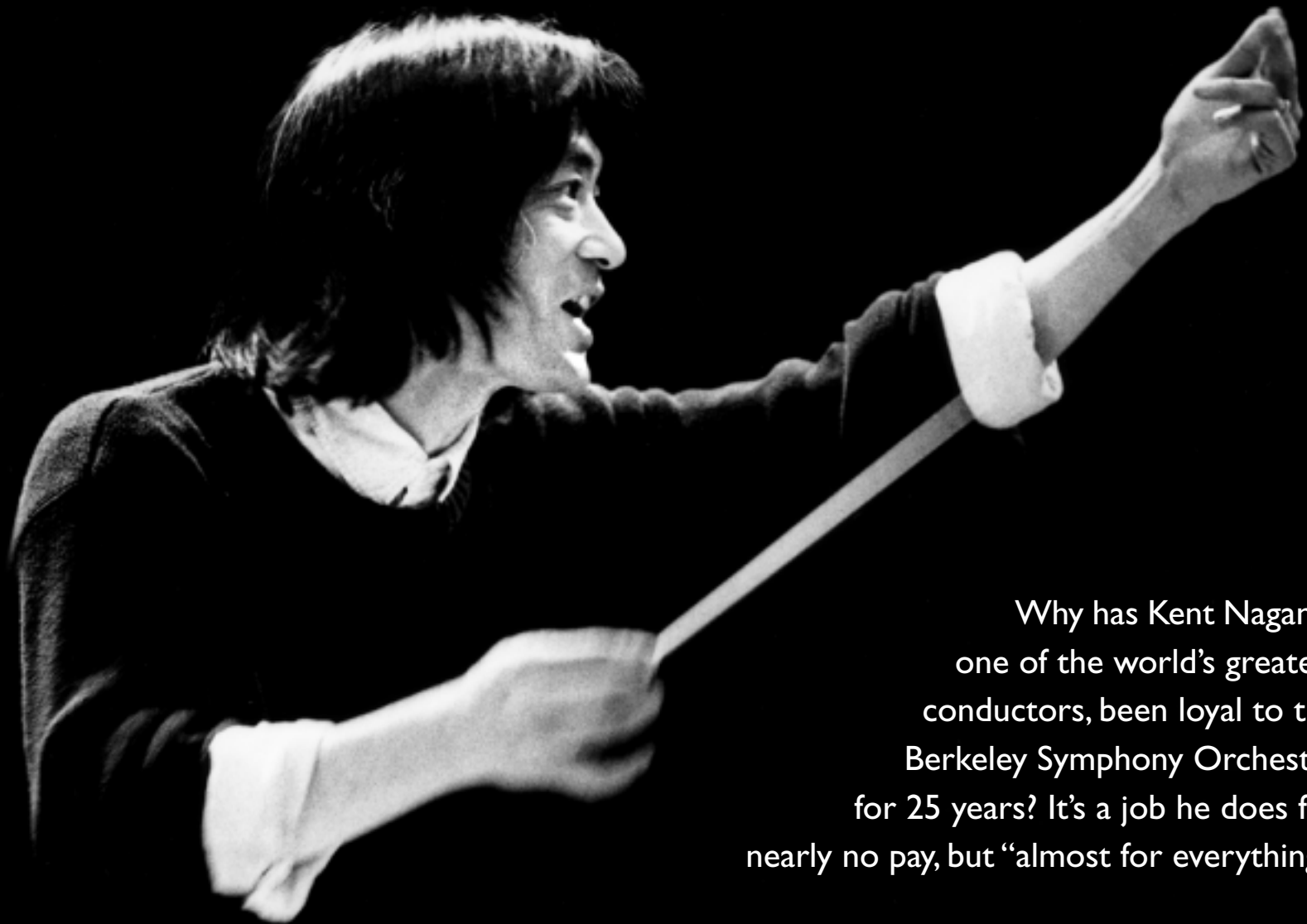


PARIS, Munich,  
Salzburg, Milan, Vienna,  
Prague, LONDON,  
Berlin . . .

**BERKELEY?**



Why has Kent Nagano, one of the world's greatest conductors, been loyal to the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra for 25 years? It's a job he does for nearly no pay, but "almost for everything."

