

## The Filipino-American Symphony Orchestra

# Making Music, Making History



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**A**ll roads lead to Beverly Hills on May 17, 2009. The excitement unfolds. At long last, it is happening—the Filipino-American community in Los Angeles, California and elsewhere from across America and around the world gathers. The red carpet is rolled out, the lights are flashing, the stage is set at the historic Saban Theatre, which curiously, by the dictates of one's memory, is still fondly referred to by its old, more familiar name: the 1910 art deco landmark Wilshire Theatre.

The Filipino-American Symphony Orchestra (FASO), the first and only orchestra of its kind, is playing the music of our heritage, alongside high-caliber performers: multi-awarded recording artist Joey Albert; stage actress Stephanie Reese; and vocalist Christopher "Pete" Avendaño.

On this night commences what months of passion, hard work and determination built: FASO's highly anticipated gala performance in this prestigious epicenter of culture. Born of sheer ingenuity, FASO is fueled by love for one's country as expressed through the arts.

This event, like all other historical milestones, will forever define the chapter of history it is cradled in.

### From the backporch and beyond

What began as a casual conversation between friends at a back porch one summer has evolved into a full-fledged symphony orchestra now entering into the mainstream.

Roger Oriel, publisher and CEO of The Asian Journal and Lito Ocampo Cruz, Editor-at-Large for The Asian Journal and Editor-in-Chief for Balikbayan Magazine, felt the need for a symphony orchestra that showcases the talents of Filipino-Americans.

"There are many outstanding Filipino musicians out there," observed Roger. "The need was for someone or for one group to gather the musicians together and just form the orchestra."

Roger and Lito, both music lovers and visionaries,

decried this lack. There were, of course, Filipino musicians who played for orchestras of other ethnic groups, such as the Chinese and the Koreans, but a symphony orchestra composed mainly of Filipino-Americans was still not in place.

"Let's do it ourselves," challenged Lito. "A Filipino orchestra in America will cultivate the artistry of Filipino musicians." And such artistry, Lito believes, is innate in Filipinos.

### Concerted efforts

The idea set ablaze once more the passion for music of Roger and his wife Cora Oriel, Asian Journal President. The couple immediately enlisted the help of Cora's uncle, Andy Teeson, a violinist and a member, too, of the Asian Journal family.

Andy then got in touch with fellow musician Botchok Molina, whose service to the community is in playing the viola, to soothe the lonely and the weary in retirement homes.

Botchok, excited with the news, introduced Filipino-American musical conductor and former UP classmate Robert Shroder to the project. Bob is a member of the Local 47, an affiliate of the American Federation of Musicians.

With his background as a seasoned musician, as well as the founding conductor of the Boyle Heights Youth Symphony, Bob became the executive musical director and conductor of FASO.

"Like other Filipino musicians in America, I have dreamed of having an orchestra we can proudly call our own," Bob recounted. "But we needed a management group to take care of the administrative and business side of establishing and sustaining such an orchestra."

"Thank God, Roger and Cora Oriel and Lito Cruz passionately took up the cudgels and just did it," he said.

Roger and Lito met with some of FASO's key players: powerhouse musicians, which included Andy, Botchok and Bob, as well as violinist Cecilia Co Cruz and flutist Cheryl Lopez, along with SIPA's (Search to Involve Pilipino Americans) Nonoy Alsaybar.

### Harmony

The Asian Journal, the leading Filipino-American community newspaper, paved the way for other Filipino-American musicians—from within Los Angeles County and reaching as far as San Francisco and San Diego—to be involved in FASO.

"Some even drive for an hour just to get to the rehearsals. The parents of younger musicians also help out whenever they can. Sometimes, you'll see them arranging the seats before and after the sessions," shared Andy. "You can really see the involvement of the entire family."

Preparations for FASO have seen cooperation and creative genius spark, not only among its musicians, but also between the symphony orchestra and its supporters from local communities, such as those from Orange County, Long Beach and Riverside.

And through the support of SIPA Executive Director Joel F. Jacinto, the organization also opened its doors for FASO's rehearsals. The symphony orchestra met on Tuesday nights at SIPA's headquarters in Historic Filipinotown.

FASO showcases a line-up of talent—from child prodigies to veteran chamber musicians. They bring with them not only their musical instruments, but also their wealth of experience and passion for their craft. Among these passionate artists are cellist Art Octamio, pianist/violinist Kendro Calica, and violinist Jerico Flores.

"It never fails to overwhelm me as I see the group growing and growing right before my eyes. From just a handful, FASO has expanded to over 40 musicians," said Andy.

"Most of them come from work or school," he added, "Rarely does anyone miss practice. We just love music."

### Curtain Call

FASO's May 17 gala at the esteemed Saban Theatre in Beverly Hills marks another achievement for the Filipino-American community. The performance in this historic venue brings together the best in musical talent across generations.

### Play it forward

The Filipino-American Symphony Orchestra continues Asian Journal's vision to reach out to the community—and to pay it forward—as proceeds of the concert will provide scholarships for talented Filipino musicians.

And as the curtains are drawn on May 17, FASO once and for all takes its place in the annals of music history.

This symphony orchestra represents harmony in our community as it signifies both the reveries and memories of home and of family.

By popularizing our music—from the kundiman to the OPM—the richness of the Filipino musical heritage evokes memories of our homeland, even when we find ourselves thousands of miles away from it.

Armed with big dreams and a commitment to make a difference, The Asian Journal family and the Asian Journal Foundation give voice to our brightest musicians—all while paying homage to our culture, all for love of country.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome FASO! They're playing our song. ■