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## MUSIC REVIEW

# Conductorless! avoids danger by focusing on the music

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**I**T was natural that an orchestra founded by musicians for musicians would get around to trying to fly on its own.

In *Conductorless!*, the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra made its first foray into the rarefied realm of performing an entire program without a conductor. Saturday's performance at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church was a macho first step.

Throughout much of the millennium-old history of classical music, pieces involving more than a handful of musicians ended up needing some kind of leader, even if it was as simple as the head of a choir tapping a finger to keep the group together when chanting a psalm. We still encounter that kind of work in, say, a concerto performance directed by the soloist.

The arm-waving, pelvis-thrusting, leaping man we now think necessary on the podium was a latecomer, arriving less than 160 years ago. Certainly a lot of core orchestra repertoire now needs somebody to sort the music out and impose a unified idea.

ROCO got around that by choosing music — and a style of interpretation — that never put the group in real danger.

It opened with a piece of chamber music for eight woodwinds: *Decet* by Rumanian George Enescu. No challenge there. Chamber music is part of most musicians' lives. The eight players were generally well unified and of a single mind in shaping the work.

Concertmaster Brian Lewis led Joseph Haydn's *Sinfonia Concertante* for violin, cello, oboe and bassoon with orchestra. Using the speed and weight of the bow, or the up-and-down motion of the left forearm, he

guided beginnings, ends and shifts in tempo. When he was too busy for that in his solos, the person sitting in the first chair of the first violinists took over coordination.

Throughout the evening Lewis, as leader, opted for a big, robust approach to interpretation. Haydn's concerto was thus big-boned and meaty in both solo and ensemble playing. Lewis' solo work was not consistently clean, and cellist Amy Sue Barton, fresh from New York, had a sound more 'New Yorker' than Texan (and thus not a good blend). Oboist Alecia Lawyer and bassoonist Kristin Wolfe Jensen were more lyrically even-handed.

The tendency toward zest and zippiness came through most fiercely after intermission (which ROCO calls "Take 5," when members leave the stage and mingle with the audience).

Gustav Holst's *St. Paul's Suite* is most famous for the last movement combining the familiar jiglike tune *Dargason* with the even more familiar *Greensleeves*. Lewis and friends took the combination so fast that the command "Haste, Haste" in the chorus of the Christmas carol version of *Greensleeves* became "Run, Run." The audience loved it. A standing ovation followed.

Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony* (No. 1) closed out the event. Again, chins were lifted up and bows sped quickly in the high-spirited interpretation.

The advantage of a big musical persona was that it hid, or at least played down, problems in performing. Boldness requires a large string sound, which camouflages problems of tuning, blend, articulations and good ensemble work (the pizzicato ending of Holst's third movement was sloppy). Gaining a lighter, more transparent sound would have required a lot more time than available, but ROCO's players offered a well-rounded, vivacious approach to well-chosen music.

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