

Kedrick Armstrong

conductor

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— *San Francisco Classical Voice*



Kedrick Armstrong, conductor
2025-2026 Biography

Kedrick Armstrong is the new Music Director of the Oakland Symphony, named in 2024 as the 9th Music Director in the orchestra's almost 100-year history. His inaugural season with the Oakland Symphony was met with audience and critical praise for his programming, dynamic stage presence and palpable energy for music-making and audience connectivity. Of their opening night performance, the *San Francisco Chronicle* remarked that "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."

The Oakland Symphony has embarked on a groundbreaking project that will elevate the voices of seven remarkable Black American Composers. The goal of "Blacknificent 7" is to cement the legacies of these works in the American classical canon, and to reach new, diverse audiences through innovative storytelling and digital distribution. The 2024-2025 season saw the first two premieres - Shawn Okpebholo's *Two Black Churches* with baritone Will Liverman and Carlos Simon's *Here I Stand: Paul Robeson*, a co-commission with the Kennedy Center. The 2025-2026 season opens with Dave Ragland's *Harmony of the Unheard* for actor/narrator and orchestra. Jasmine Barnes's *Tupac (Shakur): A Requiem* for soloists, chorus, and orchestra will close the season. Other 2025-2026 highlights include Beethoven Symphony No. 9, Verdi Requiem and works by Stravinsky, Mahler and Rimsky-Korsakov.

Kedrick's 2025-2026 guest conducting appearances include the world premiere new production of Scott Joplin's 1910 opera, *Treemonisha*, with the Washington National Opera. This powerful work reimagines the incomplete piece with direction by mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves, musical arrangement and orchestrations by composer Damien Sneed, and dialogue and lyrics by playwright Kyle Bass. In addition, Mr. Armstrong makes his orchestral conducting debuts with the Minnesota Orchestra and Springfield Symphony, as well as a return to Chicago Sinfonietta.

Kedrick's recent highlights include a debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in a CSO MusicNow performance of works by Daniel Bernard Roumain and Allison Loggins-Hull. He also debuted with Lyric Opera of Chicago to premiere Will Liverman and K Rico's new opera *The Factotum*, and appeared at the Opera Theatre of St. Louis as one of the festival's

assistant/cover conductors (*Tosca*, *Susannah*). He served as assistant conductor for Dan Shore's *Freedom Ride* at Chicago Opera Theater and music director for Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* with Wheaton College's Opera Mainstage. Kedrick has served on the music staff at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Washington National Opera and at Opera Theatre of St. Louis. He has recently concluded his tenure as the Creative Partner and Principal Conductor of the Knox-Galesburg Symphony in Illinois.

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 young people through local outreach programs such as Ravinia Festival's REACH*TEACH*PLAY, Chicago Musical Pathways Initiative, and Chicago Sinfonietta's Audience Matters.

Kedrick is an alumnus 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 and 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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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."

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"Oakland Symphony concerts feel like a party with a good live band, and Armstrong leans into that energy, shaping programs that are as spontaneous as the people who show up to hear them."

— **San Francisco Chronicle**

"[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**

"Armstrong ends with a flourish, followed by a series of wide gestures in thanks to each section of the immense symphony behind him. The crowd stands in unison for the culmination of a striking debut, promising an exciting new era for the symphony."

— **Daily Californian**

Features



CLASSICAL VOICE
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May 13, 2025

Kedrick Armstrong and the Oakland Symphony Find a Perfect Fit

By Emily Wilson



Last year, Kedrick Armstrong became the ninth music director of the [Oakland Symphony](#), and he's already built a strong rapport with the community. He stepped into the position after the untimely death of the beloved Michael Morgan, who led the organization for 30 years. Armstrong says he's grateful to stand on the shoulders of Morgan as well as Morgan's predecessor, Calvin Simmons, who in 1979 became the Oakland Symphony's first Black music director.

Armstrong, now 30, grew up in South Carolina, obtained his bachelor's degree

from Wheaton College, and pursued a master's in orchestral conducting at the University of Colorado Boulder. For several seasons, he was the music mentor for EmpowerYouth!, a joint program between Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Chicago Urban League. Additionally, he took part in Chicago Sinfonietta's Freeman (formerly Project Inclusion) Conducting Fellowship, also serving as assistant conductor for that organization for a year.

In 2022, *The Washington Post* named Armstrong a conductor to watch. He has guest conducted at Chicago Opera Theater and Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, and in 2023, he led the Lyric Opera premiere of *The Factotum* by baritone Will Liverman and DJ King Rico.

