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Jeannette Sorrell, founding artistic director of the baroque orchestra Apollo’s Fire, works with the Southland College Prep choir on a piece for the October 26th concert launching the Matteson School District 162 Strings Program. Photo by Eric Lites
Matteson School District 162 Launches Strings Program

BY TIA CAROL JONES

Students at the Matteson School District 162 will have their own Strings program thanks to a partnership between the school district and Apollo’s Fire, a Grammy Award winning Baroque orchestra.

On Oct. 14th, there was a concert featuring Apollo’s Fire and singers Rodrick Dixon and Alfreda Burke at Southland College Prep Charter High School for the students in the school district.

Jeanette Sorrell, the artistic director of Apollo’s Fire, loves working with children and has always wanted to bring classical music to children who otherwise wouldn’t be exposed to it. She wouldn’t be a professional musician today if she had not taken advantage of a free music program, with free strings lessons, when she was in school. It changed her life. The Ohio-based Chamber Orchestra is doing a concert series in Chicago and wanted to also bring its educational initiative to the city.

The hope is that 50 to 80 students will participate in the new strings program. The program will start with students in fourth through sixth grade. “We are excited to work with this world-class musical group to bring the beauty of classical music to our students,” said Dr. Blondean Y. Davis, superintendent of the Matteson School District 162 and CEO of Southland College Prep Charter High School in Richton Park. “We believe in educating the whole child and music is an important part of that education. Providing an opportunity for our students to learn orchestral music from some of the best musicians in the world is a dream come true.”

Rodrick Dixon and his wife Alfreda Burke connected Apollo’s Fire to the Matteson School District. Dixon and Burke thought having a strings program in the school district would be a good addition to their curriculum.

“For the students to learn these instruments with private instruction, and also to play in an ensemble, certainly enables them to be disciplined and learn a discipline. Also, music is the most cognitive of the fine arts,” Burke said, adding that music involves mathematics, history and language.

Dixon and Burke both have performed all over the world with major symphonies and orchestras. They have done television from China to South Africa to London. Burke made her debut at Carnegie Hall with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Dixon made his debut at Carnegie Hall with the Cincinnati Symphony and American Orchestra.

Dixon and Burke currently have a show called “Too Hot to Handle,” which is in its 17th year at the Auditorium Theater. The tenor and soprano have been involved in the entertainment and arts for a long time.

Burke believes in the whole gestalt of a child and the way music enriches them. It has the ability to expand a child’s world.

“The more information about periods, times, customs, traditions, different composers, that’s just very enriching, and how they’re relevant to your world today. Nothing under the sun is new, so just to learn what Handel did … Their music is relevant,” Burke said.

Burke added, although the music of Baroque composers like Handel and Vivaldi are different than what young people are listening to today, there are also similarities. One example is the way Handel and Vivaldi used their music to benefit the social justice issues of their time.

Dixon was impressed by the way Davis perpetuates the idea that there isn’t anything the students cannot achieve.

“The whole idea of having a string orchestra where she would, starting in the fourth grade, and having a child a Viola or Cello or a Double Bass instrument, fits into her ideal about what a child can expect when they walk into an institution of education,” Dixon said.

Dixon said while it is important that Black children have exposure to the “other side” but the “other side” should have exposure to Black children.

“The genius that comes from our children is not when the ‘other side’ is providing help, it’s when our children are providing exposure to them about what our children can do when given the opportunity,” he said.