the celebration in 2001 and ’02 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his death. *Moses und Aron* became part of that celebration; we brought it to Berlin and Vienna. Plácido wanted us to come to Los Angeles with a premiere, but giving *Moses und Aron* for the first time here was premiere enough.”

Nagano's arrival on the operatic scene came about in a topsy-turvy manner — not the usual apprenticeship with Mozart and Rossini but through Olivier Messiaen and his daunting *Saint François d' Assise*. In 1981 Nagano had invited Messiaen to sit in on a festival of his music in Berkeley, and the venerable *maître* returned the favor by inviting him to Paris to assist Seiji Ozawa in the premiere of the opera. It was Nagano who, years later, made the first complete recording of Messiaen's opera; by then he had also recorded a number of performances with France's Opéra de Lyon; his delicious production of Prokofiev's *Love for Three Oranges* copped all kinds of prizes, for the performance itself and for the video.

"I could never have opera as my exclusive love," he says. Still, the list of works he has triumphed in adds up to a declaration of hope for the future of that peculiar medium: Kaija Saariaho's *L'amour de Loin* in its Salzburg premiere, John Adams' *El Niño* in Paris, Adams' *The Death of Klinghoffer* in Brussels and *Nixon in China* in Los Angeles.

Where, with all that traveling, does Kent Nagano feel at home?

"In California," he says without hesitation. "My home is in San Francisco, which I love because of the weather . . . the fog. I grew up in Morro Bay, where my parents — second-generation Japanese — had a commercial farm, 300 acres of artichokes, sugar beets, strawberries. There was a refugee from Munich, Vaclav Korischelli, who persuaded the Morro Bay School District to let him teach a music class — 7:30 in the morning and again after school in the afternoon. And so, a dozen of us kids — the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Jerry Folsom was one of us — got this real *Hochschule* music training from early on.

"The Japanese identity is a little harder to hold on to, after three generations here in California, with the open, uncrowded beauty of the central coast around Morro Bay in my personal background. I've traveled to Japan with my orchestras, of course, but I'm not aware of any 'returning

native son' treatment in the big cities. Where I have felt that is in my ancestral home in a small village near Kumamoto, on Kyushu Island. After my grandfather emigrated to California he kept sending money back to help rebuild that city. When I first visited there, seven or eight years ago, I did get the honored-son treatment.

"I do live, of course, with many identities. But if you want to know who I am, as *The Mikado's* song goes, 'I am, above all, Californian.'"