


Kedrick Armstrong

conductor



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— *San Francisco Classical Voice*



Kedrick Armstrong, conductor
2024-2025 Biography

Kedrick Armstrong is the new Music Director of the Oakland Symphony, becoming the 9th Music Director in the orchestra's almost 100-year history. He is also the Creative Partner and Principal Conductor of the Knox-Galesburg Symphony.

Kedrick's recent highlights include debuting at the Lyric Opera of Chicago to premiere a new opera, *The Factotum*, by Will Liverman and K Rico. He also appeared at the Opera Theater of St. Louis as one of the festival's assistant/cover conductors (*Tosca*, *Susannah*). Guest conducting engagements have included a SummerStage and family concert with the Oakland Symphony, DePaul Opera Theater (*Candide*), and Chicago Opera Theater (Matthew Recio's *The Puppy Episode*). He has also served as assistant conductor for Dan Shore's *Freedom Ride* at Chicago Opera Theater and music director for Monteverdi's *L'Orfero* with Wheaton College's Opera Mainstage. Kedrick is on the music staff at the Lyric Opera of Chicago and Opera Theater of St. Louis.

Named by the Washington Post as one of "22 for '22: Composers and performers to watch," Kedrick uses his voice and platform as a Black conductor to advocate for classical music's performance, publication, and preservation of minority voices. This advocacy has led to various speaking engagements and a research fellowship with the American Music Research Center (University of Colorado-Boulder) studying Black female composers within the Helen Walker-Hill archives.

Kedrick spent several seasons as the music mentor/supervisor for "EmpowerYouth! Igniting Creativity through the Arts," a unique collaboration with the Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Chicago Urban League. He also enjoyed working with Ravinia Festival's REACH*TEACH*PLAY, Chicago Musical Pathways Initiative, and Chicago Sinfonietta's Audience Matters.

Kedrick is an alum of Chicago Sinfonietta's Project Inclusion Freeman Conducting Fellow program, where he served as Assistant Conductor during the 2018-2019 season. He holds a B.M. in History and Literature from Wheaton College and an M.M. in Orchestral Conducting from the University of Colorado-Boulder. He graduated from the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts & Humanities. Armstrong has studied with and assisted/covered conductors Mei-Ann Chen, Gary Lewis, John Nelson, Cliff Colnot, and Lidiya Yankovskaya, among others.

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AUGUST 2024 - PLEASE DESTROY ALL PREVIOUSLY DATED MATERIALS.

Kedrick Armstrong Critical Acclaim



"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...With more performances like this one, the lights will shine in bright affirmation."

— **San Francisco Chronicle**

"In Kedrick Armstrong, the Oakland Symphony has found a musician who appears to be a perfect fit... Nielsen's symphony was bursting with energy and drive as Armstrong led an unflagging performance that lifted the spirit."

— **San Francisco Classical Voice**

"[Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5] was wrenching in its anguish but also punchy and mighty."

— **San Francisco Classical Review**

"A musical activist of the highest order and in the best sense."

— **San Francisco Classical Voice**



musicalamerica WORLDWIDE

June 1, 2024

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.



San Francisco Chronicle

October 19, 2024

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.



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Oakland Symphony Celebrates Living Jazz in Season Opener

Michael Zwiebach on October 22, 2024.

The search for the [Oakland Symphony](#)'s next music director was never about finding a replacement for Michael Morgan, the beloved conductor who was almost a civil servant for the city of Oakland. Rather, it was about continuing Morgan's overarching vision for the organization, which, during his 30-year tenure, became an orchestra that truly reflected the entire diverse community it served.

In Kedrick Armstrong, the Oakland Symphony has found a musician who appears to be a perfect fit. A superb conductor whose musical tastes dovetail cleanly with the ensemble's recent history, he has already debuted on the orchestra's subscription series, leading a memorable performance [in February](#) of a new oratorio by composer Carlos Simon. (Armstrong had previously conducted a free civic performance on the steps of Oakland City Hall in August 2022.)

