

A drunk Pierrot & an expensive Haydn: ROCO commissions music others won't dare perform

BY JOEL LUKS

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While Houston Symphony's *Orbit - an HD Odyssey* trekked around planet Earth, the River Oaks Chamber Orchestras' journey took flight and reached for the Solar System's fifth largest satellite. Moonstruck and moondrunk, the opening premise of JoAnn Falletta's poem in response to Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, was the muse for the ensemble's premiere of Paul

English's *Lumière Lunaire* this weekend at The Church of St. John the Divine.

The program also included Haydn's *Concerto for Cello in C Major* with principal cellist Richard Belcher and Schubert's *Symphony No. 4 in C Minor "Tragic"* led by visiting conductor Kazem Abdullah.

The nod to space wasn't in reaction to the Houston Symphony, it happened serendipitously. English was taken by Falletta's much lighter reflection of the otherwise noir and gloomy setting of Schoenberg's 1912 pre-serial atonal composition. That *Pierrot* was celebrating its centenary anniversary was coincidental, but no less significant.

It's by no means a stretch to call English a music Renaissance man. He's equally as comfortable improvising jazz riffs as he is whipping up country western tunes at the recording studio, versatility he adopted growing up with a band director for a father. That familiarity with a wide range of genres seeped in comfortably in *Lumière*.

Of course the viola represents the main character. Subject to countless jokes, the instrument is largely unappreciated in general music zeitgeist, not unlike *Pierrot*.

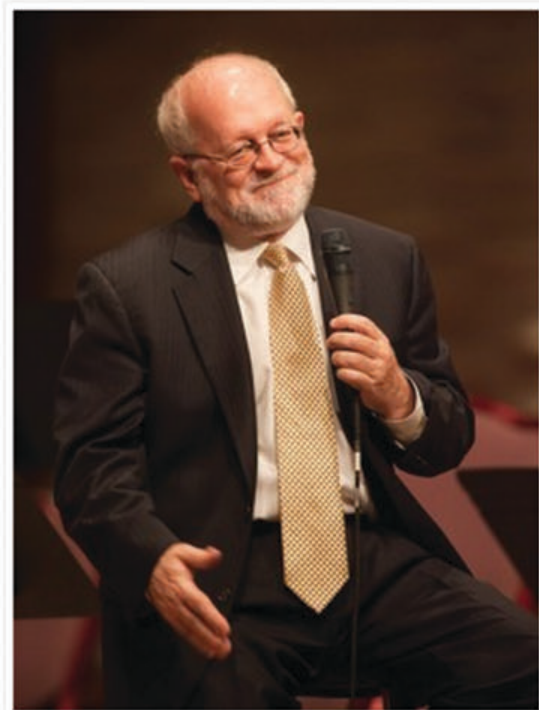


Photo by Scott Corron
Paul English

The justification for doing so emerged from the many languages that intermingled leading up to Falsetta's text. Her *Pierrot* is an English memoir of the music which set Otto Erich Hartleben's German translation of a 1884 French text by the symbolist Belgian poet Albert Giraud. And *Pierrot* originates from 17th century Italian Commedia dell'Arte.

Yet that was no reason to call on instrumentalists to sing while playing, wear microphone headsets and *sprechstimme* German-style vocalizations, which appear in Schoenberg's *Pierrot*. That idea came from the group's founder, principal oboist and art troublemaker [Alecia Lawyer](#).

Surprise! They can sing, in tune, and pull off an effective theatrical piece.

That's so ROCO, something many ensembles can't do and won't dare commit on a playbill. ROCO's audience may appear conservative, but that doesn't stop Lawyer from pushing boundaries.

The music: *Lumière Lunaire*

Of course the viola represents the main character. Subject to [countless jokes](#), the instrument is largely unappreciated in general music zeitgeist, not unlike *Pierrot*, who endures ridicule in loveless pain while basking in the reverie of the moonlight. First coherent, then implicitly drunk, the leitmotif and its permutations travel across the wind section.

Lumière Lunaire opens with rising intervals bowing to the sonorities of Schoenberg. It quickly moves to focus on the verse, highlighting action words with text painting and hand gestures. Spooky chatter leads to a juxtaposition of recognizable influences: A little [Stravinsky](#), some [Tristan und Isolde](#), a touch of film noir and plenty of [Mission Impossible](#) with walking bass lines, groovy drum kit beats and gimpy asymmetrical rhythms. English's background definitely showed.

With atonal interjections sprinkled during transitions, English nostalgically reminisced of the composer he wished to honor, not just during his serial period, but his complete opus. Like the moon vanishing in the horizon, *Lumière Lunaire* disappears into nothingness.

To append context to *Lumière*, [Space Center Houston](#) provided a large exhibit with images of Apollo 11's mission of 1969, [Buzz Aldrin's first footprint on the moon](#), photos taken by Apollo 17 mission commander [Gene Cernan](#) of geologist-astronaut [Harrison Schmitt](#) standing adjacent to the lunar module "Eagle," displays signed by astronaut [Mark Kelly](#), a space suit and models of craft used during exploration.

To American ears, Belcher's New Zealand brogue lies somewhere in between debonair chivalry and witty mischievousness, also words that accurately describe what happens when he speaks through his lustrous instrument.



Courtesy of Enso String Quartet
Richard Belcher

A fresh new Haydn

Josef Haydn's showcase may have been written in 1760s, but at the hands of principal cellist [Richard Belcher](#) (Enso Quartet), it was as if the piece was written yesterday. The concerto is a staple of the instrument's repertoire, often learned early in the career of an emerging musician but, like Mozart, constantly refined years into professional life. It can sound over-rehearsed, calculated and academic. But not this fresh take on Haydn.

Belcher plays with an accent. To American ears, his New Zealand East Coast brogue lies somewhere in between debonair chivalry and witty mischievousness, also words that accurately describe what happens when he speaks through his lustrous instrument. When he executed Haydn's perky happy gem it was as if his musical maturity framed the energy and coquettishness of a young child, rendering this performance very "expensive."

That is certainly not an observation on ticket price. Rather, expensive details a raucous finesse: A pinky-up classical facade with a naughty undercurrent. It's a compliment.

Tell me more

Schubert's *Tragic Symphony* might as well be dubbed the symphony of countless deceptive cadences that, although you know they are coming, surprise every time. [Abdullah](#) clearly understood the harmonic implications and leaned into their role with gusto and dark zest. His pending post as the Generalmusikdirector of the city of Aachen, Germany (starting in August) validates his musical prowess, though refining his speaking skills from the podium may be his next step.

After all, ROCO loves nothing more than connecting musicians with their fans.