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HOUSTON: RIVER OAKS CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

By [Andrew Sigler](#) on May 23, 2014

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13

2

Every single problem in the arts can be fixed by working on personal relationships. –Alecia Lawyer

Based in Houston and drawing on some of the finest players in town and from around the nation, River Oaks Chamber Orchestra is gearing up for their tenth season. Since its inception in 2005, ROCO has presented hundreds of concerts to a wide variety of audiences and in many different forms. Founded by oboist Alecia Lawyer, ROCO has commissioned or premiered 34 new works and during their upcoming season they will pass 40, including a co-commission in partnership with [New Century Chamber Orchestra](#) and A Far Cry for a piece by Derek Bermel. Lawyer was kind enough to take time out of her busy schedule to fill me in on how ROCO got started and where it's headed.

Andrew Sigler: How did ROCO come about?

Alecia Lawyer: I had been a part of many start-up orchestras in NYC and in Houston and had had an entrepreneurial trio in NYC while at Juilliard. While in Houston, when my church was being renovated I knew a chamber orchestra would be perfect there in this lovely Frank Lloyd Wright-style building with seating for around 550. I wanted to build something for Houston, but also something very authentic and relevant to the classical music world.

I thought of the musicians who were with me at Juilliard and different festivals who actually smiled when they performed and took joy in their craft on stage; who could be vulnerable and open in performance; who could talk to an audience and engage them, not just entertain them; who performed with such fluency that the music became the language, not the entity. I was lucky to have hired Suzanne Lefevre as personnel manager, who helped form the orchestra, as well.

AS: What are some areas of presentation that set you apart?

AL: We have many simple ways to make the audience feel comfortable without changing our product of fantastic classical music. The concerts start at 5 p.m. and are over before 7 p.m., so people can do more than one thing in a night. I put pronunciation guides for composers' names [in the program] so people don't feel dumb, and I include timings of pieces to allow people to get a sense of the scope of a piece. (And if they don't like it, they know how much longer it is!) I married the idea of a kid's night out with the concerts and now have ROCOrooters, a music education/childcare program during and after our concerts. We don't have a regular intermission. It's "Take 5" [style] and musicians actually clip on nametags and walk into the audience to greet our audience. ROCO is known as "the most fun you can have with serious music." Our season consists of four main concerts with all 40 professional musicians (half of whom fly in to play) with repeat performances. The rest of our 25-30 concert season is made up of chamber music in various venues and with many partners throughout Houston. We actually perform in ten zip codes here.

AS: Your mission statement is to "shape the future of classical music through energizing, modernizing and personalizing the orchestral experience." That's a tall order. How do you accomplish this?

AL: We energize through musician involvement in programming and creative direction, rotating conductors ([the ensemble has] no named conductor), annual conductorless concerts, and world premiere commissions. We modernize through streaming live concerts into patient rooms at MD Anderson Cancer Center and Hallmark Retirement Home. We are dedicated to bringing this music to immobile communities like the V.A. hospital, where we performed a veteran's concert this season. We also have a Listening Room where you can hear our past concerts for free and also download them. We offer ring tones by our individual musicians so you can carry your favorite ROCO musician with you wherever you go. We have been broadcast nationally over 60 times on *Performance Today*. We personalize through accessibility where musicians and audience and board have relationships; through our musical collaborations; knowing our audience members by name; keeping the house lights up the whole concert to feel even more connected to our audience; having individuals or groups support each musician's chair throughout the season (every musician has a sponsor or group of sponsors); commissioning and programming with actual people in mind and involved.



AS: You have a pretty spectacular group of players from all over the place. How were they assembled?

AL: They are not just from Texas! NYC, Vancouver, Boulder, others I cannot think of. It's more about people I knew and ROCO's personnel manager, Suzanne Lefevre, who has a wide group of musicians she knows. Plus her job is not what you would expect. She is now named associate artistic director and has always been a partner in building the orchestra.

