

National Arab Orchestra founder and conductor Michael Ibrahim, shown here playing the *oud*.

MUSE/IQUE performs a regular series of concerts on the CalTech campus. Most musicians in the orchestra stand up to perform.

PENNSYLVANIA PHILHARMONIC

The main mission of the Pennsylvania Philharmonic is music in the schools.



A young audience member at a Lake Tahoe SummerFest performance



Startups

It's supposed to be a tough time for the arts.

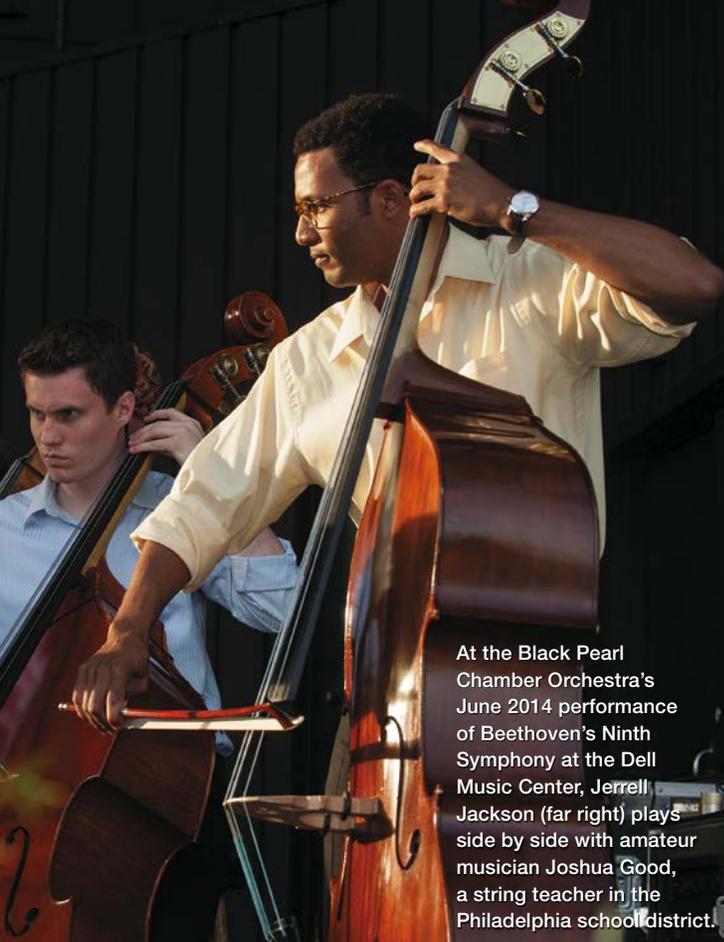
Rising

by Jennifer Melick

Along with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, starting a new business is part of the quintessential American Dream. Today, as we slowly pull out of a national recession, startups are everywhere, from the tech sector to retail and service industries. And a healthy amount of new activity is bubbling up at orchestras.

New groups are popping up all over, formed by conductors, music educators, composers, and arts administrators, with several entering the market recently or in the last few years. Motivations vary, but all are the result of conscious decisions to focus on specific missions: some orchestras fill a community niche, some focus on pops and education, some bring forward minority musicians, some focus on neglected or unfamiliar music, some offer completely new hybrids of music, and some aim for a more interactive concert format. What these emphatically are *not* are just “our city needs an orchestra.”

Here, we take a closer look at eight groups. While each orchestra has a very different story to tell, they share a few things in common. Every person interviewed for this article was at pains to point out that they are trying out new ideas and different approaches, not



At the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra's June 2014 performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the Dell Music Center, Jerrell Jackson (far right) plays side by side with amateur musician Joshua Good, a string teacher in the Philadelphia school district.



The horn section performs at the Colour of Music Festival in Charleston, South Carolina.

COLOUR OF MUSIC FESTIVAL



GO-GO SYMPHONY

The Go-Go Symphony, Capital City Symphony, and Da Originalz dance troupe in a combined performance at Washington, D.C.'s Atlas Performing Arts Center, June 2014

Yet people are launching orchestras everywhere. Why?

The Savannah Philharmonic performs full-orchestra concerts throughout the community.



SAVANNAH PHILHARMONIC



Jeri Lynne Johnson leads the Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the Dell Music Center, June 21, 2014.

trying to be the next Los Angeles Philharmonic or Boston Symphony Orchestra. The phrase “making orchestras more accessible” came up repeatedly, unprompted, in multiple conversations. The orchestras’ founders are seasoned professionals whose fiscal approaches all reflect a post-recession caution. In every case, musicians are paid per-service. These orchestras appear determined not to get too big too fast, to program only what they can pay for, and hope to “avoid the pitfall of basically running a nonprofit that’s a bucket with a hole in it,” as the founder of Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra jokingly put it.

Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra

In 2008, Philadelphia-based conductor Jeri Lynne Johnson formed Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra. Her goal: to create a “totally diverse” orchestra that would be a “model for the 21st-century orchestra.” In addition to public performances throughout Philadelphia, Black Pearl offers open rehearsals and programs in partnership with the school district of Philadelphia.

“The catalyst for starting Black Pearl was a job audition that I took for music director at an orchestra,” says Johnson, a 2005 recipient of the Taki Concordia Conducting Fellowship for aspiring women conductors. “I was one of three finalists, and I did not get the job. When I asked why, a member of the search committee said, ‘You just don’t look like what our audience expects a conductor to look like.’ That was 2007. I give this date, because I

think it was significant in terms of a sort of sea change in America about the image of leadership; at that time Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were the Democratic nominees for president. That began to really change people’s minds about how important diversity is in this country. When I started Black Pearl, it was with that in mind.

