

Cultural Warrior: ROCO's Alecia Lawyer

September 30, 2012

Alecia L. Lawyer is the founder, executive and artistic director, and principal oboist of the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra (ROCO). With a tag line of "the Most Fun You Can Have with Serious Music," Lawyer takes to heart the job of making classical music welcoming to all. Now entering their eighth season, ROCO has made its mark on Houston's music scene. Lawyer visits with A + C editor Nancy Wozny on all things ROCO.

A + C: Give us an idea of the early seeds for ROCO.

Alecia Lawyer: The spark for ROCO came when I learned my church, St. John the Divine, was renovating. When I saw the renditions, I knew an orchestra should go there because the plans were to make the space as acoustically perfect as possible. It also felt like a European church.

A + C: ROCO is magic. I can say that because I have sat in the orchestra and watched how you all connect to each other. It's surreal from that seat. But what really blew me away was hearing my idol, Jo Ann Falletta, the conductor of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, say that. Bring us into the ROCO culture.

AL: The magic happens because of the relationships on the stage and the relationships that have been created with the audience members. The audience is not a thing. It is a group of independently-minded people who come together to share in a live conversation through ROCO's language of music. Interestingly, the orchestra is also not a thing. We are as independent and unique as our patrons. ROCO musicians really do care about each and every person in the audience, and take great joy in connecting with them.

I also think that we offer multiple ways to enter classical music. We meet people where they are. If you are a newbie, we have pronunciation guides for composers' names and timings for pieces (in case you don't like one, you'll know how long you have to wait until it changes!). If you are a connoisseur, we offer rarely-heard pieces and world premieres and commissions, as well as fresh takes on favorites. Kids can come to ROCOrooters and have a music education lesson, come into the concert for one piece and then stay for movies and pizza while the parents go to dinner.



Alecia Lawyer and JoAnn Falletta.

PHOTO: DAVID A. BROWN.

A + C: Every year ROCO goes conductorless. How is that possible? I thought orchestras needed those.

AL: Performing without a conductor requires collaboration, mutual respect, and radical trust. It empowers the individual musicians in a way that translates into an exciting experience for the audience.

Removing the “wall” between orchestra and audience exposes an intimate conversation among the musicians and invites the audience into conversation with the chamber orchestra. Few orchestras of ROCO’s size attempt to perform conductorless, especially on pieces as challenging as Beethoven’s well-loved Fifth Symphony or Haydn’s “Surprise” Symphony.

Sharing leadership among ROCO’s 40 musicians showcases the high level of artistry and strong spirit of musical *joie de vivre* that is ROCO’s signature.

A + C: ROCO is culled from Houston’s best musicians along with out of town players. What are the three qualities you look for in a ROCO musician?

AL: ROCO definitely requires a unique musician with performance skills and speaking skills, but mostly getting-outside-yourself skills. Sometimes our classical world frowns upon the word “entertainment.” However, seeing a group perform is as important as hearing it. The look and appearance cannot be the priority nor the emphasis. It just has to be a part of the personality of the players who show their enjoyment on stage.

A + C: You wear a lot of hats on planet ROCO. When you sit down to be principal oboist can you fully take the artistic director hat off?

AL: It’s important for all musicians to feel their part is not just playing their instruments and going home. We actually put on nametags and come out to meet the audience during the intermission. However, it does take me the first rehearsal in a set to get fully focused on performing, not worrying about ticket sales, donations, logistics, etc. Luckily now, we have an incredible staff that does a great job in all of these areas.

A + C: How did you know that the oboe was your instrument? I learned (from you) at one of those intimate ROCO restaurant gatherings that reeds are not for the faint of heart.

AL: One of my teachers, Elaine Douvas, said, “Learn to make reeds fast or it will ruin your life.” I adhere to this philosophy and also enjoy all of the oboe’s idiosyncrasies. Yes, the reed is a little barometer, changing with the weather. And many people do not know that we have to make our own reeds. Think lots of cool knives! I was always up for a challenge and besides, my dad was the band director and needed one in his band.

A + C: Let’s get to the season. Josep Caballé-Domenech totally rocked the Texas Music Festival. Get us jazzed to see your opening program, Fiesta.

AL: With our Feast Your Ears Season, we have delectable guest artists, delicious main concerts, a tantalizing new chamber series, a bombastic percussion premiere, plus appetizing artistic and community collaborations. With our first concert we feature Latin composers and conductor, so it will be a Fiesta!

Josep is a fantastic Spanish conductor collaborating with us on music from Argentina and Spain. Our soloist, Anne Marie McDermott, presents Mozart and then the orchestra performs a rarely-heard composer, Arriaga, who is known as the Spanish Mozart. We will repeat this opening concert at the Crighton Theater in Conroe on Sunday.

Our season title “Feast Your Ears” is a culmination of our concept since inception of combining the senses. We have always paired wine and food with our music from Tasting Room “Music Tastings” to Kiran’s dinners. We also love to combine visual arts, like our receptions after concerts that host artists from Houston galleries and our cover art this year from the MFAH rich in color, texture and foods.

A + C: As the mother of an orchestra and two growing sons, are you ever late for soccer practice?

AL: I do feel like I have multiple personalities, but that happened before kids! Many of my days change drastically at 3pm to go to carpool and then home for homework, volleyball, scouts, etc. If there is no concert that night, then I head on back to work (in my house) after they get to sleep. However, I frankly could not do this without my parents, who often help with pickups, feedings and homework, and Larry, who is such a wonderfully involved husband and father.