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SPACETAKER ARTIST PROFILE



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Bringing Chamber Back: Alecia Lawyer for the Love of Music

BY CHRIS DUNN

Alecia Lawyer, founder and executive director of ROCO (River Oaks Chamber Orchestra) wears many hats. Administrator, tennis aficionado, closet physicist (her initial major at college), drummer, oboist, wife and mother are just a few of her pursuits. Mrs. Lawyer grew up in a small town in East Texas; her parents are both musicians and music educators. The family's annual twenty-six hour road trips to California established the fun of music, Lawyer recalls: "During the long drive, we would harmonize and my parents would make up music games for us to play. They are incredibly smart people." It is this joy that Lawyer gifts to her audience with her orchestra. For her, that is what music is about: connecting with people. "Music by itself is a vacuum. It is music's ability to bridge—people, generations, cultures—that makes it worth anything."

It is this philosophy that prompted her to create ROCO in 2004. She wanted music to be fun, and to play it with people she cared about. She believes it is the people—the musicians and the audience—that generate the power of music, not just the notes. "It is the energy and passion of the community of people playing together that affects the audience, whether it is Mozart or a new piece of work. It is also what establishes relationships with the audience," she says. Part and parcel to this, Lawyer is active in cultivating relations in the city of Houston. Having been in Houston for 12 years, she has been able to build strong ties within the city. Working with the Junior League and singing at nursing homes are just a couple of ways she has been able to touch lives.

Lawyer feels that in part, the lack of opportunity for community involvement is what is wrong with the orchestral system: "The system is broken in a way. Musicians move to cities where there is an opening, which are few and far between. It is then really difficult to get involved, and often these jobs



are steps toward a bigger and better position in a different orchestra." For a while, this was disconcerting to her. She even thought of putting down the oboe before she started ROCO and began collaborating with the other members of the orchestra. There is a dynamic interplay between the players in ROCO. As Lawyer says of flutist Christina Jennings, "It is wonderful to play with her. We don't even have to practice together. We share the same breath."

Houston itself also re-inspired Lawyer. "Houston is a fabulous town. The people are so friendly and welcoming of new ventures. It is not like that in a lot of places." For her here in Houston, "It is not art for art's sake like in New York, but its art for people's sake." In this vein, Lawyer developed the Saturday Night Out program, during which parents can enjoy a concert child-free while children get their own musical experience, both hands-on and listening. As an added bonus, after the concert the children enjoy pizza and movies, allowing parents time to have dinner or attend post-concert receptions.

Perhaps the greatest gift Lawyer has given Houston is that she has made music accessible to a wide audience. In part it is the programming, which marries Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 with Alan Hovhannes' Fantasy on Japanese Woodprints. She finds the confluence of difference exciting. "We live in the age of the iPod Shuffle, and it is great to have Beethoven right next to Pearl Jam,"

she says. In part it is the atmosphere of the concert. Four tickets are raffled off before the music begins, and four audience members are invited to sit in the orchestra and experience the first piece of music from the trenches. And the first piece is never announced—it is always a surprise. Knowing that Lawyer not only loves Mozart but has musical leanings toward Prince and Journey only makes the anticipation that much sweeter.

