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West Mt. Airy conductor Jeri Lynne Johnson led her Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra Saturday, March 10, in one of the most enjoyable and inspiring concerts I've heard in years.

Performed in the visually dreary yet acoustically supportive Episcopal Cathedral in West Philadelphia, Johnson and her musicians performed symphonies by Joseph Boulogne (Chevalier de Saint-Georges), Franz Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart before the most enthusiastic and best-dressed audience I've encountered in decades. I hasten to add that the crowd sold out the Cathedral, packing it front to back and side to side.

Johnson's program was splendidly chosen, expertly arranged and magnificently played. She and her 27-member ensemble opened with Boulogne's Symphony No. 2, Opus 11, no. 2, in D major, then rounded out the evening's first half with Haydn's Symphony No. 44 in E minor, "Trauer" (Mourning), and finished out the concert with Mozart's Sinfonia concertante for Violin, Viola & Orchestra in E-flat major, K. 364. The Boulogne was a wonderful way to start the music making, the Haydn was the emotional highpoint of the program and the Mozart sent everyone off sharing its own high spirits.

Born on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, Boulogne is the first known classical composer with African ancestry. The son of wealthy French planter George Boulogne and his African slave, Nannou, he was sent to France at the age of 13 to be groomed as a gentleman. By the age of 19 he was a member of the Royal Guard and by 25 he was famous as a violin virtuoso. By 1773, he was the director of one of Paris' (and Europe's) finest orchestras. His Symphony in D major actually functioned as the Overture for the premiere of his opera, "The Anonymous Lover," in 1780.

Its three movements – Allegro presto, Andante and Presto – are flawlessly cast in the traditional forms established by Haydn, the creator of the classical symphony, yet each is invested with a high degree of individual character. The first movement balances the bright major tonality of its exposition with a darker modality in its development. The second movement is a minor-key masterpiece of lyrical expression, while the third proffers an engaging dialogue between sections of the string choir.

Johnson led the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra with a firm yet open touch, holding ensemble, balance and blend to an immaculate level yet allowing her players the freedom to sing Boulogne's refined melodies with elegance and wit.

Haydn's "Trauer" Symphony is nothing short of a masterpiece: emotionally profound within the composer's ever-developing invention of and command over the structural intricacies of the classical symphony. His use of chromatic harmonies in the first movement, as well as his writing for the French horns, surpasses anything written before Beethoven's First Symphony. Haydn's handling of imitation in the Menuetto assures us of his knowledge of Bach's counterpoint, the elegiac character of the Adagio touches the heart, and the tumult of the closing Presto catches the sense of loss with spiritual intensity.

Johnson's conducting both controlled and motivated the musicians of the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra. The strings glowed with focused refinement in all four movements while the winds' playing was pointed yet mellow. Most impressive, though, was Johnson conceptual acuity. Without being overbearing, she nonetheless oversaw a rendition that fit every individual gesture into the scheme of each movement's form as well as the structure of all four movements in the symphony as a whole.

Although Mozart's Sinfonia concertante is a frothy diversion when compared to the spiritual depth of the Haydn, its performance by violinist Kelly Hall-Tompkins, violist Robin Fay Massie, and Johnson and the Black Pearl Saturday night was stellar. Especially noteworthy was the strength of Massie's playing. It's not unusual for the viola part to be played in so subdued a manner that it becomes little more than an alto accompaniment for the leading soprano of the violin. Not so this time around. Massie's strongly projected and beautifully modulated brawny tone made certain that her voice would be heard as an equal solo partner with Hall-Tompkins' silvery timbre. And Johnson accompanied with the sure hand of a seasoned veteran.

The Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra is one of the region's musical treasures and Jeri Lynne Johnson is a jewel of a conductor.

Black Pearl concert: Relaxed yet celebratory, including a Black Mozart piece

March 12, 2012|By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic

Now in its third season, the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra is finding itself a niche doing typically classical things with less-than-typical participants. Oriented toward African American musicians, founder/music director Jeri Lynne Johnson is creating audiences that seem new to Haydn and Mozart - and doing so with concerts that are first-class on every level.

