

STATE OF THE Arts

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Naked classical music: Your guide to Houston's intimate side

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BY JOEL LUKS



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Editors Note: We've asked Houston arts leaders and CultureMap contributors to pick the jewels from Houston's upcoming arts season — the events that they don't plan to miss. Here's what's on listings editor Joel Luks' don't miss list:

There's no better way to get to know a musician's artistry than through [chamber music](#). Don't get me wrong. I am completely for the power, volume and scale of a full-sized 80-piece symphony orchestra — throw in a chorus and you have a musical army of Texas proportions.

But the minute nuances that elevate an instrumentalist to a musician to an artist come to the fore in the more intimate classical music format. From as little as one musician to the more popular string quartet to the wind quintet and other configurations, chamber music has something for everyone.

Think of chamber music as naked classical music. There is very little in between the listener and the performer's interpretation. No note is lost. Nothing can hide.

We tend to think of chamber music as serious. Could that be the fault of the label itself? Chamber sounds antiquated, stoic, formal. But at its roots — growing up from an accompanying art form during the Renaissance to an established genre in the Baroque period — chamber music was indeed the music of friends. For nearly 200 years, it was the period's answer to a leisurely home activity.

It wasn't until the technological advances of the 19th century — when instruments emerged with richer, louder sounds and bigger presence — that the art form immigrated to the concert stage.

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Photo by Roman Ponomarev
WindSync



Apollo Chamber Players

Today, you can engage in a myriad of different concert experiences in chamber music. If you are the modern traditionalist, an onstage performance may be your cup of tea. If you are the artistically-curious, a more intimate setting may strike your fancy. Or, if you are the inquisitive social type wanting to get up close and personal — real close and personal — you can opt for an interactive structure where performing artists turn into your [beer drinking](#) buds.

This fall, the Houston art scene has lots to offer you. To help plan ahead, here are my suggestions:

Houston Grand Opera Studio Recitals at Rienzi

What's not to love about combining the energy of emerging opera stars and the opulent (yet comfortable) setting of Rienzi? These series of recitals continue in [European Decorative Arts wing of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston](#).

The [Houston Grand Opera Studio](#) assembles the most promising young singers from across the globe. This program helped propel the careers of mezzo [Joyce Di Donato](#), soprano Albina Shagimuratova, baritone Liam Bonner, soprano Rebekah Camm and baritone Scott Hendricks, among a large army of divas and divos.

It doesn't really matter what they are signing. You can say, I knew them when, or I heard them here, years later.

After each concert, there are usually bites and cocktails, during which concert goers can enjoy the exquisite outdoor areas at Rienzi.

The first program of the 2011-12 season is [Friday, Sept. 30 and Saturday, Oct. 1](#) at 7:30 p.m.

Jerusalem String Quartet presented by Houston Friends of Chamber Music

This concert will mark Jerusalem Quartet's Houston debut with Houston Friends of Chamber Music. Run primarily by volunteers with one staff member, this nonprofit is a perfect example of what can be done when passions are alive.

The repertoire spans from the classical period with Mozart's *String Quartet No. 15 in D Minor*, travels to the rich sonorities of German romanticism courtesy of [Brahms String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor](#), landing also in the dual style of Shostakovich's *String Quartet No. 11 in F Minor*.

[Tuesday, Oct. 11](#) at Shepherd School of Music's Stude Concert Hall.

Pianist Yuja Wang presented by Society for the Performing Arts

Remember the days of cute little [Midori](#) and Sarah Chang? We've been watching Chinese pianist Yuja Wang since she was young enough to wear [princess dresses](#) and don pig tails. She was as much of a bad ass then as she is now.

At 24 years of age, she has performed under the most discerning batons and received a Grammy nomination for Best Instrumental Soloist Performance — without orchestra — in 2010. Though her repertoire for her Houston solo recital — also without orchestra — has not been finalized, that won't deter me from saving the date.

[Wednesday, Oct. 12](#) at Jones Hall.



Sharon Isbin and Mark O'Connor



Clarinetist Nathan Williams

Wednesday, Oct. 12 at Jones Hall

River Oaks Chamber Orchestra (ROCO) principal clarinetist Nathan Williams in recital at Gremillion & Co.

I credit [ROCO](#) for revolutionizing the way classical music is presented in Houston. Always engaging while keeping its artistic integrity, ROCO formats allow listeners to get into the music. Concerts have a social component and an element of surprise.

We first met Williams prior to his performance of the Copland Clarinet Concerto. His control is sublime. His sound? Like butter. If there could be a clarinet rock star, Williams would be it.

On [Sunday, Nov. 13](#), he will be featured in the orchestra's recital series, also marking the beginning of a partnership with Gremillion & Co.

Guitarist Sharon Isbin and violinist Mark O'Connor presented by Da Camera of Houston

The duo should not need an introduction. Isbin is a virtuoso across genres sailing through avant-garde, traditional and more popular art music with relative ease. The guitar, in her hands, is a toy. O'Connor is equally comfortable in folk, classical or jazz style. The pair together is a force to be reckoned with.

What happens when classical artists — who have an understanding of harmonic and structural form — dabble in folk music? Sometimes, they fall short if they do not internalize the music's spirit. But not Isbin and O'Connor. They get it and use their traditional training to add sophistication to O'Connor's *Appalachia Waltz* and the *Strings and Threads Suite*.

[Friday, Nov. 18](#) at the Wortham Theater Center.

Local chamber ensembles: Apollo Chamber Players and WindSync

It would be difficult to narrow down just one concert from these two ensembles. The [Apollo Chamber Players](#) have earned a reputation for presenting rarely heard music that explores where classical and folk genres meet, usually creating their own interpretations that show off the players' individual strengths. Hear them at the 9/11 Memorial Concert on Saturday, Sept. 10 at 7 p.m. at University of St. Thomas, or catch them at the Inaugural Concert of the [Houston Heights Orchestra](#)— where the ensemble is in residence along with WindSync — Saturday, Oct. 1 at 7 p.m.

Though all members of [WindSync](#) wind quintet stem from traditional classical music backgrounds, there is nothing traditional about the way the troupe operates. Keep an eye out for the group's [Classical Revolution](#) concerts — in bars with beer and wine. They will also perform alongside Apollo at the Heights Orchestra concert.

Worham Theater Center
Oct 12 7:00 PM