**T**his month East Bay music lovers will take their seats and applaud an entrance as striking as it is familiar: the lithe, square-jawed figure of Kent Nagano seizing the stage with a purposeful, elegant stride. One of the world's most sought-after conductors, Nagano heads into his 25th season as musical director of the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra, bringing the dramatic flair and sense of urgency that have earned this quirky group of seasoned pros and devoted amateurs recognition they would never have seen without him. Critics hail the orchestra's "passionate engagement," its expertise, and daring premieres. Nagano credits the Berkeley musicians' intensity, saying they play "as if their lives depended on it."

In fact they depend on Nagano, and the lengths to which he goes to squeeze his Berkeley appearances into a hectic international schedule planned years in advance. He has been known to lapse into French or German at rehearsal, having flown in from Europe just hours beforehand. The high-wire act often means a punishing itinerary. Last January he shuttled between Berkeley and

**Photographs  
by Marshall  
Berman**

Los Angeles—where he's principal conductor of the L.A. Opera, headed by Plácido Domingo—for six concerts in nine days. One day last March he flew in from Berlin in the afternoon to attend an evening benefit concert for the BSO musicians' pension fund, then flew back to Berlin at 10 the next morning.

**By  
Juan  
Rodriguez**

So why does one of the world's great maestros—innovative, charismatic, deeply thoughtful—soldier on with the small orchestra that gave him his first job? His loyalty to Berkeley has been described as "bizarre" by *Los Angeles Times* critic Mark Swed, "unprecedented in the modern age of conductor careerism." Recently I asked Nagano when the question of his leaving the Berkeley outfit had last come up. He broke into the raucous laugh that occasionally punctuates his calm, precise cadence. "Just two nights ago!" He paused, as if searching for a new explanation, then came back to the answer he says he always gives: As long as the Berkeley musicians make a total commitment to his rigorous challenges, "I am where I want to be." **continued on page 14**

And so Nagano will keep making headlines at prestigious showcases like the Salzburg Festival and the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris; he'll continue as musical director of the progressive Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester, one of the big three orchestras in the world's most important music city today; and, for the 25th year, he'll come back to Berkeley.

**N**agano says he remains with the Berkeley orchestra "virtually for nothing" (monetarily) but "almost for everything." He was born in Berkeley, spent his formative years on the California coast, and has known many of the orchestra's members for much of his life. Although he now spends most of his time in Europe (he has apartments in Berlin, Paris, and London), he still calls the Bay Area home. A meticulous planner, Nagano remodeled an elegant Maybeck on a hilltop in San Francisco's Forest Hills neighborhood.

Nagano's work with the Berkeley players reflects his notion that "the conductor's function is not to be famous but to assume responsibility for the music." He also believes in the power of music to transform the culture of a community. Nagano's own success in transforming a small local orchestra into a serious and daring organization that regularly tackles demanding new works illustrates his belief that "music nourishes a community's soul." Music, he says, "has a direct correlation to the quality-of-life issues we so cavalierly toss around. It's not a purely empirically measurable aspect, such as affordable housing or the number of parks.

There's a profound sense of fulfillment in communicating through music those parts of us that are at the essence of humanity."

Nagano's measured tone changes to the excited rush of a local activist when he raves about the proposed renovation of the old UC Theater—once proud home to the longest-running series of midnight *Rocky Horror Picture Show* screenings in the U.S.—as a permanent home for the BSO. Acoustic tests have gone extraordinarily well at the local historical landmark, and if seismic safety and financing issues can be resolved, the theater could open in two or three years.

The space, refurbished to seat 1,000, could at long last give the BSO preferred treatment for events scheduling and rehearsal availability; the symphony currently plays second fiddle to CalPerformances at Zellerbach and to the Berkeley Rep at the Roda Theatre.

"Rather than expand too quickly when the economic situation was very favorable," Nagano explains, "we took a conservative economic path. The result has been a wonderful prolonged period of slow but steady growth." Such words—"prolonged," "slow," "steady"—are not normally signposts on a career fast-track, but they represent long-term values, incubated in Berkeley, that Nagano brings to all his myriad endeavors.

**The forceful quality of BSO's collective musicianship—70 to 75 union and nonunion players—has made it a desirable place for musicians to rise to Nagano's challenges; auditions for open chairs are always full.**

Inevitably there are comparisons between Nagano and San Francisco Symphony music director Michael Tilson Thomas, perhaps the most salient being their respective resources: The BSO has a meager \$1 million budget, patched together from government and foundation grants and donations; the San Francisco Symphony, which Tilson Thomas took over in 1995, has a \$43 million purse. Nagano was passed over for the San Francisco job, and dismissed the decision with one of his trademark there's-a-time-and-place-for-everything spiels. Personally, the two maestros maintain a cordial relationship, having crossed

paths at the London Symphony, which the Los Angeles-born Tilson Thomas led as principal conductor for seven years while Nagano was principal guest conductor.