Though some listeners Saturday at the packed Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral could be heard quietly humming along with Mozart's beloved *Sinfonia Concertante* for violin, viola, and orchestra, others applauded between movements - showing not just appreciation, but that lots of listeners were new to classical concerts.

The program began with a seldom-heard piece by the so-called Black Mozart, Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint Georges (1745-1799), who was born in Guadeloupe but educated in Paris, eventually becoming a composer and such a fixture among Paris aristocracy that he was imprisoned during the French Revolution. He was represented by his *Symphony No. 2 (Op. 11, No. 2)*, written during an era of fairly strict musical conformity (fun, frothy, elegant - or else!), though one can hear that he injected his own unexpected breaks with the usual melodic symmetry and rhythmic regularity, before reeling himself in to satisfy the tastes of the times.

Elsewhere, the program had a hidden undercurrent - French horn writing that anchors Haydn's *Symphony No. 44 ("Trauer")* and Mozart's *Sinfonia* - that was especially apparent thanks to the solidity of Larry Williams and Katy Ambrose. Haydn's adagio movement shows the composer writing something of a melody without end - and one you don't want to end - that conductor Johnson paced with particularly poetic skill. She chose not to use harpsichord (lately the fashion with Haydn symphonies), though the solidity of the performance combined with the cathedral's generous acoustics assured that the piece had all the sound it needed.

The concert's overall atmosphere felt both relaxed and celebratory. Listeners brought well-behaved children. Johnson mingled in the crowd at intermission. The Mozart soloists, violinist Kelly Hall-Tompkins and violist Robin Fay Massie, had obviously worked out their interpretation in great detail. In a piece where violin and viola often complete each other's musical sentences, these two had a sense of witty banter that made their performance anything but another encounter with Mozart's masterpiece.

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Black Pearl's first concert showcases talent, diversity

Author: David Patrick Stearns; Inquirer Music Critic

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Only a year ago, the arrival of any group of the caliber of Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra, which gave its first full concert Saturday at the Kimmel Center's Perelman Theater, would be greeted happily and without qualification. That's not just because music director/founder Jeri Lynne Johnson, the former assistant conductor of the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, is committed to ethnic diversity on numerous levels, but because it is clearly capable of an excellent Beethoven 5th. But with the Chamber and the Philadelphia Orchestra (among others) in financial trouble, you wondered: Can the philanthropic community afford a newcomer without slighting others? Or is Black Pearl's niche something we cannot afford not to have?

The program of William Grant Still, Astor Piazzolla, and Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 played to a near-full house, its free tickets having been snapped up in three days, though some seats went empty, perhaps because the world does not always value what is free. Those who were there clapped heartily between movements - a healthy sign that new audiences are being reached - though much texting and Twittering could be observed during the music. Are such people truly being reached when so occupied?

Beethoven does not allow texting - the music is too imposing - particularly performed with the "sound and fury" Johnson mentioned in her program notes. The 40-player orchestra gave a tight, intense performance, not going into full cry until the exalted final movement. Elsewhere in the program, Still's 1953 *Danzas de Panama* was a hugely ingratiating, exotic discovery. Piazzolla's *Contemplacion y Danza*, a showcase for clarinetist Doris Hall-Gulati, is an eerie case of artistic synchronicity: It would seem to be an Argentine version of Copland's *Clarinet Concerto* except that the two works were written at exactly the same time, probably unbeknownst to each other. Aldemaro Romeo's 1975 *Fuga con Pajarillo* ended the first half of the program by creating a bridge to Beethoven, employing a Latin rethinking of the Bach fugue, which was part of Beethoven's foundation.

The rhythmic liveliness of these works would be slighted by many conventional orchestras but felt effortless with Black Pearl, and not through any overt efforts from Johnson. She maintained a solid rhythmic framework and let the players handle it. In general, she is a poised, low-key presence delivering musical information from the shoulders up.