AS: You have had 34 world premieres (and counting!) in less than ten years. Are any/all of these commissioned works? How do you go about selecting these works/composers?

AL: Yes, all are world premiere commissions. We have more that are either Houston premieres, or world premieres that were not commissioned by us. Some composers came to us in the beginning, but now that we are known for this I get submissions constantly and *love* it! I am constantly getting suggestions from the musicians in ROCO, as well, for repertoire and commissioning. Our big news this season is that we are doing a co-commission with New Century Chamber Orchestra and A Far Cry having Derek Bermel compose the piece. ROCO will get the world premiere on Valentine's Day next season.

AS: Houston is a large cosmopolitan city with many outstanding musical organizations of all sizes. How does ROCO fit into this?

AL: Many people don't realize the difference in groups for classical music. There is a 100-piece symphony orchestra on one end and then chamber groups on the other. In between you have string orchestras of around 18-20 players and then a full-size chamber orchestra like ROCO of 36-40 performers. Each of those four categories is its own animal with repertoire specifically for it. We have other groups in the different categories, but

are the only one occupying the full-size chamber orchestra space and truly sticking to that repertoire. I love the flexibility we have for the main concerts with the full group and then chamber groups throughout the rest of the season. It is intentionally being built as a Lego model, where small groups like our ROCO Brass Quintet have their own series of concerts under the ROCO brand.

AS: You've presented at Yale, SMU, Round Top, Juilliard, UT Austin, and the Texas Music Festival concerning your entrepreneurial approach to community-specific orchestra building. What is your approach?

AL: I call what I do "Wildcatting in the arts" which [might need explaining](#) if you are not from Texas! I meet with the performance majors and the arts management students and talk about starting ROCO. The talks have gone in many different directions from development and board building to programming/commissioning. However, my favorite thing to do is to talk about ROCO as a case study of reactions to my own past in performance and then have individual appointment times for students to come discuss their own ideas. I believe that orchestras should not be cookie-cutter and actually have a personality like the city in which they are created.

I love the process of connecting people together through the arts. Each conversation, whether about music, money, or venues, is one of discovery and craft. Every single problem in the arts can be fixed by working on personal relationships. Gratefulness, joy, and connection are our panaceas.

*

World Premiere/Commissions by ROCO for the full chamber orchestra

Brad Sayles – *Echoes of Invention* for narrator and orchestra (2008)

Karim Al-Zand – *Visions from Another World After Illustrations by JJ Grandville* (2008)

Carter Pann – *Mercury Concerto* (2009)

Brad Sayles – *Buffalo Bayou Suite* (2010)

Scott McAllister – *Concerto for Double Bass and Chamber Orchestra* (2010)

Karim Al-Zand – *Handel's Messiah Pregame Show* (2011) In collaboration with Houston Chamber Choir

Paul English – *Lumiere Lunaire* (2012) (In honor of the 100th anniversary of Pierrot Lunaire and based upon JoAnn Falletta's poem about Pierrot)

Tony Brandt – *Maternity* (2012) based upon neuroscientist David Eagleman's writings about women throughout evolution back to the amoeba.

Reena Esmail – *Teen Murti* for string orchestra (2013)

Carter Pann – *The Extension of My Eye, Le Tombeau d'Henri Carter-Bresson* (2014)

World Premieres

Steve Laven – *Beyond the Odyssey* (2006)

Tony Brandt – *Nano Symphony* (2010)

Todd Frazier – “*Save the World*” in *Memorium*; *Richard Smalley* (2010)

Houston Premieres

Derek Bermel – *Natural Selection* (2006)

Michael McLean – *Elements* for solo violin and strings (2006)

Daniel Kellog – *Mozart's Hymn for String Orchestra in 16 Parts* (2008)

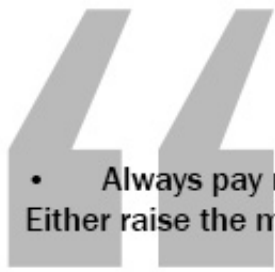
Pierre Jalbert – *Autumn Rhapsody* (2012)

Huang Ro – *Folk Songs* for orchestra (2013)

Chamber Music World Premiere/Commissions

22 Works for our annual Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) musical and literary ofrenda. Composers write small pieces about life, death, remembrance, or other themes for an oboe, viola, and cello trio from ROCO with a singer.

