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Kedrick Armstrong Launches Oakland Symphony's Season

By Sarah Shay



First impressions matter. For 30-year-old [Kedrick Armstrong](#), the new music director for the Oakland Symphony, the opening of the new season on Oct. 18, as described in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “offered very promising signs.” Armstrong, who is following in the footsteps of the late Michael Morgan, who led the ensemble for 30 years before [his death in 2021](#), offered a bill of three new works commissioned by the orchestra, one long-neglected work, and Carl Nielsen’s 1916 Symphony No. 4, *The Inextinguishable*.

The program began with *Short Piece for Orchestra* by Black composer [Julia Perry](#), an “eventful, well-made work [with] a brassy, bustling opening that evoked a busy urban scene... [to which] the flutes and strings posed a soft, quizzical response.” Perry’s work, which was premiered nearly six decades ago by the New York Philharmonic, “merited its rediscovery here.”

The three commissions grew out of a partnership with the education-based Bay Area organization Living Jazz. Allison Miller’s “accurately self-described ‘cinematic’” *Valley of the Giants* combined “lyricism from the strings and several sumptuous saxophone solos” to paint a “sound picture” of the California redwoods. The composer’s percussive contributions, sadly, “felt intrusive and poorly integrated.”

A medley of songs by Bay Area singer-songwriter Meklit revealed Ethiopian influences as well as the “poetic imagery and the pentatonic scale Debussy and other Western composers sometimes use.” The words summoned rich visual imagery that was, unfortunately, somewhat diminished by the singer’s “wobbly vocal chops.” The third work—John Santos’s *Un Levantamiento (An Uprising)*, was “a brief but urgent protest song” about Puerto Rico’s centuries of colonial rule. Maria Cora delivered the spoken narrative “over steadily percolating music” that featured violin riffs and “the rapidly plucked strings of [a]... cuatro.”

Armstrong’s rendering of Nielsen’s Symphony No. 4, performed as written without pauses between its four movements, found the conductor and orchestra “in glorious accord.... Sounding as fine as it ever has.” Armstrong is a “tall and graceful” podium presence who “led with a strong but supple beat.” The performance, judged its reviewer, was “driven but never bombastic, languid but never turgid, at once spacious and tightly structured.”

The evening was a bright start to the tenure of the symphony’s new music director, who in his prefatory remarks linked Nielsen’s *Inextinguishable* symphony to the “tenacious and resilient” spirit of Oakland.



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