But it's not hard to detect in the East Bay an appetite for the role of underdog, the little orchestra that could. Nagano embraces an adventurous schedule, rife with premieres from around the world, while the S.F. Symphony's repertoire extends only as far as subscribers' tastes will go. Tilson Thomas has injected a healthy dose of modern Americana, but audiences still expect him to deliver the classics, and the San Francisco orchestra is occasionally chided for not going further. *San Francisco Chronicle* critic Allan Ulrich said last year, "There's no reason the San Francisco Symphony shouldn't sponsor regular open-workshop reading sessions, akin to Nagano's *Under Construction* in the East Bay." That series, now a decade-long tradition in Berkeley, brings new Bay Area music to the community at large. Free to the public, the annual event's bright atmosphere of discovery is electric. (See *Playbill* below for upcoming concert information.)

Of course, no orchestra on the West Coast does premieres, in amount and variety, quite like Berkeley. "Nagano's championing of the music of his time remains one of the more cheering aspects of Bay Area musical life," noted Ulrich. The forceful quality of its collective musicianship—70 to 75 union and nonunion players—has also made the BSO a desirable place for musicians to rise to Nagano's challenges; auditions for open chairs are always full.

Last January Nagano added a dramatic new rendering of Beethoven's *Seventh* to the end of a program of premieres. His joke—Beethoven as "emerging composer"—poked fun at Berkeley's penchant for premieres, but it also emphasized Nagano's talent for tackling classics in fresh ways. *Chronicle* critic Joshua Kosman hailed the BSO performance in a review for "infusing this symphony with the obstreperous energy it needs. Where Nagano succeeded most strikingly was in giving the music speed and weight without the deadening air of monumentality."

The same can be said for Nagano's own highly individualistic career. Call him a cool breeze—a Californian who loves surfing (he tries to schedule two surfing



Knowing the score: Nagano with Cuban-born guitarist Manuel Barrueco.

holidays annually), martial arts (meditative and athletic), and fast cars (including Ferraris)—though he rolls his eyes at caricatures ("classical music's hot new conductor dude," as *People* magazine one dubbed him).

In essence, he's a bracing blend of California casual and old-world formality, extolling Berlin as one of the few remaining outposts of manners and protocol. He bucks the image of conductor as tyrant or aloof autocrat, yet he's a fierce taskmaster. While most conductors are loathe to speak to an audience, Nagano will frequently introduce a new work with a few well-chosen phrases, as when he explained the surfer-slang title of *Gnarly Buttons* at the 2001 premiere of this ode to California by Berkeley resident John Adams.

Nagano has conducted more artistically successful and critically acclaimed performances in the last 15 years than any other musician. His recording career is quite likely the most prolific and interesting of his generation. And yet he's underappreciated at home in the U.S. When Plácido Domingo persuaded him to take over as the L.A. Opera's principal conductor, it was Nagano's first posting with a large American orchestra. It has been a decade since Nagano was anointed "the next Leonard Bernstein" by *New York* magazine, yet it is in Europe where he is a star. Last December he was chosen to lead Bill Clinton and Sophia Loren, accompanied by the Russian National Orchestra, through *The Wolf and Peter*, a rejig of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* for a charity CD, which also involved Mikhail Gorbachev and Nelson Mandela. Europe is where Nagano is most appreciated for marching to his own muses, bringing audiences and musicians along with him, in a daring career that has defied careerism.

**N**agano, 51, grew up on an artichoke farm near Morro Bay. The farm was started by his first-generation Japanese-American grandparents, who were interned by the U.S. government during World War II. Nagano's father and mother, who were also interned, interrupted their studies at U.C. Berkeley (in architecture and microbiology, respectively) to work the family farm when Nagano's grandfather fell ill. When he was four his classically trained mother began teaching him to play the piano. Music was "completely voluntary and joyful," he says. "We [two sisters and a brother] just wanted to play like Mom." By high school, Nagano was proficient at the koto, viola,

clarinet, and electric guitar.

He benefited early on from the arrival in Morro Bay of a Professor Korisheli from the Munich Conservatory. Trained in the Soviet Union, Korisheli established a rigorous conservatory in the fishing town's elementary school system that had young Nagano working early and late hours throughout the 1960s (and planting the seeds of his notoriously indefatigable pace). In the middle of coastal California, the budding musician was able to connect directly to the European musical tradition.

