

LIFESTYLE

Chamber orchestra going conductorless

By **Colin Eatock** | February 12, 2015

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Photo: Richard Bowditch

Composer Derek Bermel will be in Houston Friday and Saturday, when the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra performs his "Murmurations."

During the past decade, Houston's River Oaks Chamber Orchestra has been led by many conductors. But once a year, the orchestra likes to go conductorless.

That's what the 40-piece ensemble will do on Friday at Grace Presbyterian Church, when it plays a concert called "Mutual Affection." It will repeat the program on Saturday at the Church of St. John the Divine.

Artistic director Alecia Lawyer says the idea is to bring the musicians into an equal and interactive group - dependent on each other, rather than a maestro on a podium waving a baton.

"It makes us all come to the table as an ensemble full of relationships," says Lawyer, who also plays oboe in the orchestra. "And removing the conductor allows us to connect more directly to the audience. But you do have to have someone leading."

With no conductor, the concertmaster, seated at the head of the violin section, assumes an important role - and all eyes will be on guest concertmaster Cho-Liang Lin. The renowned Taiwanese-American violinist will be doing triple-duty, as an orchestral player, a soloist and the orchestra's leader.

The orchestra will play Franz Schubert's "Symphony No. 5," as well as Edward Elgar's "Salut d'Amour" and Antonín Dvořák's "Romance for Violin and Orchestra." (These last two pieces were clearly programmed with Valentine's Day in mind.) Lawyer promises a few surprise pieces that aren't on the printed program.

But perhaps the biggest challenge for a conductorless orchestra will be a piece by the New York composer Derek Bermel. His "Murmurations," a three-



MORE INFORMATION

River Oaks Chamber Orchestra

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday, 5 p.m. Saturday

movement work for strings, will receive its first performances by the group.

Where: Grace Presbyterian Church, 10221 Ella Lee Lane (Friday) and Church of St. John the Divine: 2450 River Oaks Blvd. (Saturday)

Tickets: \$10-\$35; 713-665-2700; rocohouston.org

From his home in New York, Bermel explains that the piece was inspired by birds flying in flocks.

"Some years ago, when I was living in Rome," Bermel recalls, "I often saw groups of starlings flying above the city. They're quite a spectacle - and I saw that the birds have a mathematical geometry in their mass motions."

It occurred to Bermel there were similarities between a flock of birds and a string orchestra - and that the flock's movements could be translated into sound.

"Musically, I've tried to map that kind of motion," he continues. "The music swoops and glides and has the contours of flying birds. The strings have lines that move all together like a flock. Then suddenly they separate and come back together."

The piece is a co-commission, with a flock of chamber orchestras chipping in to cover the costs: ROCO, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, San Francisco's New Century Chamber Orchestra and the Boston orchestra A Far Cry.

This is the kind of opportunity that's made in composer heaven, and Bermel knows it.

"To have ROCO perform the piece is already great," he says. "But then to hear it again with the other orchestras is just incredible. They're all very different ensembles - and multiple performances will allow me to hear how different musicians tackle the

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challenges of the piece. It's group energy in the best sense. It becomes larger than the sum of its parts."

"We want this kind of collaboration to be an ongoing thing," Lawyer says. "We don't really have a commissioning fund - but we commission anyway."

Bermel will be in Houston to hear "Murmurations." He'll give a pre-concert chat before both performances.



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