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## MUSIC REVIEW

# Chamber group ends elegant first season

By CHARLES WARD  
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Not since OrchestraX burst (momentarily) on the scene in 1997 has a classical music group wrapped up a first season with such style and sense of purpose.

River Oaks Chamber Orchestra exuded confidence in its third and final program of the inaugural season Saturday afternoon at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church.

The program had personality. The presentation was relaxed. The quality of the music-making was high. The interpretations had a distinct profile because of guest conductor Christian Zimmerman, music director of Symphony of Southeast Texas in Beaumont.

In key ways, ROCO is the opposite of OrchestraX. Its founder is oboist Alecia Lawyer, and its core musicians are instrumentalist friends committed to audience-friendly concerts.

Saturday's program illustrated the style. It started at 5 p.m. and began with (perhaps too many) introductions to ensemble, people and music. Then, Zimmerman immediately offered an off-the-menu surprise: Mozart's Adagio and Fugue in C minor.

He continued with an interesting, well-balanced program that didn't just aim to be nice: Debussy's *Prelude to the After-*

*noon of a Faun*; Haydn's Symphony No. 83, *The Hen*; three songs from *Natural Selection* by the contemporary American Derek Bermel; and Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite*.

Bermel's *One Fly, Dog and Spider Love* looked at animals as proxies for human behavior — the fly as irritant, the sleeping dog as dreamer, the spider as a prickly lover. Bermel encased them in proudly modern yet accommodatingly American sounds.

University of Houston baritone Timothy Jones sang the wry, unorthodox settings with panache.

As interpreter, Zimmerman loved bold strokes. Aurally, Mozart's and Haydn's pieces were almost too big for the church. The playing was fervent and the music well sculpted, but without much lightness.

However, Zimmerman didn't forget subtlety in the two complementary Impressionist-era works. Debussy's *Prelude* was framed by the supple solos of principal flutist Christiana Jennings and reached almost goose-bump beauty at its peaks.

*Mother Goose Suite*, generally more chaste and classicist in style, was similarly elegantly shaped and played.

The performances were typical of a winning first year.

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