Undecided on a career path, Nagano studied music and sociology at U.C. Santa Cruz, earning dual degrees in 1974. While doing grad work in music at San Francisco State, he hedged his bets by attending graduate-level classes in sociology at the University of San Francisco. He thought his keen interest in sociopolitical sciences (which continues to this day) might lead to a job in the diplomatic corps, politics, or law. "Though it did not occur to me at the time," he told the U.C. Santa Cruz alumni magazine recently, "these studies would prove to be an introduction to a life's work in international communication—one without words but through music, aesthetics, art, and theater, rather than politics." He found himself filling in so often for university and local community conductors that, de facto, he had become a conductor himself. Later he worked as assistant to conductor Laszlo Varga at San Francisco State and as associate artistic director of the Opera Company of Boston under Sarah Caldwell.

In 1978 Nagano took over what was then the Berkeley Promenade Orchestra—his first real conducting job—a community ensemble that performed in street clothes. Nagano set up chairs and swept the floor in the rehearsal "shed," which was occasionally so cold that instruments cracked. He couldn't fire incompetents because they weren't being paid in the first place. He could have hired outside musicians to play the principal chairs as the orchestra gathered momentum but decided not to, says the orchestra's longtime French horn player Richard Reynolds (whose day job is communications director for *Mother Jones* magazine). "He looked at the people that he had and challenged them to play better. Pretty quickly he had us wearing tuxes."

Nagano carved out a niche for the BSO by specializing in a modern repertoire, carefully programming more familiar fare to bring audiences along. His early

## Berkeley Playbill

The Berkeley Symphony Orchestra's remaining 2002-03 season includes the following performances:

**April 27, 8 pm, St. John's Presbyterian Church**

*Under Construction*. Now celebrating its tenth year, *Under Construction* showcases freshly penned works by emerging Bay Area composers. The concert's rehearsal/reading format allows for dialogue between the audience, composer, musicians, and conductor. Conducted by the BSO's assistant conductor, George Thomson, and hosted by Kent Nagano, with a post-concert reception. The concert is free to the public.

**April 29, 8 pm, Zellerbach Hall, U.C. Berkeley**

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Overture to *Don Giovanni*  
Unsk Chin: Violin Concerto (U.S. premiere), Tibor Kováč, violin  
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Piano Concerto in C Minor, K. 491, No. 24*, Benedetto Lupo, piano  
Régis Campo, *Symphony No. 1* (world premiere)

**June 13, 8 pm, Zellerbach Hall, U.C. Berkeley**

David Benoit/Jean-Pascal Beintus, *Kobe* (world premiere)  
Ichiro Nodaira, *Piano Concerto* (world premiere), Markus Pawlik, piano  
Johannes Brahms, *Symphony No. 4*

The 2003-04 season, not announced at press time, will include two works by the BSO's first composer-in-residence, Naomi Sekiya: *Guitars Concerto* and a new work written for the Berkeley Symphony, *Sinfonia*.

For more Berkeley Symphony Orchestra concert information, visit [www.berkeleysymphony.org](http://www.berkeleysymphony.org).

mentors, the ethereal French composer Olivier Messiaen and American iconoclast Frank Zappa, helped launch the Berkeley outfit's reputation—and started Nagano on his rapid rise in the classical firmament.

Nagano decided in 1979 that the BSO should undertake a six-concert cycle of Messiaen's major orchestral works. After the first performance he sent a tape to the composer in Paris, asking for criticism. Messiaen was so impressed that he replied with a densely written two-page note and visited Berkeley in 1981 to help prepare for the West Coast premiere of his *Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, performed to enthusiastic response at Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco. That a critical San Francisco public welcomed the little cross-bay orchestra, Nagano says, turned out to be a very important moment for the Berkeley Symphony, helping the group cultivate a sense of professional pride.

Around then he came upon some sheet music by Frank Zappa at the Paris office of the prickly French

**Nagano says “there really aren’t any excuses for mistakes. Ever.” Yet he’s unafraid of putting himself and his colleagues at risk of failure. Had the orchestra not made “that total commitment, I would’ve given it up long ago.”**

composer, conductor, and modern music guru Pierre Boulez, who had commissioned the title track of Zappa's *The Perfect Stranger*, an album of the rock maestro's classical works. Nagano contacted Zappa about performing some scores. As it happened, Zappa had already done research on Nagano. A partnership was born, and in 1983 Zappa enlisted Nagano to conduct the London Symphony through his fiendishly tricky works for the aptly named album, *London Symphony Orchestra*.