We also have commissioned and premiered two other chamber works on our chamber music series we are now calling ROCO Unchambered.



Alecia's Pet Peeves

- Always pay musicians when they perform. ALWAYS! Either raise the money or pay them out of your own pocket.

• Get your 501 (c)(3) before your first concert. It is not a good idea to "try a concert concept out" and wait to get your nonprofit status to make sure it can work. You won't be able to raise the money you need to actually pay people, so the series won't fly in the long term. Get your status first so people will give you money to get their tax write off, plus it makes you feel legitimate to a donor.

• Corporate money is the most difficult to acquire. Businesses might give a few hundred here and there, but not the bigger dollars one might expect.

• If you are not going to live in the town in which you want to start your series or concert idea, please don't expect the community to come out with all flags flying to support you.

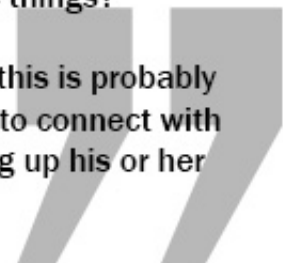
• There is a very short list of foundations that give seed money to new projects, but again, reference above the 501 (c)(3) comment and reference above the requirement that you will actually have to show that you will be in this for the long term.

• Never have a free concert, unless there is a very specific reason you are doing it. Instead, print tickets with a price on them. You can sell them OR hand out all of them to whomever you would like, saying, "Please come as my guest to our concert." This creates a perceived value and the person will then be more prone to actually show up and get involved.

• Please always respect your audience: How dare you get upset when someone claps in between movements! THEY ARE CLAPPING FOR YOU!

• Many people say Mo-zahrt without the 't.' It is YOUR job to tell them how to pronounce Mozart. Think about the fact that many of you don't know how to do your taxes so you go to someone who does. How would you feel if they made you feel dumb because you didn't know the most basic things?

• At your next gig (whether a good one or a bad one—and this is probably more important for a bad gig), find someone in the audience to connect with and make eye contact. Actually care that that person is giving up his or her time to hear you and go thank them for coming afterward.



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william osborne

May 23, 2014 at 1:41 pm

This article is, of course, once again a rather overt political statement for the concepts of entrepreneurship in the arts. In the political rubric of the USA, the not so subtle message is that entrepreneurship is to stand in opposition to the systems of public arts funding used in all other developed countries.

To back up this philosophy of entrepreneurship it would be useful to have some *documented* information about ROCO.

1. What were the composers paid for the 34 premieres or commissions that are mentioned? We need a complete and detailed list.
2. How many composers were not paid by the orchestra or paid very little?
3. How many performances per year does the orchestra perform with its full personnel as opposed to chamber music concerts?
4. How many chamber music concerts are presented?
5. What is the average salary of the musicians, broken down between first chair and tutti players?
6. How many salaried administrators does the orchestra have?
7. What was the average attendance for the concerts?
8. What is the price range, and the average price of tickets?

9. What sort of rehearsal and performance facilities does the orchestra have?
10. What sort of inventory does the orchestra own like percussion instruments, a music library, music stands, transport vehicles, etc.
11. What sort of benefits like health insurance and pension plans are the musicians given?
12. How do these numbers compare to the countless orchestras in European cities – including many that have far smaller populations and far less wealth than Houston?

[Read more ▼](#)**cheryl Mahaffay**

May 24, 2014 at 12:21 am

We love music in our family. My husband is a retired band director and we met playing in band at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa with Weston Noble as conductor. I enjoy your writing in the above pieces. Our son in law is the brother of bass player, Sandor Ostlund. we would enjoy hearing your music.