The Oakland Symphony's board of directors and musicians selected Armstrong unanimously after an extensive search, impressed by his leadership, passion for education, and knowledge of a broad range of music. He oversees two more subscription programs with the orchestra this season, [May 16](#) and [June 13](#) at the Paramount Theatre.



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In an interview with *SF Classical Voice*, the conductor talked about leaving a legacy, music as a tool to communicate, and his experience in Oakland so far. This conversation has been edited for clarity and concision.

It seems like you and the Oakland Symphony are a perfect fit for each other. Why is that?

For every young conductor, landing a music director job is a dream come true. But for me, there's so many things that I hold important to my artistry around how I make music and the people I make music with. [My] ideas around community engagement and education and how an orchestra best serves its community are so naturally aligned with not only the present Oakland Symphony but its legacy [that] it really did fit like a glove artistically.

You mentioned the legacy. How would you describe the legacy of the Oakland Symphony?

I'll tell you this: One of the first concerts I did with the Oakland Symphony was a family concert in partnership with Ronald McDonald House. And the orchestra was playing the hits of [Antonín] Dvořák and Brahms alongside songs that the children and their family members had chosen. That was everything from MC Hammer to "Baby Shark" to Dua Lipa, and the way that the orchestra approached [all of the] music with the same amount of reverence, with the same amount of care — that is my approach to things.

I grew up with gospel music and listening to my father play Frankie Beverly, so [for me] music didn't only exist in classical music but crossed a lot of genres. [This] was something that I had longed for as a conductor — an orchestra that sees music as the priority, as a tool in how we communicate and connect with people. That, I think, is one of the lasting legacies of Michael Morgan, of Calvin Simmons, of so many of my predecessors — using the orchestra as a tool to connect with our communities. And that can be through Tchaikovsky and Tupac and so many things [in between]. I love being able to navigate through all of those terrains with an orchestra and a team that truly respects and honors all of those traditions equally.

I notice you are doing a tribute to Whitney Houston for the annual "Let Us Break Bread Together" concert in December.

The "Break Bread" concert was started by Michael Morgan and some community [members] to pay tribute to so many iconic musical artists, and when I got to choose my first "Break Bread" artist, Whitney Houston seemed like a perfect fit. She has such range, from her [song] catalog to her acting. My first version of *Cinderella* was the version with Whitney and Brandy. My upbringing was from *Cinderella* to *The Preacher's*

Wife to *The Bodyguard* to so many other things Whitney. Listening to that music now, there is this sense of the orchestra in the background and the beauty of orchestral arrangements.

[And] the beauty of the Oakland Symphony is showing our community the presence of the orchestra in [the music of] so many of their favorite artists, spanning from Whitney to today. We're seeing this resurgence of pop, R&B, and hip-hop artists who are performing and recording with orchestras. It's important to show that fluency and reverence of the orchestra as an ensemble and instrument in the hands of the greats like Bach and Mozart and [musicians] like Kendrick Lamar and Beyoncé.

Earlier this year, in announcing the Oakland Symphony's [2025-2026 season](#), you said the

**programming is “very Oakland.”
What makes it so Oakland?**

It’s been about eight or nine months that I’ve been living in Oakland, and the thing that I love is the diversity and vibrancy in its culture and artistry, this democracy of how people exist and live throughout Oakland and support each other. One of the things that I really wanted to do with the season is highlight as best as I could over six concerts that brilliant diversity, everything from celebrating our trans community to celebrating young, underrepresented, diverse, marginalized composers.

But I also [wanted to] pay tribute to the legacy of the orchestra, the standard repertoire from [Igor] Stravinsky’s *Firebird* to Verdi’s Requiem, and really reimagine how these works — like the Requiem, this Mass for the dead, this collective communal grief — are placed in Oakland today. Knowing [what’s] going on [in the world] and [what] Oakland is facing, how do we reinterpret these great, iconic works that might seem larger than life to really speak to a community that is experiencing those same kinds of emotions?

I’m grateful for the community members that I’ve connected with. Living in downtown Oakland, I get to have a lot of conversations to really help me decide how best to [reach out] to the community and tell their stories through what we do onstage.

Who are some of the community members and organizations you’re working with?

This goes from a macro scale to someone like [jazz pianist] Cava Menzies, who teaches at Oakland School for the Arts. She was one of the first people who I connected with when I moved out to Oakland, someone who has really deep [ties to the city] through her family. She’s composing a companion piece to go alongside the Verdi Requiem next season. She does a lot of work with local artists and her own CO-LLAB Choir.