It was Nagano's first conducting gig with a big-city orchestra. A year later the Berkeley Symphony mounted a lavish production (including performance art by giant, bawdy puppets) of Zappa music over two nights at Zellerbach that cost \$100,000 to produce, leaving BSO \$50,000 in the hole and on the verge of bankruptcy. It was another turning point: Nagano and colleagues learned a valuable lesson about working within means.

A milestone in Nagano's career came soon thereafter. Through Messiaen, he was offered a job as assistant to Seiji Ozawa, music director of the Boston Symphony. Nagano was a sensation in 1984 as a last-minute substitute for Ozawa, leading the Boston musicians through Gustav Mahler's



*Fast and furious: Nagano conducting the Berkeley Symphony and German baritone Dietrich Henshel through a rehearsal.*

epic *Ninth*—with no rehearsal and having never conducted the piece before. A star was born. Nagano's performance drew comparisons to Leonard Bernstein's career-making 1943 stand-in for conductor Bruno Walter at the New York Philharmonic.

The immediate result of the performance was receiving the \$75,000 NEA-Seaver prize for conductors. From there, Nagano went on to study with both the ebullient Bernstein and the icy Pierre Boulez. Nagano says both had “one huge effect on me: Never be afraid of working too hard. Never take a shortcut.” Soon he was jetting around the world, conducting as many as 20 orchestras annually (and becoming the first classical conductor to model jeans for Gap ads). “Every once in awhile I woke up and had no idea what time zone I was in, where I was staying, and it took me a good full minute to figure it out.”

His reputation as an invigorator of underachieving orchestras (apart from Berkeley) was cemented in 1989 when he became musical director of the Opéra National de Lyon, derided by Parisians as a “provincial” organization. Quickly his landmark recordings with the opera—Prokofiev's *The Love of Three Oranges*, a French-language *Salome* by Richard Strauss, and the premiere of John Adams' controversial *The Death of Klinghoffer*—won prestigious Gramophone Awards and Grammys. Nagano oversaw the renovation of Lyon's opera house, its interior dramatic black with custom-crafted acoustic baffles covering the walls and glow-worm lights at every seat to aid in libretto-reading. (Midway through his nine-year tenure with Lyon Nagano was named an Officer in the Order of Arts and Letters, France's second-highest civilian honor.) In 1995 he brought the orchestra to the Bay Area for a two-week American debut that had *Time* magazine raving, “Now U.S. audiences are getting a look at the next great conductor.”

His triumphant five-hour performance in 1998 of Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise* with the Lyon Opera in Salzburg was recorded by Deutsche Grammophon. Writing in *Musical America*, *Los Angeles Times* critic Swed declared Nagano's recordings of this—and his renderings of Busoni's *Doktor*

*Faust*, Peter Eötvös's opera *Three Sisters* (commissioned by Nagano), and Leonard Bernstein's posthumous *A White House Cantata*—“the four most necessary operatic recordings of the century's end.”

Nagano's interest in the modern repertoire may have cost him consideration for the New York Philharmonic's vacancy in 2000. American audiences aren't generally exposed to Nagano-style revitalizations of standards and discoveries of little-known works. “We human beings have an exasperating need to classify and cubby-hole, which means there's pressure on you not to experiment,” Nagano says. “An orchestra is a human phenomenon. You have to make an effort to avoid the routine. If you do one thing over and over again then the senses become dulled.”

Nagano's unflappable drive for perfection turns off some musicians, Adams told the *New Times L.A.*, “because they think he doesn't know when to stop.” Berkeley's Reynolds says, “Kent will spend a long time going over a passage note by note to improve the intonation. Some musicians might feel they're above that kind of thing. He can be nitpicky, but I've never found anything in rehearsal to be anything than useful.” Nagano says “there really aren't any excuses for mistakes. Ever.” Yet he's unafraid of putting himself and his colleagues at risk of failure. Had the orchestra not made “that total commitment, I would've given it up long ago.”

“The overwhelming reason we dedicate our lives to music,” he says, “is because we firmly share a belief in the mysterious, powerful, benevolent force of live performance of great repertoire.”

Nagano enjoys an ineffable magnetic pull to the music. His stamina and drive are legendary. He conducted six performances and nine recording sessions of *El Niño*, John Adams' millennial nativity oratorio, in around 10 days while suffering a severe flu that would've laid most people out.

