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Charlotte Symphony Orchestra music director Kwamé Ryan's journey to the Grammys



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From left: Kwamé Ryan, Blanton Alspaugh, Janai Brugger and J'Nai Bridges accept the Best Opera Recording award for "Heggie: Intelligence" during the 68th Grammy Awards at Peacock Theater on Feb. 01 in Los Angeles. Photo: Matt Winkelmeyer/Getty Images for The Recording Academy

Kwamé Ryan, Charlotte Symphony Orchestra's music director, won his first Grammy Award Sunday night in Los Angeles. Best Opera Recording went to Jake Heggie's "Intelligence," which was recorded with the Houston Grand Opera.

Why it matters: Not only is this Ryan's first Grammy, but it's also the first Grammy for a CSO music director.

Between the lines: Ryan was named the first person of color to lead CSO in December 2023.

The Canadian-born conductor, who grew up in Trinidad, did not have a Grammy Award on his vision board as a child. Growing up, he did not know classical music could even win a Grammy. Now Ryan plans to use this experience as a starting block for what CSO can achieve.

"Speaking for myself as a Black conductor, we're a small demographic, but getting less so one generation at a time, and moments like these could be so inspirational for the people who will follow," Ryan said as he accepted the award Sunday night.

Catch up quick: Ryan made what he described to Axios as a "herculean effort" to make the awards. CSO's scheduled performances for the weekend had been canceled due to a historic snowstorm. Rather than try to fly out on Sunday as originally planned, he went straight to Charlotte Douglas International Airport at 8am Saturday morning.

"I was almost out on Saturday evening, and they called our flight back from the runway," Ryan tells me, as he waits to board a flight home from Los Angeles.

Ryan spent 12 hours at the airport. He initially went home resigned to the idea of having to watch the Grammys on YouTube, "I have to have this experience," he thought, "because who knows if it will ever come again."

It took until 2:30am Sunday for Ryan to catch an Uber to Atlanta where he caught a flight to Los Angeles. By the time he made it to the Peacock Theater, the Grammys had already started.

He made it in time to accept his first Grammy Award. "I am still quite overwhelmed," Ryan told me.

Watch Ryan's speech below...