

# Orchestra marks its third season

After making round after round of auditions, Alecia Lawyer nearly decided to discontinue playing the oboe. Instead, the West University Place resident founded her own orchestra. "There are maybe three to five oboe openings per year and I decided not to wait around," she said. So in 2004, she drew up the proposal for the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra. "I discovered the joy of playing again," she added.

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DAVE ROSSMAN: FOR THE CHRONICLE

## RIVER OAKS

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**FOUNDER:** Frustrated by being unable to secure a post with an orchestra, oboist Alecia Lawyer founded the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra three years ago.

■ Julliard grad Alecia Lawyer motivated to start own group

By ARLENE NISSON LASSIN

*"We have changed expectations of what to expect with classical music and we have brought a different audience into classical music."*

ALECIA LAWYER, River Oaks Chamber Orchestra founder

**A**FTER making round after round of auditions, Alecia Lawyer, 40, nearly decided to discontinue playing the oboe.

Instead, she founded her own orchestra.

"There are maybe three to five oboe openings per year in various orchestras, and I decided not to wait around," Lawyer said. "I wanted to be part of an orchestra that really communicated with people through music, and I wasn't enjoying the auditioning."

Lawyer, a West University Place resident, has lived in Houston for 15 years. She is a 1992 graduate of The Julliard School in New York City, with a master's degree in music, and of Southern Methodist University where she received a bachelor's degree in music in 1990.

In 2004, she drew up the proposal for the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra.

#### Nonprofit organization

The group is now a recognized nonprofit that contracts 40 musicians from all over the country to present three to four performances each year.

The orchestra gave its inaugural performance in the summer of 2005.

Lawyer, the principal oboist, is executive director.

"My goal was to create an orchestra that would invite the audience into the world of the musician," Lawyer said. "I wanted the musicians to communicate verbally, instrumentally, and bodily with the audience."

"In founding and playing with ROCO, I discovered the joy of playing again."

Lawyer wanted ROCO to be an "interactive" orchestra.

At concerts, the musicians explain the pieces

they play. Programs contain information on the musicians perform.

Also at each performance, audience members enter a raffle. The person who wins is able to sit on stage with the orchestra during a piece.

"The winners don't want to get up and leave the orchestra after the number is finished," Lawyer said.

Instead of intermissions, ROCO has "Take 5 Breaks." That's when musicians walk into the audience to chat with the audience.

#### After the show

At the program's end, everyone is invited to stay for a reception with the conductor and musicians.

Musicians were recruited by Lawyer. They include Christina Jennings, who plays first flute, and Brian Lewis, first chair violin and concertmaster.

Guest conductors are used. All soloists come from within the orchestra.

"I formed this orchestra from personal relationships I have developed with musicians," Lawyer said. "These musicians smile on stage, they interact and engage the audience."

Musical selections tend to be seldom heard, newer classical pieces, and unannounced encores that "surprises and excites the audience," Lawyer said.

"We are having a joyous conversation with the audience through music," she added. "Houstonians have been very receptive, very welcoming to us."

"We have changed expectations of what to expect with classical music and we have brought a different audience into classical music."

About 400 people

attended a concert that closed ROCO's third season.

The group is based at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, 2450 River Oaks Blvd., but performs at other venues such as Bayou Bend, One Westcott St.

Lawyer operates the orchestra with an annual budget of \$330,000 raised through individual, corporate and foundation donations.

She hired Kilby Hoskins as general manager in February. Lawyer also credits graphic designer Teresa Southwell, and other consultants who have helped her.

Lawyer said it costs around \$70,000 for each concert. Tickets are \$25, but all the operating funds cannot be raised from ticket sales alone.

#### Unique programs

Lawyer also devised two other unique programs.

ROCO Rooters music education and child-care program for children ages 10 and under runs in tandem with and after each concert.

"We do music education and play for the children. Afterwards, the children can stay while their parents enjoy the concert and then they can even go out to dinner, and collect the children later," Lawyer said. "This makes it a multigenerational experience."

The orchestra also hosts wine and music tastings on three Thursdays during the concert season at the Tasting Room in Uptown Park.

In between sampling wines from a particular country, ROCO musicians play music from the same country.

For more information, visit the organization at [www.rocohouston.org](http://www.rocohouston.org).