Then there was September 11, 2001. Nagano was flying from Germany to Los Angeles, where he was scheduled to conduct the L.A. Opera's first-ever rendering of Wagner's *Lohengrin*—his first staged Wagner opera. With air schedules gone haywire after the New York and Washington, D.C.

disasters, Nagano's plane was over Calgary when it was suddenly ordered back to Frankfurt (via Iceland for refueling), but was not allowed to land in Frankfurt and detoured to Leipzig. From there he managed a flight to Munich, then, after a day devising a route to L.A., flew to Frankfurt and took a plane to Mexico City, then transferred to a small junker for the journey to Guadalajara, then to Tijuana. A bomb scare at the border delayed him another two hours before driving on to Los Angeles. Despite missing the final rehearsals, he led the opera through the performance of their lives. A coming of age, said one critic; a “balm for the soul,” said another. And a pointed reminder of the power of music.

Nagano often talks about music in spiritual terms. He says it embraces the four elements, “the vast range of emotions, the deep spiritual connections we have, our tremendous intellectual capacities and the physical abilities we have to feel so many stimuli.” The rigorous martial art of *shintaido* and “common sense” help the soft-spoken conductor keep these elements in balance, allowing him to absorb brutal schedules and dire straits alike.

“I do love this stimulating lifestyle but I take precautions to make sure I don't take physical health for granted,” he says. He starts at 5 a.m. with three and a half hours of study, “quietly, without the distractions of the everyday world. I dedicate long periods of gestation—a year and a half—for studying the repertoire that I'm currently performing. I try not to have things be a quick study. I love the chance to look inside and analyze and deconstruct and reconstruct, search and research these great masterpieces, to go into deeper levels of discovery.”

He thinks far ahead, yet lives in the moment. He delayed until 2006 a high-tech version of Wagner's monumental five-day cycle of *The Ring* with the L.A. Opera—using effects concocted by friends at Industrial Light & Magic—so it could coalesce without looking gimmicky. He recently signed a five-year deal to become music director in 2006 of the Munich-based Bavarian State Opera, succeeding Zubin Mehta. It's anyone's guess what effect Nagano will have on that paragon of Germanic traditionalism.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18

And this month he'll bring it all back home to Berkeley with the U.S. premiere of Unsuk Chin's *Violin Concerto* (with soloist Tibor Kováč), which drew eight curtain calls at its Berlin premiere, and French composer Régis Campo's first symphony (inspired by his composing residency in Berkeley). As a reminder of the Berkeley musicians' versatility, the program includes Mozart's *Overture to Don Giovanni* and *Piano Concerto No. 24* (with the acclaimed Italian soloist Benedetto Lupo).

In 1992 Nagano married Osaka-born pianist Mari Kodama, a colleague of five years, shortly after recording Prokofiev's piano concertos with her. Mari's career has recently “exploded,” he says with evident pride. She's one of the few classical musicians to be rewarded with a new recording contract in an age when big names are being dropped unceremoniously, and is currently recording Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas. Their four-year-old daughter, Karin, “sees Mama and Papa at the keyboards from morning to night, and wants to be like Mom. But unlike my isolated childhood, she's already gone around the world 15 times,

**Nagano sympathizes with those who are intimidated by orchestral music. By comparison, he confesses it was only recently that he began to appreciate the subtleties of wine, strange for a cultured Californian.**

and French is often spoken around the house. She knows the words to her favorite video,” Nagano laughs, “*The Marriage of Figaro*.”

A great repertoire, like the music Nagano brings to audiences around the world, appeals to many listeners, but fear of the unfamiliar, or of instrumental music in general, keeps some from taking the plunge. “I totally sympathize with that nearly overwhelming, fragile feeling of thinking you're not quite understanding things that everybody else ‘appears’ to be ‘getting,’” Nagano says. By comparison, he confesses it was only recently that he began to appreciate the subtleties of wine, strange for a cultured Californian.

“Everyone who attends a concert goes to discover something unknown, and that shared sense of discovery is what makes live music so extraordinary,” he continues. “If you go with an open mind, the opportunity for discovery and tremendous emotional reaction can be more invigorating than you could possibly imagine. It's the opposite of cynicism.” ●

*Juan Rodriguez is a Montreal-based critic who has written about music, entertainment, and popular culture since 1967. He is currently completing The Book of Cool, a critique, and The Scene Changes, a personal pan-musical journey.*