

# SF WEEKLY

## Live Review: The Oakland East Bay Symphony's Season Opener Stolen By a French Accordion Player at the Paramount

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You wouldn't expect an accordion player from France to nearly steal the thunder of the **Oakland East Bay Symphony's** season-opening concert on Nov. 7, but he did. The venerable Oakland institution began its 26th season performing Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64, and the West Coast premiere of "Brothers in Arts: 70 Years of Liberty," a work for jazz quintet and orchestra composed by Chris Brubeck and Guillaume Saint-James.

In a night of spectacular moments, Didier Ithursarry stretched his accordion

into surreal sonic landscapes, wooing the **Paramount Theater** audience with shimmer, showy solos and largely driving the energy of the stylish, intriguing composition constituting the second half of the program.

The “Brothers in Arts” premiere was the result of a discovery. In 2012, Brubeck, trombonist, composer and son of jazz master Dave Brubeck, and Saint-James, saxophonist, composer, and son of an amateur jazz musician and doctor, happened to meet in Rennes, France, and found their fathers’ histories had nearly overlapped in WWII. During the liberation of France by the Allied troops in 1944, their fathers shared common (French) ground; the American, in Patton’s army, the Frenchman, saved by Allied doctors during the Normandy landing.

Deciding their fathers’ fight for freedom made them “brothers in arms” — a phrase they converted to “brothers in arts” — the eight-movement work was launched. Composed by the two musicians in separate movements and weaving shared themes throughout the work, the narrative describes an arc from tranquil to pastoral, from fragmented to eerie escapism, and from tattered tunes to declarative victory.

Under the baton of Music Director Michael Morgan, the orchestra was joined for the new work by Brubeck, Saint-James, Ithursarry, Jerome Seguin (bass), Christophe Lavergne (drums), and vocalists Jada Banks Mace, McKenna Lindell Wright and Nelly Ake from Vocal Rush, the Oakland School for the Arts’ award-winning a cappella ensemble.

Entering Saint-James’ opening theme through a gauzy soundscape suggesting ocean waves, distant church bells and children’s voices, the magic of collaboration revealed itself early on. Brubeck picked up the melody, sending it to America with Ragtime- and Ellington-like tags reminiscent of American composer Aaron Copland. But the swift-moving piece didn’t languish for long as grumbles from the strings, piercing explosions like air raid sirens from the brass and full use of drums and timpani built a complex structure for the work’s middle movements.

Remarkable for its integration of tattered war themes, New Orleans-style jazz, French waltzes, “Wolf Pack Boogie” and more, a seventh movement thrust itself into the modern age with intense solo turns for members of the quintet. Especially exceptional were the aforementioned Ithursarry, Saint-James (plush soaring tone where lesser sax players sound thin) and Brubeck on both trombone and piano. OEBS principal pianist Jeff LaDeur, when not knocked off the bench by Brubeck, played with noteworthy assurance and deserved to be in the quintet’s lineup for a bow (note to directors).

A distracting element — recorded spoken fragments with obvious historical relevance early on and live vocalizations in the work’s final movement — proved disappointing, despite the justification for having them. Poorly

balanced, it was difficult to understand the words and when they did ring out, with “never again” in the last movement, the spoken words were an unnecessary annoyance detracting from the work’s power. It’s a minor mark against “Brothers in Arts” overall forcefulness and perhaps the muffled presentation was intentional.

Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 5, by comparison, was rather lackluster. Certainly, the four-movement symphony, a summer’s work Tchaikovsky composed in 1888, displayed the orchestra’s command of rapidly changing textures and sweeping melodies. Their bold, precisely unified ensemble sound led to melodic solos that whispered morosely (finely rendered by Meredith Brown on French horn and Diane Maltester on clarinet in the second movement). Aside from the assertively-played marches and Morgan’s much-appreciated subduing of the work’s excessive harmonies, it took only a few ragged notes and an occasional transition performed dutifully instead of inspiringly to flag the energy and shift from graceful to drooping. Kudos to the programmers, therefore, who sent the audience onto the streets of Oakland remembering a French man with an accordion and perhaps whistling a snippet of “Brothers in Arts.” In what is a typical OEBS move — progressive, generous — the show was simulcast two blocks away on “The Great Wall of Oakland” at West Grand Avenue between Broadway and Valley Street.