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Conducting herself

By **WALT AMACKER/TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER**

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Erin Freeman, associate conductor of The Richmond Symphony Orchestra and director of the orchestra chorus, is completing her first full season of standing in the wings, if you will.

The diminutive, 35-year-old conductor's schedule would put most people under the table, but Freeman thrives on the challenges.

"I knew that I wanted to be a musician when I was 6 and heard Robert Shaw conduct the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus," Freeman said. She went on to become the youngest member ever to join that group when she was 17.

Attending each of the Richmond orchestra's rehearsals and performances with score and pencil in hand, marking each of conductor Mark Russell Smith's specific instructions as he indicates is an integral part of her job. If Smith breaks a leg walking off the platform during a concert, she's there to step in.

She also programs and conducts most of the Pops concerts, the Kicked Back Classics series, and is artistic head of the education department of the Richmond Symphony. This makes her director of the most advanced of four youth symphonies, responsible for programming and conducting the community and students' discovery concerts program, and in charge of coordinating the program so it adheres to the Virginia state standards of music education. And with her credentials, Freeman is up to the job.

With a bachelor's degree in vocal performance from Northwestern University, a master's in choral conducting from Boston University and a doctorate in orchestral conducting from Peabody Conservatory, she's more than qualified.

Freeman's winding trail to Richmond started when -- while still a doctoral student at Peabody -- she auditioned for the position of director of the Richmond Philharmonic and was accepted.

Then, through a timely sequence of events, she was encouraged to audition for director of the RSO Chorus because founder and conductor Jim Erb was retiring from the position.

"I knew Jim because his wife played in the Philharmonic," Freeman said. "He was the person who encouraged me to audition for the chorus director's position."

Even before she auditioned for that job, the associate conductor of the RSO spot popped up, and she was encouraged to apply for that as well. She was named associate conductor in October 2006 then auditioned for the chorus position in January.

And the rest -- shall we say -- is recent history.

Freeman has thrown herself into her work with a passion. Asked if there is a dominant force because of her background and education in both disciplines -- vocale and choral conducting -- Freeman said, "I'm a conductor."

"I feel blessed to have experience in both. I don't prefer a small ensemble to a large ensemble, or vice versa," she said. "I just want to work with whatever I have and take it to the next level.

"These associate positions are really a part of the growth process of a conductor. Two to four years and then you move on to something else. But I take any position I have and work like I'm going to be there my entire life, because I don't want to feel temporary. I've bought a house here . . . steeped myself in Richmond history. I love it, and I don't want to be looking beyond what I'm doing."

And if any of her musicians think about getting out of line, they should know that Freeman is preparing to obtain her black belt in the Korean martial art of tae kwan do.

"For me, it's a combination of sport, history, discipline and different forms of prescribed patterns," Freeman said. "It's a great escape. No one is reviewing me. No one is applauding me. It's something I can do at my own pace, but it also is very similar to what I do for a career.

"My instrumental conducting teacher, the great Gustav Meier, would say, 'Drop your elbows . . . you need intensity not tension.' My tae kwan do instructor says exactly the same thing.

"It's all made me a better conductor and teacher," Freeman said.

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