[The orchestra is also] partnering with organizations outside of the musical or

classical realm, like Youth Alive, which does a lot of work with violence prevention and intervention. Also the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, which does a lot of work with the prison system. It’s been really beautiful for me to have these conversations, both with local artists and with organizations that aren’t directly tied to classical music but have a deep love and appreciation for music.

[And] then Daniel Bernard Roumain, who’s our current artist-in-residence, is writing this concerto for electric violin, spoken-word artists, and onstage community participation. What does that look like, to bring our community members onstage and have them tell their stories about this political and social [moment] alongside an electric violin concerto? That’s the beauty of living in Oakland. It sort of vibrates the mind with this excitement of collaboration.

Anything else you’d like to say about being in Oakland?

[Something] I tell everyone is that besides our fantastic orchestra and amazing staff, the audience in Oakland is probably one of the best that I’ve ever experienced in my life as far as engagement, enthusiasm, and openness to whatever we present onstage. My managers and agent came to [my debut] concert [as music director in October], and of course, they’ve experienced concerts all over the world, but even they said, “We’ve never experienced an audience quite like the Oakland Symphony’s.”

I have to give so much credit to the community of Oakland and how they champion the orchestra but also hold the orchestra to the fire to continue doing this work. It’s not just artistic administrators and operational administrators, but it’s truly our [entire] community that pushes us to create and to serve them. It really is this beautiful conversation that happens from the stage to the audience, from the audience to the stage.



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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



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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.

Reviews



San Francisco Chronicle

October 18, 2025

How Oakland Symphony's season opener turned classical music into a party

By Michael Zwiebach



When Oakland Symphony Music Director Kedrick Armstrong tried to describe the logic behind the program for the orchestra's season opening concert, he summed it up in one the word: "authentic."

It wasn't much of an explanation, but an apt description of the arts organization and its audience, which filled the Paramount Theatre on Friday, Oct. 17. The crowd was a true cross-section of the city — 20-somethings, longtime subscribers and families, including a baby who only lasted through the first piece. They dressed as if at the movies, and applauded or shouted whenever the spirit moved them.

Oakland Symphony concerts feel like a party with a good live band, and Armstrong leans into that energy, shaping programs that are as spontaneous as the people who show up to hear them.

Adding celebrity to the evening, 84-year-old composer Adolphus Hailstork flew in from Virginia to hear the performance of his Symphony No. 1 (1987). It's a work of great craftsmanship, with an emphatic opening, a la Joseph Haydn, pushed along by consistent syncopations. That opens up to a second theme of great lyrical beauty. The scherzo has a fleet Mendelssohnian grace, and the finale, a

joyful busy rondo, fizzes with jazzy licks.

Originally written for a New Jersey summer music festival, the piece fits Armstrong's personality and the orchestra easily handled its modest technical demands in the evening's best performance.

When Hailstork rose to acknowledge the moment, the audience met him with a wave of applause that swelled through the auditorium like another movement in the symphony.

But the clear audience favorite was soloist Sara Davis Buechner, whose febrile account of Maurice Ravel's Piano Concerto in G Minor was the concert's other high point.

Buechner, a frequent guest of the Oakland Symphony, tore through the challenging opening movement with virtuosic intensity. Then she turned inward for a second movement of luminous calm and control. She was in command, technically, although her pedaling was so emphatic — her foot lifting completely off the floor — that she was actually out of breath at the conclusion. The orchestra hung with her, though Ravel didn't make it easy on them, either.

This is an ensemble that often doesn't have everything buttoned down and sonically impeccable. Armstrong thus deserves kudos for opening the program

with Anna Clyne's colorful, theatrical "This Midnight Hour" (2015).

It's a 12-minute work set in motion by downward-rushing scales in the strings, representing a woman running through the night. The score isn't fully programmatic, but in the middle section, half of the violas are asked to play a quarter-tone sharp "to emulate the sonority of an accordion playing a Parisian-esque waltz." I've heard this effect land more cleanly in other performances, and in a score that has so much going on there were balance problems and some details that could have been clarified.

Even so, the final section of the piece came off nicely with haunting solos from trumpeters William Harvey and Leonard Ott.

The finale was Igor Stravinsky's 1919 suite from "The Firebird." The Oakland Symphony's sound was necessarily leaner than a big-budget orchestra, but they did themselves proud with the interpretation of this repertory staple, which has such a big soundscape. The winds shone throughout, with phenomenal solos by principal bassoon Deborah Kramer and, in the finale, horn Alex Camphouse.

In the "Infernal Dance of King Kaschei," with Armstrong driving them like Derby winners, the players went briefly savage, delivering a bravura account.



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 monomel 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.



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