

Music: Mastering the quirks of the clarinet

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SPECIAL CONCERT: Clarinet player Nathan Williams, who teaches at the University of Texas' Butler School of Music, is performing with the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra in Houston.

Clarinetist embraces instrument's many idiosyncrasies

By Tara Dooley | ARTS WRITER

THE clarinet may be the instrument people love to hate. That might be in part because so many people love it.

Just think of all the budding musicians who picked up the instrument in middle school and had the time of their lives playing in the band. Then think

of all their parents, siblings and neighbors who listened as those very same clarinet lovers tried to eliminate the whines and the squeaks on the way to making

beautiful music.

"It seems that everybody who walks the planet has played the clarinet," joked Nathan Williams, a clarinet player who performs as a soloist, chamber musician and member of the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra.

After concerts he's had audience members come up to him to say: "I played the clarinet, and it never sounded like that."

Clarinet lovers will be able to hear Williams perform one of the most famous pieces for the instrument Saturday and April 10 as part of concerts by the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra.

Williams will play Aaron Copland's Clarinet Concerto in a program that includes Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 and Symphony No. 1 by José Antonio Bowen, a composer and dean of Southern Methodist University's Meadows School of the Arts.

The clarinet concerto was commissioned in the late 1940s by the great jazz and swing player Benny Goodman. The piece is written for string orchestra and harp and consists of two main sections, Williams said. The first part is known for its bittersweet lyricism, and the second part is infused with a jazz and swing feel befitting the player who first performed it.

"It is about as made in the United States of America as you can get," he said.

Williams' love of the clarinet extends back to the time he was 7 and with his family attended a concert that featured clarinet solos.

"I remember being so captivated by the sound and how complicated it looked physically," said Williams, who now

teaches clarinet at the University of Texas' Butler School of Music in Austin.

Though the instrument may at first seem easy enough to play, it becomes more difficult as a student progresses, Williams said.

It's also "acoustically imperfect," and the squeaky sound many beginners make is part of the clarinet experience.

"When it comes down to the details and the subtleties, it is potentially like walking through a land mine until you learn to

control it," Williams said. But in the hands of the right player, it has great range of sound and expression.

The Copland concerto is the perfect opportunity to hear a clarinet, Williams said.

"If they love it, that's great, and I'm thrilled. But if they don't love the clarinet, they have a lot of things going on in the string orchestra to tide them over until Beethoven's Seventh."

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THE CLARINET

Nathan Williams performs with the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra conducted by Robert Moody.

■ **When:** 5 p.m. Saturday at the Church of St. John the Divine, 2450 River Oaks, and 6:30 p.m. April 10 at Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens, 6003 Memorial

■ **Tickets:** \$10-\$25; 713-665-2700 or www.rocohouston.org