

River Oaks Chamber Orchestra leads without being led



WORKING AS A UNIT: Alecia Lawyer, principal oboist/founder, and Brian Lewis, concertmaster, perform with the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra. DABFOTO

■ Conductorless performance presents a challenge

By CHARLES WARD
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No one died, was fired or got a better offer elsewhere.

But one notable person will not show up at the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra concerts today and Sunday: the conductor.

For the program *Conductorless!* the ensemble will take a big risk: going it alone in works that most think require a leader: Haydn's *Sinfonia Concertante* for violin, cello, oboe, bassoon and orchestra; and Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony* (No. 1).

ROCO has gone conductorless

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MUSIC: Concertmaster leads

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pheus Chamber Orchestra.

Founded in 1972, it follows a unique principle: "musician-led performances and rotating leadership," Orpheus executive director Graham Parker said.

A team of players is assigned to each piece the group performs. The team develops the interpretation and leads the rehearsals. "They are the managers for that piece."

Other groups offering conductorless programs follow ROCO's route: relying on the concertmaster for leadership.

"It all depends on the repertoire," said Larry Rachleff, the orchestra conductor at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music. The more complicated the work, the greater the need for a guiding concept, he said.

Orpheus has become so skilled that it recently played Arnold Schoenberg's *Chamber Symphony No. 1* and Johannes Brahms' *Piano Concerto No. 1*, pieces many orchestral players would think impossible to do without a conductor.

CONDUCTORLESS!

■ **When:** 5 p.m. today at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, 2450 River Oaks Blvd. and 6:30 p.m. Sunday; at St. Philip Presbyterian Church, 4807 San Felipe

■ **Tickets:** \$25; 713-665-2700

conductors emerged in the 19th century. The growth in the complexity of new works and the constant addition of more instruments and players to the orchestra complicated music-making.

Conducting existed as far back as the Renaissance, when choirs had to have help singing complex polyphonic music. With the rise of the instrumental ensembles in the Baroque era, players looked to a key instrumentalist for coordination. In a few places a leader tapped a stick on the floor.

The change to a man wielding a baton can be traced to 1820, when German violinist

a baton in rehearsal with the London Philharmonic Society. He employed his bow to lead that particular concert, but a baton soon became the norm.

Composers soon routinely took the podium, Mendelssohn most notably. Next, two composers — Hector Berlioz, who wrote the first modern manual on conducting, and Richard Wagner — turned the position toward star interpreter. Finally, by the turn of the 20th century, the conductor who was neither composer nor instrumental soloist became the model.

"The greatest problem (in preparing a conductorless performance) is how it is going to be rehearsed," Rachleff said. Who is going to lead the performance and what kind of consensus will be reached?

"In any orchestra, there'll be lots of wonderful, valid opinions. The thing that makes (the concept) work — or doesn't — is a continuity of concept." Going conductorless doesn't mean a group can't find it. "It just takes longer," he said.

"It takes a grand bit of selflessness."

twice, said founder/principal oboist Alecia Lawyer in a note to subscribers. Those involved small concertos in which coordination was not as big a challenge.

"The conductorless concert reflects ROCO's mission of connecting with you, the audience, by removing yet another layer between audience and stage," Lawyer wrote.

"It's something we've talked about for a long time," principal flutist Christina Jennings said.

"I remember (concertmaster) Brian (Lewis) saying we're not going to be ready to do this in the first and second seasons."

But the group is ready now. Key personnel have remained the same, and the will still exists. "There's a sense that we want to communicate directly that way," Jennings said.

"My role as concertmaster is to help

lead the rehearsals and facilitate any musical discussions," said Lewis, who will be the leader.

And, yes, he'll also put his foot down, diplomatically, if discussion goes on too long or a consensus can't be reached.

During the performances Lewis will start and end sections and establish tempos. But, he emphasized, the players will have to pay a lot more attention to their colleagues.

"When you're playing a solo you don't have a cue from the conductor."

The ultimate benefit for the orchestra will be sharpening and deepening communication among sections and among players within each section, Lewis said.

Going conductorless is rare. Only one great truly conductorless ensemble