As for the orchestra's mandate, Black Pearl is not necessarily doing anything that other organizations attempted. Its ranks have more ethnic diversity - 25 percent Hispanic, African American, and Arab. Free concerts are great, but several fine organizations have a history of doing so as well. Black Pearl's programming is not unknown, though you might not think to hunt down a major Piazzolla performance in, say, the Philadelphia Orchestra's Valentine's Day concert. The value of Black Pearl is concentration and consistency on these fronts. Having an African American woman on the podium inevitably has outreach value. How much? The next concert is in February. More will be revealed.

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Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra: Performing impressive, programming less so

By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Classical Music Critic

Posted on Mon, May. 31, 2010

So far so good with the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra, which concluded its first season Saturday at Temple University's Baptist Temple, with an impressive standard of performance - the most important element - but much uncertainty over translating its alternative sensibility into effective programming.

The first half had founder/music director Jeri Lynne Johnson conducting mostly American music; the second half was a set by the Rodney Mack Philadelphia Big Brass. The connection wasn't obscure: Mack was the first-half soloist, while Johnson conducted some of the more classical pieces on the second half. Pacing and substance are, if anything, more crucial in a program that's not anchored in any of the usual symphonic cornerstones. And while the program was admirably enterprising, it only worked intermittently.

The "Hoedown" passage from Aaron Copland's *Rodeo* was in the opening overture slot (great idea) followed by that composer's meditative *Quiet City* tone poem, which could have killed the momentum had the performance been typical. But it wasn't. Instead of suggesting some semi-deserted Edward Hopper-esque urban landscape, this performance had sharper contours with a sense of tension that was out in the open rather than under the surface. This was unquiet 21st-century Philadelphia - an approach that completely worked on its own terms, thanks to a smart collaboration by Mack and Johnson. However, Ellis Marsalis' *Fourth Autumn*, nice as it is, slowed down the sequence of pieces and killed what might have been an effective transition to George Walker's excellent *Lyric for Strings* and Ernst Bloch's great *Concerto Grosso No. 1*, which closed the first half in a tough, tight, contrapuntally centered performance.

The after-intermission brass set was a grab bag that was ultimately satisfying with a knockout etched-in-metal transcription of *Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4* (final movement) and the Michael Jackson hit "Billie Jean," whose famous bass line was the bedrock of a hotly competitive jam. Previous to that, the set meandered, with Mack's playing a transcription of a Bach sarabande that proved little more than the fact that it could be done, the "Nimrod" section from Edward Elgar's *Enigma Variations* and the inconsequential *Phoenix Polka* by Francis Johnson. Between-song patter had classroom-cutup insouciance that wasn't as charming as it wanted to be and gave a false impression of disorganization. Philadelphia has far better comedians in other venues, but few cities have a lineup of brass players that's better than this. Where's the logical point of focus? Just because the Canadian Brass does this sort of thing doesn't mean anybody else should.

The Baptist Temple is turning out to be a splendid venue with a bright, immediate acoustic. But some bugs are still being worked out. Latecomers were noisily seated while music was being played. A recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* was heard over the sound system during intermission - which functions to give your ears a break from music.

Black Pearl Orchestra delivers 'outstanding' debut

By Roberts, Kimberly C

Kimberly C. Roberts, Tribune Entertainment Writer

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In my humble opinion, listening to skilled musicians playing together live is one of life's greatest pleasures, and I was happy to be present last Saturday, when in the intimate atmosphere of the Kimmel Center's Perelman Theater, the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra, Philadelphia's "first multi-ethnic professional orchestra" and the newest addition to Philadelphia's rich arts and culture community, made its auspicious debut before an enthusiastic and supportive audience.

Black Pearl began its inaugural season with a free concert in celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month, performing works by famed Latin American composers, including Javier Alvarez, Aldemaro Romero and Astor Piazzolla, as well as Beethoven's 5th Symphony and a piece by William Grant Still.

