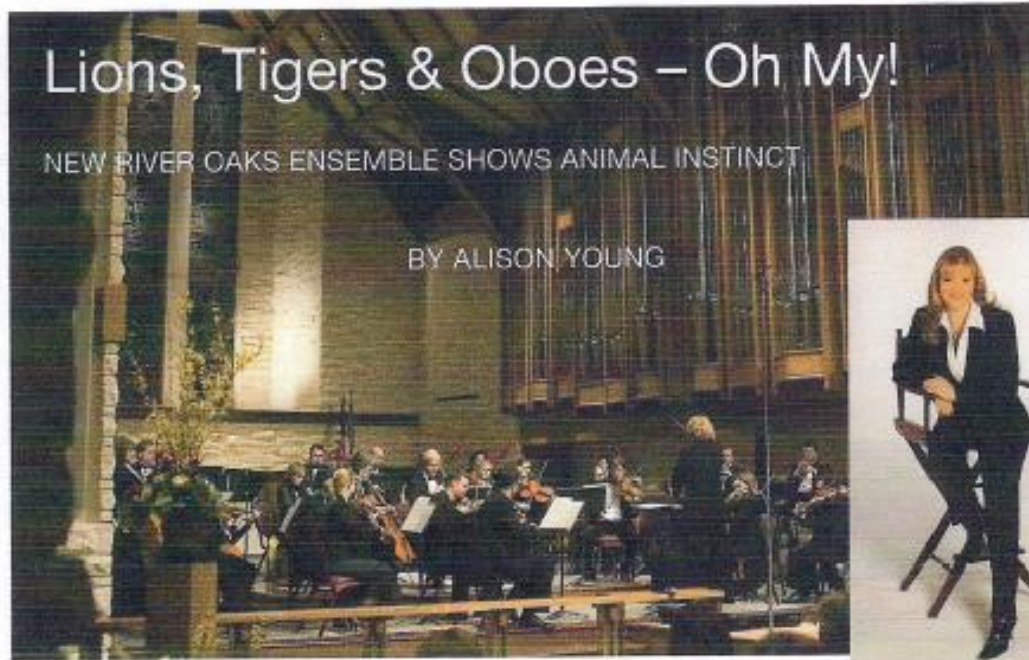


Lions, Tigers & Oboes – Oh My!

NEW RIVER OAKS ENSEMBLE SHOWS ANIMAL INSTINCT

BY ALISON YOUNG



LEFT: The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra.
INSET: Executive Director and oboist Alecia L. Lawyer.



The next concert in the inaugural season of the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra (known by its mellifluous name ROCO) is unofficially based on animal themes. So be prepared for quacks, clucks, barks, buzzes - and one sultry afternoon.

ROCO's signature is the personal touch that attempts to bridge the gap between the musician's world and the audience experience. Founded by oboist Alecia Lawyer, who has an extensive background in start-up orchestras, the ensemble is of the highest professional level while still down-to-earth enough to make the teaching parts of the concerts feel like entertainment.

ROCO has no music director, but instead invites energetic and passionate young conductors to lead the ensemble. This month, the visiting conductor is the English rising star, Christopher Zimmerman. Currently the Music Director of The Symphony of Southeast Texas in Beaumont and Chair of Orchestral Activities and Music Director of the Hartt Symphony in Connecticut, Maestro Zimmerman gave his "most auspicious London debut" in 1985 with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. A few years later, like Alecia Lawyer in Houston, he co-founded an orchestra, the City of London Chamber Orchestra. Lawyer said that what impressed her most about Maestro Zimmerman was his masterful use of rehearsal time that proved to be both efficient and productive.

"Nothing in (a musician's) training prepares us for being reigned in under one person for a common goal," she said by phone. "Zimmerman is such a gifted conductor. Nothing is wasted. He just hones in on problems immediately but does so in an encouraging way."

Another plus is the confidence Zimmerman exudes while not letting his ego get in the way, always a major plus for a democratic group like ROCO.

The centerpiece of the concert, upon which the rest of the repertoire was planned, is a piece by New York composer and clarinetist, Derek Bernel. *Natural Selection* is a song cycle for baritone and chamber ensemble based on poetry by Wendy S. Walters and Naomi Shihab Nye. A group of animal portraits, the work is dramatic and complex in spite of its commonplace subject. Bernel wrote "all four songs deal with human nature whether by allegory or more literally: jealousy, seduction, prophecy, and philosophy." But with titles like "Spider Love" and "One Fly," the music is probably not too somber.

In fact, Alecia Lawyer called Bernel "the Dr. Seuss of composers" and related a story when the two were students at the Banff Centre. "I pulled my reed out of my oboe and did what I call my 'stupid oboe trick' making it buzz. Derek liked the sound and wanted to catalog it." The lesson: be careful what you do in front of composers, it might make it into their next piece!

In high demand throughout the country and a vocal instructor at the University of Houston Moores School of Music, baritone Timothy Jones is no stranger to Bernel's work having presented it many times. Jones is on deck to sing *Natural Selection* at St. John the Divine with the ROCO.

Also on the program is Maurice Ravel's ballet suite *Mother Goose*. As an adult, Ravel was able to penetrate the world of childhood as few composers ever before. His empathy may be a result of his small stature, some-

thing he was very sensitive about, but one that put him more on the level of small people. He wrote his suite for four-hand piano based on a series of illustrations for French fairy tales and gave it as a gift to two children of friends, who were quite gifted pianists. He later orchestrated the work and its fanciful and poetic impressionistic colors add to its charm.

Composer and conductor Pierre Boulez marks the beginning of modern music with Claude Debussy's *Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun*. Opening with one of the most famous, languid exhalations in all music, Boulez observed "the flute of the Faun brought new breath to the art of music." Debussy intended to write a complete suite based on Stéphane Mallarmé's poem of the same name, but only completed the prelude. In it, he captures a moment in the heat of the afternoon when the mythological half-man/half-goat passes the time dreaming of nymphs and naps before falling into intoxicating sleep. ROCO Principal Flutist Christina Jennings returns to perform the solo.

ROCO will conclude the evening with a symphony by Franz Joseph Haydn. Commissioned to write six symphonies in late 1784 by Claude-François-Marie Rigolety, Comte d'Ogny, Haydn's "Paris Symphonies" were presented to uproarious acclaim. Some were given names by the delighted audience including number 83 for its infectious repeated passage by the oboe and strings that sounds like the clucking of a hen.

As has become customary at ROCO concerts, there will be a surprise opener and an encore, plus a drawing for one lucky winner to sit in the orchestra. The unusual concert time of 5 p.m. is designed to allow parents a bit of a night out. Children are invited to attend day care that includes a musical education project plus concert etiquette in preparation for the older kids to attend a portion of the concert. Childcare is available until 9, well after the last note is played.