

## Apollo's Fire concert at Southland College Prep to launch elementary school strings program

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Apollo's Fire conductor Jeannette Sorrell watches the Southland Dancers prepare for a concert designed to launch a strings program in Matteson Elementary District 162. (Matteson Elementary District 162)

Those free violin and piano lessons in public school helped transform Jeannette Sorrell into the internationally renowned musician and conductor she is today. Now Sorrell is returning the favor, teaming up with Matteson Elementary District 162 on a strings program that is expected to spark the musical talents of scores of students for years to come.

“It’s something I’ve always believed in passionately,” said Sorrell, who grew up mainly in Denver, Colorado and whose family couldn’t afford the private violin and piano lessons she craved. “The reason I’m a musician today is because there were free strings programs in the public schools I attended.”

Sorrell said public school budgets have been cut in the past 20 years, and arts is always the first thing to be dropped. To launch the program, a concert will be held at 7 p.m. Oct. 26 at Southland College Prep.

Charter High School, 4601 Sauk Trail in Richton Park, mainly open to students who will be in the strings program and their parents. The choir and student dancers from Southland College Prep will perform with Apollo's Fire, led by Sorrell, its artistic director, conductor and harpsichordist.



The music will range from Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" to "Stand by Me." During a break in the program, Southland's nationally award-winning speech team will recite an original piece, "Music is to my souls as melanin is to my skin." Afterward, students can get to know the instruments in an instrumental "petting zoo," Sorrell said.

She has been impressed by recent meetings with the Southland choir and dance students and said she is looking forward to getting to know the dozens of

Jeannette Sorrell, founding artistic director of the baroque orchestra Apollo's Fire, works with the Southland College Prep choir on a piece for the Oct. 26 concert. (Matteson Elementary District 162)

elementary school students who will be in the program. "Being able to work with children of color is also something I believe in very passionately because, generally speaking, they haven't had enough exposure to classical music or opportunity in the arts," said Sorrell. "I really feel we all have a debt to pay in that area."

The new program will begin in November with fourth through sixth graders meeting three days a week at four of the district's elementary schools, but could eventually expand to middle school students. Blondean Y. Davis, superintendent of District 162 and Southland College Prep, said the schools have plenty of band, dance and voice talent, but only have a small strings program because of the difficulty in attracting teachers. "When Apollo approached us, we knew they had enthusiasm and had performed worldwide," Davis said. "I thought this is wonderful, but why us?"



Jeannette Sorrell listens to sopranos Alfreda Burke and Elizabeth Norman-Sojourner during a rehearsal. (Matteson Elementary District 162)

The partnership came about this summer when Fred Nelson, Southland and District 162's artistic director, and Rodrick Dixon and his wife, Alfreda Burke, met Sorrell and Apollo's Fire at Ravinia. Dixon and Burke, classically trained singers who perform in these schools, will be soloists at the Oct. 26 concert.

The next day, Sorrell visited Southland and her dream of bringing Baroque music to more African American students was born. Davis said even if students are not interested in joining an orchestra, "we have an opportunity to expose our children to classical music that hitherto they would not have had."

Davis said the one hitch was funding, but Sorrell came through on that score, too. She and staff gave Davis a list of donors and grants, allowing the district to apply jointly with Apollo's Fire, which will also provide teachers. "So this is a different kind of collaboration, it's not just the district raising the funds," said Davis. "We've never had anyone come to us. It's unique and their attitudes are very welcoming."



Apollo's Fire conductor Jeannette Sorrell accompanies the dancers with a tambourine as they practice. (Matteson Elementary District 162)

Janenne Coleman of Matteson and her fifth grade daughter, Zoe, who will be in the strings program, are already pumped. "The thing about it is music is another language, so I think it's a good outlet for Zoe because she is very bright," said Coleman, a singer and choir director herself. "Because it's another language, it helps her with math and her creativity."

Zoe, who plays the violin and practices several hours daily, said she loved Mozart.

“It just helps me clear my mind and it’s another way to express myself,” said Zoe. “I’ve heard a lot about Apollo’s Fire and they’re a really good group, and I’ve been listening to the music to prepare myself for the concert.”

But Zoe said she had also been inspired by Carl Cogar, who directs fine arts for both Southland and District 162. She said she hopes to take the next step and inspire fellow students.

“I felt like if he did that, then so can I,” said Zoe.

Apollo’s Fire will also launch its Windy City Series, A Journey of Discovery, Oct. 27 [apollosfire.org/event/four-seasons-chicago/](https://apollosfire.org/event/four-seasons-chicago/).

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