The program opened with a welcome from the orchestra's executive director, Julia Rubio, who promised, "No matter what your relationship with classical music has been, the Black Pearl Orchestra promises that after tonight it will never be the same."

After a few words from board member James Undercoffler, the orchestra made good on its promise, delivering a passionate program that was not only brilliant in its execution, but visually stimulating.

It was immediately evident, and quite refreshing that these musicians were not afraid to express themselves, or how they were feeling about the music. Rather than sitting ramrod straight as they played, which is the norm in "traditional" orchestras, they moved and swayed, with some almost dancing with their instruments. Adriana Linares, a supremely talented violist, was particularly expressive, obviously feeling every note that played. She was a joy to watch, and dare I say it? This was an orchestra with soul.

Maestro Jeri Lynne Johnson had firm command of the orchestra, conveying the vibrant spirit that is inherent in Latin music. She also did a superb job of programming, choosing selections that would both challenge her musicians and engage her audience. The most popular pieces proved to be the captivating "Fuga con Pajarillo" by Aldemaro Romero, as well as an immaculate and emotionally charged rendition of Beethoven's "Symphony No. 5 in c minor, Op. 67," commonly known as Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony." When the last note of the great symphony faded, Johnson leaped joyously into the air before taking a bow with the orchestra.

Immediately following the performance, Johnson's proud father, Jerry Johnson, gave his reaction, saying, "I'm very pleased. It was an outstanding concert, and I thought it was a great opportunity to pay tribute to the special month Hispanic Heritage Month. I thought the 'Beethoven's Fifth' was probably one of the best renditions I've ever heard. I thought she did an excellent job, and I know it's been a labor of love for Jeri to put this orchestra together. I think tonight we saw the culmination of it."

Concert pianist Blanche Burton-Lyles, founder and curator of Philadelphia's Marian Anderson Historical Residence/Museum, called Black Pearl's performance "the perfect blend of fine musicianship."

"Jeri Lynne Johnson is a major conductor of gigantic proportions," she said. "And I'm just overwhelmed and thrilled that it's at this venue - at Perelman. The enthusiasm and the passion, it shows. She's totally qualified. She has the excitement, the training and the talent."

Burton-Lyles was also delighted by the cultural diversity that is hallmark of Philadelphia's newest orchestra. "It's similar to when they used to have the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C., but it's in the City of Brotherly Love that we have this," she said. "In listening to them, I closed my eyes and I said, 'My goodness! They have the command of the Philadelphia Orchestra,' because they are all outstanding musicians."

One of those outstanding musicians is principal trumpeter Roday Mack, who happens to be the cousin of decorated musician and composer Wynton Marsalis. On the way to the celebratory reception that followed the concert, Mack, who had literally just stepped offstage, gave his immediate reaction saying, "It felt amazing, because it's something we all believe in: A diverse orchestra, highly talented individuals, men and women from all different walks of life, making music. It's something we all believe in, and you could feel it, I think, from the audience. It was a very special event for all of us."

While surrounded by a group of well-wishers at the reception, Jeri Lynne Johnson summed up the experience, saying, "I'm exhausted and exhilarated, and I'm overwhelmed! I'm overwhelmed by the response from the audience. I'm overwhelmed by the enthusiasm from the orchestra. This is exciting and this is a great beginning for us, and we're going to bring the whole community along for the ride. It's important that the entire city - that we embrace them and that they embrace us to continue this success!" The Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra will present the second of three free concerts in February 2010.

Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA)
February 27, 2002

A small orchestra, solid sound
Peter Dobrin INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

It may have won the local record for most warhorses in a single concert, this program assembled by the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia.

With so much so familiar, assistant conductor **Jeri Lynne Johnson** could have gone the way of suggesting new thinking about the Pachelbel Canon or Barber Adagio for Strings. And in fact, in one work, the "Adagietto" from Mahler's Symphony No. 5, **Johnson** made an extremely effective personal statement.

