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**Jeri Lynn Johnson carefully cultivates Black Pearl orchestra of young musicians**

Peter Crimmins

When an orchestra is working the way it should, the music sounds effortless. Notes just pour off the stage as though there were no other way for them to exist.

When an orchestra is not working, it sounds like a train wreck.

Jeri Lynn Johnson invites teenagers onto the podium to lead her Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra into a wailing heap. As part of the organization's education mission, young people can have their first stab at conducting.

"It's a lot harder than just waving your arms around," said Johnson.

She instructs her musicians to follow the lead of the young conductor exactly, even if that lead breaks down. Inevitably, the rhythm goes off and strings collide with winds. The kids learn instantly, viscerally, how important it is for an orchestra to work together, under a steady wand.

They also learn what it feels like -- just for few fleeting seconds -- to own an orchestra.

The Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra has a strong populist mission. The musicians come from a range of races and backgrounds so audiences new to classical music can relate to the action on stage.

"I think it sends a very visible message to the community that this orchestra is for you," said Johnson. "To attract a diverse audience, it's important that when they come, they see people who look like them. That's what has made us successful. We're usually sold out."

When it comes to repertoire, Black Pearl is solidly in the classical canon, heavy with Mozart and Beethoven, occasionally branching into more modern work by George Walker, Astor Piazzolla, and William Grant Still. It's a professional organization.

"We are not a pickup group," said Johnson. "This is our core group. I use the same people all the time."

**Building a base, neighborhood by neighborhood**

Black Pearl is nomadic. It doesn't have a regular venue, but hops from place to place. In part, that's due to economic reality -- a home venue means costly overhead -- which Johnson tries to turn into an advantage. The flexibility allows the orchestra to move around the city and build an audience base neighborhood by neighborhood.

"We regard diversity as an untapped market," said Johnson. "When we do education and outreach with Philadelphia public schools, these kids are getting an amazing first experience with an orchestra, with people that look like them. So that when they grow up and go to the orchestra, they are going to be more encouraged and excited about going."

A rising tide lifts all boats: Johnson's egalitarian vision of the future of classical music would bring audiences to all orchestras, not just her Black Pearl.