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Filipino symphony orchestra...

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migrated to the US in 1991. For six years, this 1982 National Music Competition for Young Artists Grand Prize winner was with the Manila Symphony Orchestra, eventually becoming its principal flutist. Then, he joined the Manila Chamber Orchestra for seven years.

'70s dance band

As a young boy, Bob was introduced to music by his grandfather, Augusto R. Samaniego Sr., in Kawit, Cavite. Augusto, who was a member of the Philippine Constabulary Band, taught Bob early—at age 7—to play the clarinet. The talented boy played for his Lolo's local band, Magdalo. In high school, he picked up the saxophone and joined a '70s music dance band. Bob's grandfather passed on the baton to him to continue leading and conducting Magdalo. He also worked as a musician on the score of Filipino movies.

"I can't think of any word to explain the excitement we feel," shared Bob, who is the founding conductor of a youth symphony orchestra in Boyle Heights, a district east of downtown LA. "This is history. It's a great blessing to be part of this."

Bob was understandably guarded when Bochok called him on behalf of Roger and Cora, who are staunch supporters of the arts and the Filipino communities across the US, about forming a Fil-Am symphony orchestra. He recalled, "I was very excited, but I had mixed emotions, because I wasn't sure if this was a serious venture or just more empty talk."

Now, the orchestra is a reality. Just the sight of those Filipino musicians going through a piece that evokes Mindanao instilled joy and national pride in us that evening. "What makes it special is that, this is a dream come true for most of us," declared Bob.

Bob said that the orchestra now has about 40 members, ranging from promising musicians like brothers, Roth and Steven Ramos, Charlene Rugayan and Julia Geber, to veteran Tagumpay de Leon. "Most of the first batch of members were colleagues here and from Manila," he stated. "So, we pretty much knew their musical capacity. We are continuing with the audition process because more and more Fil-Ams are showing interest in joining FASO."

Concert pianists

Asked how challenging it was to conduct an orchestra where members vary significantly in age and experience, Bob answered: "The excitement is priceless, but it's quite challenging to be dealing with the different levels. The good thing is that, some of the more experienced members are always there to help the less experienced."

We told Bob that the Oriels are brave, bold souls for forming an orchestra in these economic times. "With the current economic situation, it might be a little more challenging on the business side," Bob admitted. "But, based on my experience and those shared with me by my grandfather and other mentors, music and the arts go on no matter what the economic situation is. Good music is food for the soul—it nourishes us when we are depressed."

He shared what's in store for the audience on the historic night of May 17: "We will be performing some light classics, but most of the repertoire will be Filipino classics and pop music."

Joey Albert, Stephanie Reese and Pete Avendaño are the featured guest artists. Bob disclosed, "Stephanie and Pete will be singing some arias and kundiman. Joey will sing her popular hits, with the orchestra accompanying her, which seldom happens nowadays. When you go to a pop concert, you usually hear a minus- one accompanying the featured artist."

Love songs

He stressed, "With people craving to listen to good Filipino music, everyone can't wait to hear their favorite Filipino folk and love songs being played by FASO."

As for future plans for FASO, Bob revealed, "We would like to continue training the Filipino youth." He volunteered that it's gratifying to see the orchestra's younger members smiling when they recognize the pieces they're rehearsing as something that they had heard in their homes. For those who weren't exposed to Filipino classics, the rehearsals have been enriching; an opportunity to discover and appreciate their musical heritage.

In a community that's sometimes afflicted with the *ningas cogon* mentality—the trait of initial enthusiasm, followed by loss in interest—we expressed hope that something as wonderful as FASO will be a permanent institution.

"That's one of the reasons why we have FASO," Bob reacted with conviction. "This is a long-term plan—we'll do everything to succeed, with the continued support of Roger, Cora and Lito and the Filipino public. Our dream is to have a strong Filipino musical institution here in the US, to share the beauty of *Pinoy* music with our community and the mainstream audience."

We share the dream. We hope our *kababayans* will show up in droves on May 17. ■

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