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# Oakland Symphony's new music director makes dynamic debut to open season

By Steven Winn



In a richly plotted program, the Oakland Symphony spun out multiple story lines to open its season at the Paramount Theatre. The evening came with a title that declared big, proud ambitions: “Inextinguishable Oakland!”

First and foremost of the narratives on Friday, Oct. 18, was the podium debut of the ensemble’s new music director, [Kedrick Armstrong](#). There were speeches. There was a city proclamation. And then the 30-year-old led a [locally rooted, globe-spanning bill](#) that featured three Oakland Symphony commissions of diverse new jazz works and a thrilling

performance of Danish composer Carl Nielsen’s 1916 Symphony No. 4.

Bonds between conductors and orchestras build and develop gradually, organically over years and often decades.

Armstrong’s predecessor, [Michael Morgan](#), worked 30 years to nurture a strong and vital connection, until [his death in 2021](#). Only time will tell about Armstrong and the Oakland players. But as an opening move, Friday’s concert offered very promising signs.

Some audience members were already primed for Armstrong’s official first night. Earlier this year, in what turned



out to be a successful audition for the post, he led an impressive Oakland Symphony program that included a semi-staged world premiere oratorio about [Paul Robeson](#) and Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5.

Friday's concert began with "A Short Piece for Orchestra" by the too-little-known Black composer Julia Perry (1924-1979). Performed by the New York Philharmonic in 1965, the eventful, well-made work merited its rediscovery here.

After a brassy, bustling opening that evoked a busy urban scene, the flutes and strings posed a soft, quizzical response. Over shifting, heaving rhythms, the initial theme returned, cloaked now in thicker, more complicated harmonies and orchestral textures by turns brawny, delicate and bright. A single, insistently plucked note from the harp primed a wittily abrupt ending.

Created in partnership with the education-based Bay Area organization [Living Jazz](#), which is celebrating its 40th anniversary, the three commissions began close to home before roaming afar.

First up was Allison Miller's accurately self-described "cinematic" "Valley of the Giants," dedicated to the late drummer/composer Eddie Marshall. Lyricism from the strings and several sumptuous saxophone solos by Dayna Stephens prevailed in this sound picture of the California redwoods. The composer, on a downstage drum kit, added softly shimmering cymbals, though her later percussive

contributions felt intrusive and poorly integrated.

In her Ethiopian-influenced medley, the monomial Bay Area singer-songwriter [Meklit](#) tapped poetic imagery and the pentatonic scale Debussy and other Western composers sometimes use. A sinuous, dramatic presence onstage (unfortunately unmatched by her wobbly vocal chops), Meklit summoned a distant natural world with lines like the one that pictured stars as "roasted grains strewn in a wide field." In one entrancing effect, the cellos laid down a choice ground bass to anchor and enrich the poetry.

Finally it was on to Puerto Rico, in John Santos' "Un Levantamiento" ("An Uprising"), a brief but urgent protest song about the island's centuries of colonial rule. "I am the spirit of freedom," spoken word artist Maria Cora voiced at one point over steadily percolating music. "I am the machete, the truth, the tsunami." Pedro Pastrana lit the keenest musical fire with the rapidly plucked strings of his cuatro. Violinist Dawn Harris added a soulful riff.

From start to finish of Nielsen's Symphony No. 4, "The Inextinguishable," performed as written without pauses between its four movements, Armstrong and the orchestra were in glorious accord. Everything from richly blended strings to the spry and musing woodwind choir, the burnished French horns, blazing brasses and a pair of thundering timpanists combined in a singular performance. The orchestra sounded as fine as it ever has.

Tall and graceful on the podium, Armstrong led with a strong but supple beat. The symphony emerged as a heroic quest, in its darkly brooding passages and shining exaltations alike, driven but never bombastic, languid but never turgid, at once spacious and tightly structured.

In brief remarks before the first downbeat, Armstrong linked Nielsen's "Inextinguishable" to the "tenacious and resilient" spirit of Oakland. With more performances like this one, the lights will shine in bright affirmation.