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Alecia Lawyer celebrates ensemble's anniversary

Musician was able to pull off the founding 10 years ago of the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra

By Steven Brown

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Trumpeter George Chase had seen Houston chamber orchestras start, struggle and fold. When one of his fellow musicians, a veteran of the defunct groups, told him she intended to start her own ensemble, he feared a replay.



Image 1 out of 6

Marie D. De Jesus/Staff

Alecia Lawyer is the founder artistic director and principal oboist of ROCO also known as the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra. This year is the orchestra 10th season performing classical music on different venues in Houston. Lawyer founded the orchestra as a way to connect the community through music. Wednesday, Sept. 10, 2014, in Houston. (Marie D. De Jesus / Houston Chronicle)

"I went home and told my wife about it," Chase says. "I said, 'This is the most absurd thing I've ever heard. But if there's one person on the planet who can pull it off, it's Alecia Lawyer.'"

Lawyer, an oboist, indeed pulled it off. Her River Oaks Chamber Orchestra is launching its 10th season of offering audiences a concert experience like that of no other Houston group.

Lawyer calls her ensemble "the 'Cheers' of orchestras - where everybody knows your name."

"It's about connections and trust," she says.

Saturday's performance at the Church of St. John the Divine, where only a step or two separate the orchestra and audience, will embody much of what's distinctive about the group.

The sanctuary lights will stay on, helping the musicians and the audience remain aware of one another. Between pieces, musicians will share insights about the works.

During one piece, a handful of audience members will sit next to the musicians. The players will mingle with the audience during intermission and a post-concert reception.

Lawyer says she's just following a vision of how music can create bonds between musicians and listeners.

"My mantra is, everyone is just a friend you haven't met yet. I said that to my mom when I was 4, supposedly," Lawyer says.

Lawyer grew up in Van, a town of less than 3,000 northwest of Tyler. Her father directed a high school band and her mother led a choir, so she was surrounded by music. Lawyer was a drum major, but she also belonged to the tennis team and physics club.

"Being in a small town, you can do anything and everything. In my high school, you could be in every club," Lawyer says. "It was super-empowering."

Lawyer entered Southern Methodist University as a physics major, but switched to music studies. After graduation, she moved to New York and the Juilliard School. Eager young musicians were all around, Lawyer says, and anyone with motivation could perform. She organized a trio, which played gigs in New York and had a concert series on Massachusetts' Nantucket island.

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"She was a self-starter," longtime Juilliard president Joseph Polisi says.

Today Juilliard and other schools coach students about becoming musical entrepreneurs, Polisi says, but Lawyer developed the skill long before conservatories taught it. Last year, Juilliard brought her back to share her experiences.

"She created her own opportunities," Polisi said. "That's what makes her story so powerful."

After finishing her master's degree in 1992, Lawyer moved to Houston with her husband, Lawrence Lawyer, a businessman. Playing in ensembles such as the now-defunct Houston Chamber Orchestra exposed her to ideas about promotion and unconventional venues. She also volunteered with nursing homes and community groups, and she made friends at her church, St. John the Divine.

"There's a dehumanization that can happen in the arts," Lawyer says, if musicians allow their instruments and careers to consume their lives. "You have to learn your craft. But then you have to learn to work in the world and be a person."

After spending a year in France while her husband earned a graduate degree, Lawyer returned to Houston to resume her career. She realized that a job in a typical orchestra didn't appeal to her. Having no say in what she performed seemed confining and the model of musicians focused on their playing, management running the shows and audiences sitting in the dark went against her belief that everything about music should be personal.

So, in 2004, Lawyer began developing ideas for her own chamber orchestra. Her goal: bringing musicians and listeners into the same world.

Relying on musicians she knew rather than holding auditions, she enlisted players who not only boasted strong performing skills, but also had a knack for talking with non-musicians about their lives and art. Performances would start at 5 p.m., allowing concertgoers to continue to dinner and other events. Musicians and the audience would have chances to connect.

The group debuted in 2005. Chase realized early on that it could last.

"Alicia would blush at hearing it, but I think a lot of it is her tenacity, and also her sense of how to talk to people and create a feeling of community," he says.

"You start to get to know the people (in the audience). There's a real personal connection. When I'm sitting up there waiting for a concert to start, I see so many familiar faces. ... I don't always get that feeling with other groups that I've performed with."

Audiences also sensed a special atmosphere. After moving to Houston eight years ago, Kit Gwin, an actress and former political consultant, received tickets to a River Oaks Chamber Orchestra concert from a friend. They were for the annual concert in which the orchestra performs without a conductor.

"They were all having such a great time onstage," Gwin says. "You could see it in their faces and their bodies and the way they responded to one another. ... They were clearly having a blast, and they pulled you into that."

Gwin contacted Lawyer, who enlisted her for the orchestra's board. For six years, Gwin watched Lawyer bring on more backers who shared her vision and passion; staffers added administrative expertise.

As the group has grown, so have its offerings. ROCO Rooters combines music education and childcare for ages 10 and younger; they listen to single work before leaving the concert for other activities. Solo recitals and small-group performances in art galleries and other cozy locations enable the public to become acquainted with individual players. Live streams into hospitals and nursing homes expand the group's reach beyond concert venues.

Despite having River Oaks in its name, the group will perform in 10 ZIP codes this season, Lawyer says, including the Memorial City area and Spring, as well as at the Holocaust Museum Houston, Lawndale Art Center, Houston Zoo and other settings.

Though Lawyer remains artistic director, she has handed some administrative work to James Rowland, who joined in 2013 as the group's first full-time executive director. Other musicians also contribute ideas; Chase, for example, organizes brass-ensemble concerts.

Lawyer remains the group's driving force, talking up the orchestra whenever she can. When a television reporter working on a story about new Apple products stopped her outside a drugstore, she gave a spiel about the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra.

"You can't start an organization if you're not going to be there - if you're not going to invest in the community," Lawyer says.

"I have my spot picked out in the columbarium at St. John's," Lawyer says. "I'm going to be buried here. People know that I'm here for life, and I really mean it."

River Oaks Chamber Orchestra

When: 5 p.m. Saturday

Where: Church of St. John the Divine, 2450 River Oaks

Tickets: \$35; 713-665-2700, rocohouston.org

When: 8 p.m. Sunday: Miller Outdoor Theatre, 6000 Hermann Park Drive

Tickets: free; 281-373-3386, milleroutdoortheatre.com

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