



Robert Johnson

CONDUCTING A NEW GENERATION *of Symphonic Musicians*

BY AUDREY HANES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA DONNER

The Delta Symphony Orchestra has been an artistic and musical influence on Jonesboro and Northeast Arkansas for more than four decades. With the addition of the Delta Youth Symphony Orchestra, which launched this year under the direction of Conductor and Music Director Robert Johnson, the orchestra is working to support and cultivate a new generation of musicians.

Catherine Norvell, executive director of the Delta Symphony Orchestra (DSO), says the Delta Youth Symphony Orchestra (DYSO) was founded to address a lack of opportunity for string instruction and performance in Northeast Arkansas.

"Few string programs exist in our area schools, and to continue past the beginning level of instruction students are often required to continue with private teachers, which may not be an option for some families," said Norvell. "The DYSO program began in the fall of 2023 to address this need in our community and is open to students ages 12 to 18 with a least one year of instrument instruction. ...

"The DSO is committed to entertaining, educating, and enriching lives in the Delta region through orchestral music, and we believe that one of the most effective means of accomplishing this goal is by reaching young people. Other DSO youth programs include our national Young Artist Concerto Competition, Summer String Camp, School Day Concerts and no-cost workshops with DSO guest artists."

Norvell says Johnson, who has held the position of orchestra representative on the DSO Board of Directors and worked closely with Dr. Neale Bartee, DSO conductor and artistic director, for a number of years, was the perfect fit for the DYSO conductor.

"Robert is a dedicated and talented instructor who is passionate about string and music education in our region," said Norvell. "He also serves as instrumental director at Tuckerman High School and Swifton Middle School and as a performing violinist in the Delta Symphony Orchestra."



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Robert Johnson (opposing page and right photo), Delta Youth Symphony Orchestra conductor and music director, provides instruction to students during the Delta Symphony Orchestra's Summer Strings Camp recital in July. Also pictured assisting students are DYSO instructors Anastasia Tarkington (opposing page) and Jenny Rong Cao (above).

A native of Missouri, Johnson started his musical studies playing tuba and then violin at Arkansas State University, where he received his Bachelor of Music Education and Master of Music in Orchestral Conducting. While at A-State, he began studying conducting with Bartee and formed the Jonesboro Suzuki String Orchestra. He also conducted performances with the A-State Symphony Orchestra, which yielded his first experiences leading an orchestra and conducting major symphonic works.

"I have been a section violin player for the Delta Symphony Orchestra for over a decade now, and when it was decided that the DSO was going to add a youth symphony, they asked me to be the conductor," said Johnson. "It has been a dream of mine to conduct an orchestra, so I immediately said, 'yes.'"

"Young string players in Northeast Arkansas did not have a way to expand their string playing skills beyond the elementary grade levels unless they could afford private lessons. Several members

of the DSO board expressed interest in doing something to help reach out to the young string players of Northeast Arkansas and give them an outlet to play and expand their skills into the junior high and high school ages. After several meetings and lots of grant writing (by Catherine Norvell) and presentations, we were able to secure the funds needed to begin our summer youth string camp and then the DYSO."

Johnson serves as the music director and conductor of the DYSO, and he also handles the programming, secures the rehearsal and performance space, obtains music equipment and creates suitable audition material.

"The best part (of my job) is when I get to step on the podium and make music with these amazing young people," he said. "... My favorite part is being on the podium and making music and sharing my passion for orchestral music with these amazing players."

Last year was the DYSO's first season. As the orchestra continues

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to grow, its current musicians come from all over Northeast Arkansas, Southeast Missouri and Western Tennessee and play a variety of instruments including violin, viola, cello and piano. The group has five rehearsals for every concert and two concerts per year.

Already, community support has allowed the youth orchestra to expand its offerings and include more young musicians.

“The DYSO relies on community support to grow and thrive,” said Norvell. “We have been thrilled to receive support and encouragement from the Carl B. and Florence E. King Foundation, our local Walmart stores (through Walmart’s Spark Good program), Nettleton Public Schools, Arkansas State University, First Baptist Church Jonesboro, the Arkansas Arts Council, area music teachers, local business owners and long-time DSO patrons.

“In its first year, the DYSO was only open to string (violin, viola, cello, bass, harp and piano) students. This fall we are excited to be expanding the program to full orchestra. During the DSO’s 2024-2025 concert season, we will be showcasing the DYSO with a special side-by-side performance with DSO musicians at our Baseball Opening Day Concert in April 2025.”

DYSO auditions will be held on Aug. 25 and are free of charge. Students can sign up and find out more information on deltasymphonyorchestra.org.

“Some of our DSO members help teach and support our DYSO, and our DYSO members also get free tickets to our DSO concerts,” said Johnson.

“... Our members are aged 12-18 and they must pass an audition to become a member. To maintain membership our players are required to attend rehearsals and practice their parts between rehearsals. The DYSO holds our members to high expectations because we play very challenging and rewarding music.”

Working alongside Johnson is Jenny Rong Cao, the instructor of strings at A-State and the principal cellist of the Delta Symphony Orchestra who is also the string coach for Collierville High School orchestra, and Anastasia Tarkington, a private music teacher of 11 years who teaches violin, viola and piano and is

currently studying harp with Alaina Graiser. Tarkington performs with her family, The Tarkingtons, works in connection with The Foundation of Arts and The Stage Theater Co. in Jonesboro and is a member of the Delta Symphony Orchestra.

“Occasionally, we will need to break up rehearsals from the large group into smaller groups, and our expert instructors will lead these sectional rehearsals and refine some challenging parts,” said Johnson. “If needed, they will sit in with the orchestra and perform with these young musicians to offer support.”

It is the hope of those heavily involved with the DSO that the introduction of the DYSO will ultimately lead to more musicians for the DSO itself.

“The Delta Youth Symphony Orchestra is one of the most important new developments under the sponsorship of the Delta Symphony Orchestra,” said Bartee, who has served as the DSO’s conductor and director of music since 1975. “In the past 50 years, the DSO has relied heavily on violin, viola, cello and bass players outside of Jonesboro to fill out the string sections. The DYSO is significant because it offers instruction and performance opportunities for students ages 12-18. Hopefully, this will lead to more students who will develop their skills and ultimately perform with the Delta Symphony Orchestra.”

Norvell encouraged those who wish to stay up to date on DYSO and DSO events to follow their Facebook and Instagram accounts.

“The DSO would not function without its volunteers, board of directors, musicians and many community partners and supporters,” said Norvell. “I love seeing these groups come together to provide unique and incredible musical opportunities for Northeast Arkansas.

“We have some amazing events and concerts planned for the coming months, including our annual DSO Gala on August 24, a very special Ashley McBryde in Concert with the DSO performance on Oct. 27 and a wonderful 2024-2025 season lineup.”

For more information about the Delta Youth Symphony Orchestra or the Delta Symphony Orchestra, visit deltasymphonyorchestra.org.



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