

An orchestra makes a lively debut

■ Crowd-friendly event unveils new Chamber Orchestra

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The debut of the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra was the dream-come-true of oboist Alecia Lawyer.

More than that, in its style, polish and imagination, Saturday's supper-time concert at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church signaled how big the ambitions of Houston musicians are these days, and how well they can achieve an audacious goal like founding a new, large-scale ensemble.

Lawyer has designed her events to be as inviting as possible: a late-afternoon starting time, pronunciation guides to composers' names in the program, childcare, invitations to two audience members to sit among the players during the opening piece, Rossini's Overture to *The Italian in Algiers*, which was not printed in the program.

Dessert first, said guest conductor Scott Yoo — conversing with the audience is nearly mandatory at classical concerts now — but he made the audience work for the treat.

In a *Name That Tune* moment, the orchestra played the first chord, a major triad for pizzicato strings.

But before Yoo could even offer his hints about composer or piece, an audience member

called out the answer.

The hints still came.

Appropriately, Lawyer had the first solo of the evening, and soon Yoo and the orchestra vibrantly asserted the exuberant style of music-making of the afternoon.

Yoo was an occasionally overdemonstrative conductor — abruptly crouching when the music got suddenly louder or making sharp gestures toward players that were as much about his being seen as the instrumentalists' being heard.

That attention to surface matters revealed itself in the excessive weight of string playing accents, as well as phrasing that was square and unfinished.

He was the right sort of person for ROCO — outgoing, communicative and blessed with a strong musical personality.

For the ensemble, Lawyer brought together friends from out of town as well as Houston. The concertmaster was Brian Lewis, a violin professor at the University of Texas at Austin. The principal flutist, Christina Jennings, teaches at the University of Oklahoma. Numerous local freelance musicians also performed.

They played for Yoo as if they had just had an extra shot of adrenaline. In its intensity, the sound was both exciting and raw.

Fortunately, the players had the newly renovated sanctuary of St. John the Divine to help them.

Acoustically, the room has active, almost booming sound. Reverberation is modest, but the space is so live that the mu-

sicians didn't really need to push as hard as they did. A more refined style of playing would have made their excellent work even more impressive.

Yoo chose three announced works: Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* for strings (featuring a solo string quartet), Charles Tomlinson Griffes' *Poem* for flute and orchestra (with Jennings as soloist) and Schubert's Symphony No. 5. The encore was Elgar's *Chanson de nuit* (the pomp without the circumstances, Yoo joked, referring to Elgar's famous marches.)

Poem is famous but seldom heard. Griffes (1884-1920) was a major American composer of his time, and in *Poem* (1918) he deftly combined exoticism, traditional tonality and hints of modernity. As Jennings relaxed, she brought velvety tone and sinuous strength to the music.

The Elgar pieces were refreshingly different.

For a turn-of-the-20th-century piece, the *Introduction and Allegro* was imaginative in its use of a string quartet as the solo "instrument" and a touch of adventure in its harmonies. But, like most of his music, including *Chanson de nuit* (*Song of Night*), it was rooted safely in tradition and, thus, provided comfortable listening.

Schubert's Fifth Symphony, underplayed in Houston, was an excellent finale. Yoo and the musicians relished the buoyancy and cheerfulness (occasionally rushing hints of darkness). They made the music dance.

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