“I’m in Philadelphia, so I’ve got access to some of the finest musicians in the country. Why not have a totally diverse orchestra? It’s quite simply good business. Our audience demographic profile is probably 60 percent African American.” The orchestra musicians are a mix of all races and ethnicities. “One of the things that came out of being told you don’t look like our audience expects you to look, was I decided I’m going to turn everybody into a conductor—everybody looks like a conductor! That’s the foundation of our education outreach. We put a baton in young people’s hands, and we’re teaching them leadership skills, executive function skills, verbal/non-verbal communication, and self-esteem.

“A few years ago we did iConduct, where we took one piece, Beethoven 5, and we did it at four different locations throughout the city. The simple idea was, let the general public stand up there and wave their arms around. People might say, ‘I don’t like classical music,’ but once they get that baton in their hand, and feel the orchestra actually responding, when they feel that power, they love it. It’s transformative.”

Colour of Music Festival

In 2013 in Charleston, South Carolina, Lee Pringle launched the Colour of Music, a five-day October festival spotlighting black musicians and composers of African heritage. The decision came after a 2012 Charleston Symphony concert Pringle was involved with, featuring the Mozart Requiem and honoring a composer of African ancestry who lived in France during Mozart’s era: Chevalier du Saint-Georges (born Joseph Bologne, 1745-99). “Most people had never heard of Saint-Georges,”



Jonathan Reiss

says Pringle. “The concert was a huge hit—many, many people wanted to know more about Saint-Georges.”

Under Pringle and Music Director Marlon Daniel, the festival includes full-orchestra and chamber music concerts as well as lectures and a symposium. “In 2016 we’re planning to do an opera by Saint-Georges, featuring soprano Magali Léger, a native of Guadeloupe, Saint-Georges’ birthplace. This coming fall, opening night will be Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and we’ll also perform Adolphus Hailstork’s *Shouting for Joy* with brass, timpani and organ—a big piece—as well as Stravinsky’s Symphony No. 4 and a new commission by a black composer. When our patrons see an all-black orchestra onstage, I think they are kind of taken aback. I expected to see our audience makeup to be 70 percent white, 30 percent black. To my surprise, it’s

the opposite. That’s why I know I’m onto something.

“The Charleston Symphony, where I previously served on the board, has been very supportive of what we’re doing. Once we get a little bit more established I want to partner together. I met with their CEO, Michael Smith, several weeks ago, and he has agreed. I think it would be a win-win for both of us. Our goal is to be an ambassador for our country and showcase the enormous body of work that black composers have put towards this art form. Until we get the major orchestras to program the music, it will continue to be music that nobody knows exists.”

“Our goal is to showcase the enormous body of work of black composers,” says Lee Pringle, founder of the Colour of Music Festival. “Until we get the major orchestras to program the music, it will continue to be music that nobody knows exists.”



Go-Go Symphony performs a funk/classical hybrid, billed as “music you can dance and party to.”

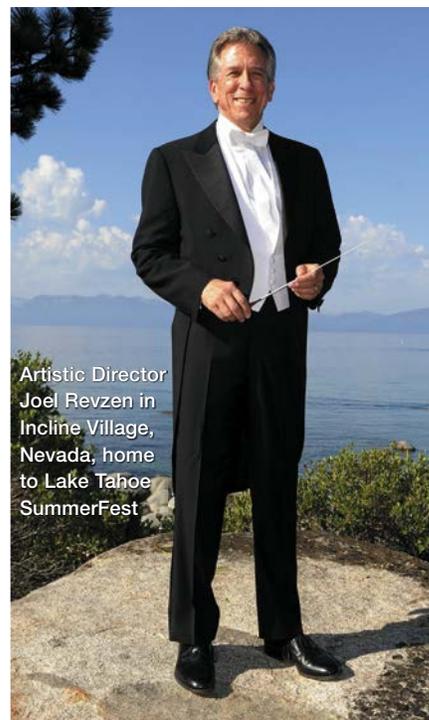
Go-Go Symphony

Launched in Washington, D.C. in 2013 and marketing itself as a “symphony you can dance and party to,” this group stretches the meaning of “orchestra” well beyond its usual definition. Wanting to try something completely different, founder Liza Figueroa Kravinsky, a composer and violinist, put together her own hybrid ensemble, whose roughly 20 musicians perform a D.C. variety of funk known as go-go, using classically trained musicians alongside musicians from the go-go sphere.

Why blend go-go and classical? “Go-go focuses on the beat, and that can get monotonous,” says Figueroa Kravinsky. “Classical focuses on the melody and harmonies and development of such, but it can use a beat, so people can dance to it. At our first concert at the Smithsonian National Mall in June 2013, kids passing by actually stopped and pulled their parents toward us, because they were attracted to the beat. The beat is a lot like human beatboxing; that syncopated swing beat that you hear all over alternative music and hip-hop is actually from go-go music. Audiences are asked to participate with a call and response, which is part of the go-go culture: an emcee tells the audience how to call and respond. People dance and chant and call and respond and clap, and the beat keeps going, the music never stops. Each song or movement is about as long as a pop song.

“Sometimes we’re a small ensemble that can play in clubs and smaller locations,

and sometimes we team up with a symphony orchestra for the full effect.” The group regularly partners with the community orchestra Capital City Symphony at the Atlas Performing Arts Center in the city’s H Street corridor. “My staff are the members of the ensemble. The production manager for our next show is our guitarist. Our tenor sax player does our publicity. Our librarian—our timpanist—does our videos and photography. Our alto sax player, who also does flute beatboxing, composed about half of our latest set. It’s



Artistic Director Joel Revzen in Incline Village, Nevada, home to Lake Tahoe SummerFest

Chris Tallbot