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## New Artist of the Month: Conductor Kedrick Armstrong

By Hannah Edgar



Growing up in coastal Georgetown, SC (population: 8,500), Kedrick Armstrong became his church's keyboardist at age 12 and picked up the clarinet in his school's band program.

But Armstrong couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to learn. He skipped recess to read scores in the band classroom, enrolled himself in the extracurricular strings program, and, eventually, worked his way through every wind instrument in the middle-school band room. By the time he enrolled at South Carolina's Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities, a selective boarding school, he had a working knowledge of every instrument he'd been able to get his hands on.

"I always had this itch towards conducting, but at that time, I didn't know it. I just knew that I needed to know all of the instruments for the day I eventually had to address them," he says.

Being tapped to succeed the late, great [Michael Morgan](#) as music director of the Oakland Symphony, as [Armstrong was in April](#), is a remarkable coup for any 29-year-old. Then again, Armstrong has been at this for a long time. He graduated as the

only Black student in the conservatory at Wheaton College—an evangelical Christian school in suburban Chicago—because it was one of the few schools with an undergraduate certificate in conducting. Years later, when he decided to go to grad school, Armstrong selected the University of Colorado at Boulder over other prestigious schools because its library held [a trove of scores by Black women composers](#), many unpublished.

The young conductor's commitment to long-sidelined repertoire primed him for the Oakland baton, one of the country's most omnivorous orchestras. After graduating from Wheaton, Armstrong cut his teeth as a conducting fellow, assistant, and guest conductor at the Chicago Sinfonietta (2016–2020), another model of innovative programming in the American orchestral firmament. Morgan led the Sinfonietta once during that time, in a [concert](#) centered around LGBTQ composers and musicians. Armstrong realized, with a jolt, that Morgan was the first Black conductor he'd ever worked with professionally.

"That was one of the biggest full-circle moments for me, not only as a conductor but as a human. As a Black queer conductor, to be able to sit in the room and to watch someone of his stature live so fully in his truth, but also command so much respect, love and community... I finally found the person that I could aspire to [become]," Armstrong says. "I learned as much in those couple days as I've learned in years studying with other conductors."

At the time, opera wasn't on Armstrong's radar—he was an orchestra guy through and through. But after hearing that Wheaton's opera program had discontinued an undergraduate conducting position years before, he asked the conservatory if they'd consider reinstating it. The opera that year, Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, was to be led from a harpsichord—in essence, conductor-less; still, he convinced the school to let him assist on the production.

### Continuo as lead sheet

Good thing he did. The repetiteur had a family emergency the day of the dress, leaving Armstrong to make a dramatic last-minute save at the harpsichord. [Sarah Edgar](#), the opera's choreographer, and a Wheaton faculty member both pulled Armstrong aside afterwards, strongly encouraging him to consider pursuing Baroque

opera. Armstrong's recollection of the episode is more self-effacing. "Reading continuo was like reading a lead sheet," he says—a throwback to accompanying preachers in church. Whatever it was, it was enough to clinch an assistant title in Wheaton's program after graduating, becoming its interim director for one season in 2018-19.

Armstrong entered the Lyric Opera of Chicago's orbit during that period, as well. Most recently, he conducted the company's world-premiere production of [The Factotum](#), devised by baritone (and fellow Wheaton alum) Will Liverman and DJ/producer King Rico, and assisted on Terence Blanchard's *Champion*. Armstrong also has an ongoing relationship with Opera Theatre of St. Louis: currently he is assisting on productions of *La bohème* and Philip Glass's *Galileo Galilei*. Not bad for someone who considers himself a "backroads" opera conductor.

Next season, Armstrong will balance his Oakland appointment with ongoing obligations in Illinois: he assists with Jeanine Tesori and Tazewell Thompson's *Blue* at Lyric Opera in the fall and remains the music director of the Knox-Galesburg Symphony (a regional orchestra halfway between Peoria, IL and Davenport, IA), which, since the pandemic, has increased its chamber programming. Armstrong continues to guide the orchestra through that "pivotal and necessary shift."

### **Varying resources**

"It's less orchestral programming than it was pre-pandemic, but more overall programming for the organization," he says. "Every orchestra's trying to figure out the way forward post-pandemic, especially a small regional orchestra in kind of a rural community. We've really had to figure out how to best serve that community."

Armstrong has big plans for his time in Oakland, grouped into three general goals. First is to promote underrepresented composers—not just those who have been racially marginalized, but also those glossed over by the mainstream repertoire. "Kedrick the musicology nerd was always interested in composers no one was talking about, like Franz Schreker, Karol Szymanowski, or Grazyna Bacewicz... Their music is amazing, and someone should perform it," he says.

His second priority: championing new work. His first season features three premieres by Bay Area jazz composers, a co-commission from his onetime Wheaton College professor Shawn Okpebholo, and a new oratorio by Carlos Simon, commissioned by Morgan before his death. Armstrong says it speaks to the ethos of the Oakland Symphony that "the last thing on my tier gets to be standard repertoire." But there will be plenty of that next year, too: Brahms 2, *Carmina Burana*, and Nielsen 4 are all on the 2024-25 docket.

His first challenge, though? Looking for housing in the Bay Area's brutal real estate market. He arrives in August. "It's all moving quickly," he says, with a hearty laugh.