His first concert as music director, which took place on Friday, Oct. 18, at the Paramount Theatre, was more of a celebration of his arrival than perhaps he would have wanted. The new season opened not with music but with a lengthy testimonial from Oakland City Council President Nikki Fortunato Bas, who declared Oct. 18, 2024, Kedrick Armstrong Day. Despite the pomp, or maybe because of it, this was a stirring moment of recognition for a classical music organization.

And then there was the concert, which, in true Oakland Symphony style, mixed classical repertoire with an extensive tribute to [Living Jazz](#), the educational organization that has spent 40 years bringing music to underserved youth, particularly through Jazz Camp West. The program opener was by Julia Perry, a mid-20th-century Black composer who, to no one's surprise, has been overlooked. Yet another American student of Nadia Boulanger, the great

composition teacher, Perry wrote music that is strongly modernist and abstract, in a neoclassical vein that was common at that time. Her work, titled *A Short Piece for Orchestra*, was given its premiere in 1952 by the Turin Symphony under the baton of legendary Black conductor Dean Dixon. The opening trumpet rip introduces a section of unsettled alarm. Unexpectedly, a flute solo ushers in a restrained but lyrical melody, and the two moods alternate for the rest of the piece. It's a strong composition from early in Perry's career, well played here. The real focus of the program's first half was on three new jazz works commissioned especially for this concert. The first of these, by drummer and Jazz Camp West Artistic Director Allison Miller, was *Valley of the Giants*, dedicated to Eddie Marshall (1938–2011), a famed drummer who ended his career living in Oakland and also taught at Jazz Camp West. The orchestral arrangement was by Miller's longtime collaborator, Todd Sickafoose, and featured her on drums and Dayna Stephens on tenor saxophone.

Miller's ambitious work begins by evoking the redwood trees under which Jazz Camp West takes place. An opening cymbal roll leads into a woodsy intro with piano, vibes, and of course, xylophone. Then a warm, embracing string melody takes over. You wish it would stay, but it gets transformed a little later in the piece. The fleet passagework in Stephens's first solo and a later bebop section paint Marshall's effusive, joyous personality as clearly as if we knew him.

Throughout the performance, Miller was incredibly inventive in using an expanded drum set to find evocative timbres. Everything was light and dry and restrained, from single snare taps to rhythms beaten on drum frames to the atmospheric ringing of bells. Armstrong and the orchestra were fully involved — no long-held “football notes” here — and the piece emerged triumphant.

Meklit, the globally recognized Ethio-jazz singer-songwriter, contributed three recent songs in new orchestrations by bassist Sam Bevan: “Ethio Blue,” “My Gold,” and most memorably, “Stars in a Wide Field,” dedicated to her recently deceased brother. This last song is structured around local proverbs from a region in northern Ethiopia, and they are striking when sung to Meklit's beautiful melody. The title comes from the saying that becomes the refrain: Stars are “the roasted grains, strewn in a wide field.”

John Santos, the phenomenal Oakland-based percussionist, offered *Un Levantamiento* (An uprising), which he co-arranged with Saul Sierra. With vocalist Maria Cora speaking a sort of prologue and Pedro José Pastrana doing an inspired job on Puerto Rican cuatro, the work was intended to capture the indomitable spirit of the Puerto Rican people. The orchestra musicians sounded great on this piece, which really involved them, polyrhythms spreading through the instrumental sections.

The second half of the concert was dedicated to Carl Nielsen's Symphony No. 4 (“The Inextinguishable”). On a day when a fire started in the Oakland hills next to the 580 Freeway, it was especially appropriate for Armstrong to remind us that Nielsen's symphony — which, despite its title, isn't formally programmatic — is in general about love as an elemental force. The conductor said he chose the piece to represent the tenacious, unrelenting drive of the people of Oakland. Perhaps it was also meant to connect with Santos's composition.

Nielsen's symphony was bursting with energy and drive as Armstrong led an unflagging performance that lifted the spirit. The orchestra certainly seemed inspired by its new leader, bringing the work to a shimmering climax, with two timpanists banging out the rhythm of the main theme and the brass coming to the fore. It was exhilarating.



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October 21, 2024

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.





