

James “Aaron” Hardwick has established a reputation as an outstanding conductor, collaborator, and educator — setting himself apart with his engaging, charismatic, and musically precise approach on and off the podium. Highly versatile and musically insightful, his artistic collaborations span multiple genres including standard classical repertoire, musical theater, opera, video game music, popular music, and new works.

Conductor & Musician

Hardwick has an extensive conducting background, collaborating with renowned orchestras such as the Winston-Salem Symphony, Brevard Philharmonic, Rochester Philharmonic, Williamsburg Symphony, Aiken Symphony Orchestra, Ruebush Brass Ensemble, CICA (Collaborations in Contemporary Art) Ensemble, Shenandoah Conservatory Symphony, University of South Carolina Symphony Orchestra, East Carolina University Symphony Orchestra, Bay Youth Orchestras of Virginia, among others. He has worked alongside artists, including Larry Weng, Courtney Jones, Damien Sneed, Turtle Island String Quartet, and Lanny Meyers.

Notably, he was a finalist for the 2021 Erno Lányi International Conducting Competition and participated in the 2020 European Union International Conducting Competition. He is an Eastman School of Music Summer Conducting Fellow with the Rochester Philharmonic, and a two-time Conducting Fellow at the Conductor’s Institute of South Carolina. As a professional violist, he has worked with the New York City Ballet Company, Shenandoah Summer Music Theater, Shenandoah Conservatory Symphony, University of South Carolina (UofSC) Opera, UofSC Symphony Orchestra, Brevard Philharmonic and Aiken Symphony Orchestras.

Concerning Music & Video Games

Hardwick’s article, "How video games like ‘Starfield’ are creating a new generation of classical music fans," initially published in September 2023 by The Conversation, has garnered global recognition, being picked up by prominent outlets such as Fast Company, Newsweek, MSN, Yahoo News, and featured in the October 2023 edition of Newsweek Japan.

In 2020, Hardwick developed the first Video Game Music course offered at Shenandoah University, fostering collaboration between the Shenandoah Conservatory and Shenandoah University School of Business. Within a year, he led the inaugural research collaboration between music performance and esports entitled “We Play Together: A Collaboration between Music & Esports.” The project not only earned the Shenandoah University Research Expo (SURE) Award, but received international acclaim through the Esports Research Network (ERN) in Sweden.

Most recently, he created, “Full Lobby, LLC” a company designed to build creative concert series and offer artistically inspired and diverse programming for symphony orchestras that includes live performance of video game music, new artists, genres, and voices. In addition to his musical endeavors, Hardwick is a competitive gamer, former Apex Legends (EA) coach, and currently serves as an advisor for the Wake Forest University Esports Association and Dash City Gaming in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Educator & Scholar

Passionate about the intersection of collaboration and music education, Hardwick spearheaded the interdisciplinary concert series, "Paving the Way" with the Wake Forest Symphony Orchestra in 2022. This innovative series aims to revolutionize the curation of symphonic music concerts by fostering collaborations with other scholars, constructing narratives around the performed music, and showcasing the work of underrepresented composers and artists. He continues to teach and develop the Video Game Music class, (now taught at Wake Forest University) which has been host to a number of leading video game composers including Inon Zur, Adam Burgess, Alex Moukala, Jim Bonney, Julian Crowhurst, among others. He was named one of Hampton Roads' "Most Outstanding Music Educators" two consecutive years by the Virginia Symphony, was nominated by the Grammy Foundation® and the Recording Academy® as a quarterfinalist for the Music Educator Award in 2014, and received the Distinguished Music Educator's Award from Yale University in 2011. He remains actively involved in working with youth ensembles, educators, and community members as a conductor and clinician.

Published in 2021, his research entitled "Performing Game Sound: The American Symphony Orchestra and Video Game Music" explores live Video Game Music performance by symphonies and how Video Game Music can help orchestras diversify programming, build audiences and audience engagement, and aid in financial sustainability. His article "A Walkthrough: Connecting Gaming and Your Performance Ensembles" was featured in the Summer 2022 North Carolina Music Educators Journal. This article explores innovative ways music teachers can connect with their students through the incorporation of video game music.

Credentials

Hardwick received his Doctor of Musical Arts in Performance (Conducting) at Shenandoah Conservatory. He earned a master's degree in Orchestral Conducting from the University of South Carolina and a bachelor's degree in Music with honors from East Carolina University. He also holds a Graduate Certificate in Esports Management from Shenandoah University. He is a free-lance professional conductor and is the Orchestra Director and an Assistant Professor of Music at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC.

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