But for the most part, **Johnson**, leading the former Concerto Soloists at Perelman Theater Monday night, made the most of the common fare within the bounds of a conservative approach. Nothing revolutionary about her Eine Kleine Nachtmusik; it was bright and bouncy and smartly shaped. The Schubert German Dance No. 1 in C major was energetic.

The program was billed as "Music from the Movies," which for the most part meant music not written for the movies, but used in film (the Barber in Platoon, etc.). But there was some actual film music in two works by Bernard Herrmann, from Psycho and Fahrenheit 451. Psycho as a suite doesn't quite work; the music is too event-specific and cliched, as the audience giggling during the famous shower-scene string violence showed. But **Johnson** made the Fahrenheit 451 melodies swell to - yes - cinematic proportions.

She provided solid leadership in Vivaldi's Concerto for Guitar in D major, RV 93 (used in A Little Romance), with soloist Jason Vieaux. The guitarist, whose career is being guided in part now by Astral Artistic Services, had a sound endowed with character and more than ample technique for this popular piece.

But where **Johnson** made the biggest impression was in the Mahler. She started with just the right tempo, neither falling in the too-slow trap of thinking this is a sacred work, nor taking it so briskly that it seemed callous. Then, she explored fluidity to its most emotional ends, even making the case successfully that the orchestra of about 20 players wasn't too small to make a big impact.

A lot had to do with the quality of the ensemble itself, which all evening was on a very high level. So few string players can unwittingly expose and accentuate little differences in intonation and phrasing. But the Chamber Orchestra, if small, acted with a lovely oneness. Peter Dobrin's e-mail address is pdobrin@phillynews.com.

Spotlight shines wide

Rocky Mountain News

By Marc Shulgold

April 8, 2006

If Wednesday's Colorado Symphony concert was the Itzhak Perlman Show, this weekend's offering deserves to be billed as the CSO Show.

No soloist was scheduled at Friday's Boettcher Hall extravaganza - unless you count nearly every member of the orchestra. As Marin Alsop suggested in the program, the concert agenda would prove "a real *tour de force*" for the CSO.

Rather than merely acknowledging the musicians' many talents, the concert set out to celebrate them. And there's no better way to do that than with an evening of colorful music from Russia.

This program was, surprisingly, Tchaikovsky-less. We heard pieces by Borodin, Rachmaninoff and Rimsky-Korsakov - composers who seemed to understand the glorious potentials of an orchestra better than just about anybody.

And there were plenty of glorious moments Friday: Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances*, brimming with exotic touches and that memorable *Stranger in Paradise* tune; Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio espagnol* with its magical percussive effects and stirring brass episodes; Rachmaninoff's sprawling, rhythmically energized *Symphonic Dances*, utilizing nearly every color in the orchestral palette.

Throughout the evening, Alsop drove her players to virtuosic heights, allowing the music - and the musicians - to shine, while never forcing the issue. Tempos were well-chosen, particularly in the *Capriccio*. In the conductor's sure hands, there would be no rushin' in this Russian program.

Space does not permit a list of all the star solo turns, but we should mention Yumi Hwang-Williams (violin), Jurgen de Lemos (cello), Peter Cooper (oboe), Jason Lichtenwalter (English horn), Bil Jackson (clarinet) and Paul Naslund (trombone).

Finally, a round of applause to Alsop for permitting her protégé, Jeri Lynne Johnson, to open the program with a solid rendition of Rimsky's *Russian Easter Overture*. Johnson is this year's winner of the Taki Concordia Fellowship, created by Alsop to encourage women who are drawn to the podium.

The overture is no piece of cake - purring one minute, shouting the next, changing moods and meters at every turn. Johnson handled it with poise and polish, luring some brilliant playing from the CSO.

Introducing the young maestra, Alsop described her as part of "the next generation of women conductors." What a wonderful concept.