

West U resident instrumental in new chamber orchestra

By CYNTHIA LESCALLEET
Staff Writer

When the newly minted River Oaks Chamber Orchestra holds its inaugural concert this weekend, its founder is hoping the combination of approachable music, accessible musicians and on-site child care attracts a multigenerational audience.

"A lot of music can't be played by a major orchestra," said Alecia Lawyer, 37, of West University Place. It loses its intimacy and immediacy in large spaces.

A Julliard-trained oboist, Lawyer spent the past year organizing the group of 35 professional musicians from Houston and around the world.

One of the orchestra's missions is to "reconnect the audience with the musicians," she said. Toward that end, performers will be wearing name tags and welcoming conversations at a reception after the 5 p.m. performance in the newly refurbished sanctuary of St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, 2450 River Oaks Blvd.

The program features conductor Scott Yoo and several members of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra. Other concerts are scheduled in 2006 on Feb. 11 and May 6.

"I can't wait to play there," Lawyer said of the church. The new wall and ceiling treatments and slate floor enhance the acoustics.

The concert's early time slot is as deliberate as the presence of a children's program during and after the performance, Lawyer said.

The concept ought to appeal to families with children ages 10 and under.

In fact, the evening is set up so that parents can head out to dinner after the concert if they want. For a small fee, their children can stay in the post-concert program for pizza and entertainment.

"We target the families for a joint but separate experience," she said. Children ages 8 to 10 attend part of the concert as part of their music education program.

Music selections are likely to be eclectic, Lawyer explained. "We live by the iPod shuffle. It's also how we eat. I don't see why we can't have it in the (concert) mix."

To further demystify the musicians, the concert includes a thick magazine of articles "inviting people into our world" so the audience can read as the music washes over them.

"Get to know us," she said.

As a professional musician, Lawyer has had to make her own jobs. ROCO is a higher form of that exercise, she said. To assemble a group of three dozen musicians willing to commit to only three concerts a year was a challenge.

ROCO is privately funded and pays its players union scale wages, she added.

As the daughter of music educators, Lawyer is sensitive to what she called "a 20-year siphoning off of music education in schools. A generation is clueless about classical music."

ROCO is her answer to that trend.

The potential audience is also a busy generation, with busy children, noted Ann Fairbanks, president of the Houston Friends of Music, which co-sponsors a chamber music series at Rice University, and interim chairman of the music department at the University of St. Thomas.

"We're all trying to fill our seats," she said of Houston's chamber music scene. Many of the groups have educational outreach aspects, Fairbanks said, but none that she knows of also offers child care.

The formation of ROCO and other chamber groups in town "is a testament to the music talent we have here," said Sarah Lowdermilk, Da Camera of Houston's executive director. The plethora of groups means, "There's an expanding opportunity for them to perform on a higher level. The more opportunities we can build, the more culturally rich our city."

For concert information, visit www.rocohouston.org or call 713-665-2700.



LAWYER