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Music



NEIL MICHAEL Axiom Photo D. Kern Holoman took the baton for the UC Davis Symphony Orchestra for good in 1978. His legacy includes challenging performances and a much larger roster of musicians.

More Information

- UC Davis Symphony Orchestra: 50th Anniversary Golden Jubilee Gala
UC DAVIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA: 50TH ANNIVERSARY GOLDEN JUBILEE GALA

WHEN: 8 tonight

WHERE: Jackson Hall, Mondavi Center for the Arts, UC Davis

TICKETS: \$10-\$16; \$5-\$8 student and children

INFORMATION: (530) 754-2787 or www.mondaviarts.org

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UCD Symphony conductor taking his bow

Orchestra's 50-year gala coincides with Holoman's 30th and final year

By Edward Ortiz

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Published: Sunday, Nov. 23, 2008 | Page 11EXPLORE

When D. Kern Holoman came to the University of California, Davis, in the 1970s, he was drawn to the idea of teaching in a forward-looking music department on a campus plunked in the middle of sun-drenched tomato fields.

He was fresh off earning his doctorate in music history from Princeton. His career as a music historian was on the rise, and his interest in conducting was a budding notion. At the time, the move to Davis felt like just another career stepping stone. But as an avid gardener, he was also drawn to the long growing season in California.

And, more important, as a music teacher and conductor, he began to see himself as a gardener of sorts, too.

"I really wanted to see what would blossom here," said Holoman. "I like the idea of planting seeds and sitting back and watching them grow."

Holoman stayed, and what blossomed was the musical evolution of the UC Davis Symphony Orchestra. Today, audiences will be able to see what Holoman has wrought as its conductor during its 50th-year gala celebration at the Mondavi Center's Jackson Hall.

The event is a swan song, as it marks Holoman's 30th and final year with the orchestra. Holoman will conduct Ernest Chausson's "Poeme" with the highly regarded violinist Jorja Fleezanis as soloist. Fleezanis will be familiar to locals as former associate concertmaster with the San Francisco Symphony. She is now concertmaster of the Minnesota Orchestra.

Also performing will be guest conductor Jeffrey Thomas on Beethoven's "Gloria" from "Missa Solemnis", and Holoman conducting Brahms' epic Symphony No. 4 in E Minor.

That's pretty heady fare for a university orchestra. But it is exactly in keeping with the expectations Holoman brought to the orchestra when he officially became its fourth conductor in 1978.

"It's fair to say that when I took over there were some struggling little band stuff going on," he said.

When he arrived, Holoman encountered an orchestra in need of musicians and in search of a wider audience. Founded in 1959, it had roughly 40 musicians. Today, the orchestra boasts 100, including players from the Sacramento Philharmonic.

To accomplish his lofty musical goals, Holoman reached out to members of the now-defunct Sacramento Symphony for its teacher core. This effort eventually brought such players as Sacramento Philharmonic bassist Tom Derthick and cellist Susan Lamb Cook to the UC Davis fold.

And Holoman expanded the scope of the orchestra to include touring. Under his leadership the orchestra has performed in France and Australia.

One legacy Holoman leaves is ensuring the orchestra's student musicians develop a solid foundation by playing the major orchestral works.

Another, perhaps more important one is how he influenced young musical minds. One of those is current concertmaster Cynthia Bates, who first encountered Holoman when she was an undergraduate violinist and Holoman stepped in to conduct for Duyong Chung in 1975.

Bates counts Holoman as a musical mentor, which may explain why she has stayed with the orchestra ever since.

Upon Holoman's arrival, Bates was surprised to see Berlioz's Requiem on the concert schedule. The great and daunting work requires four smaller groups along with the main orchestra. It's the kind of work that most professional orchestras think twice before attempting.

"I think this sort of exemplified Kern's vision," said Bates. "I felt that, from the start, he was determined to do really interesting and demanding kinds of things. And those involved were encompassed by this vision ... and are now grateful beneficiaries."

Along the way, the orchestra has not been shy about rediscovering works rarely or never performed, such as its tackling of Berlioz's "Chant du 9 Thermidor." And it has also been a champion of local composers, with the works of the Empyrean Ensemble's Laurie San Martin and Pablo Ortiz getting their due on the concert stage.

Holoman believes that in the past three decades he has imparted a lush sound to the orchestra. And he believes he has taught his musicians the crucial awareness that it is how an orchestra approaches a score that defines its sound.

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