**Andrew Sigler**

Post author

May 24, 2014 at 1:21 pm

Hi William, thanks for your message.

I don't know the extent to which the following would address some of the financial aspects of your questions, but one place for you to start might be the 501(c)(3) records (Form 990 in particular) for ROCO. The next suggestion would be to contact Alecia Lawyer at ROCO directly. The website has the contact information and Alecia was very helpful with all of my questions for the report. Finally, and to get the most candid and unvarnished responses, it might be useful for you to contact all of the composers and performers and ask them what they were paid. Many of the performers are listed on the ROCO website, and an exhaustive list of the composers is included in the article. I'm sure a quick search will certainly yield contact information for most if not all of them. Carter Pann (whose piece is featured in the video at the beginning of the article) has been commissioned twice, once in 2009 and once in 2014. You may be able to draw some conclusions from the difference in commission rate over the years.

I look forward to your findings. Please let me know if I can help.

**william osborne**

May 24, 2014 at 3:50 pm

Thanks Andrew. I think the implication of my post is that authors and interviewees themselves should begin supplying that sort of information – not perplexed and lazy readers like me. We need to see how well hard

numbers back up the oft expressed ideologies about entrepreneurship. A little reality never hurts. Hmm. Or in our field maybe it does...

Anyway thanks for the interesting article. I really like reading on NMBx what's happening around the country. And Texas is interesting because it probably has the best public school music education in the country.

Readers might like to check out this astounding recording of Ron Nelson's "Rocky Point Holiday" – a very fine concert band work. This group is comprised of Dallas area public school and college teachers working mostly just for fun. If we had funding systems like Europe, most of these musicians would have jobs in full time orchestras in the state:



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Andrew Sigler

Post author

May 24, 2014 at 1:22 pm

Thanks Cheryl!



Anthony Brandt

May 24, 2014 at 7:04 pm

What ROCO does that is so healthy and inspiring is that they treat having a world premiere on every one of their symphonic programs as the most natural thing in the world. Audiences that might have initially been uncertain about listening to new music have become so accustomed to it on a ROCO program that they would be upset if it wasn't there. ROCO also illustrates that when great players perform music with conviction and care, audiences respond enthusiastically even if they've heard anything like it before.



Karim Al-Zand

May 24, 2014 at 9:54 pm

ROCO is doing terrific work in Houston. They have made featuring and commissioning new music a priority for the orchestra, and their devoted audiences appreciate their fresh attitude to repertoire. Their contribution to contemporary music in Houston is quite significant and it's wonderful to see them recognized here at NewMusicBox.



Pierre Jalbert

May 27, 2014 at 10:12 am

The musicians of ROCO are top notch and they continue to brighten the Houston concert scene with the variety of their programming and their very active commissioning program.



william osborne

May 27, 2014 at 10:20 am

Three composers from Rice have now responded with support for the orchestra, but notably without information about what the commissioned composers were paid. Documented sums would be highly relevant to the concepts of entrepreneurship expressed in the article.



Derek Bermel

May 27, 2014 at 7:59 pm

William, to answer your question: as indicated here, ROCO played a Houston premiere of my piece in 2006. For that I was not paid, as the world premiere took place in the U.K. years earlier. Same with Pierre's piece, by all indications. I don't feel any inclination to discuss fees, as you suggest, but with the current commission ROCO has been 100% professional.

The points you raise are very germane to a larger discussion about orchestras, commissions, composers, unions, and performing musicians. Since you are particularly interested in these issues, why don't you delve into them and write an article (in NMB or elsewhere) that addresses them with specificity? You seem not at all perplexed and lazy, but rather, sharp, well-informed, and articulate. We need folks like you to advocate for what they feel is fair and just in the music world and beyond.



william osborne

May 28, 2014 at 3:15 am

Hello Derek,

I wrote an article on this topic for NMBx ten years ago which addressed the American neoliberal concepts of entrepreneurship in the arts and compared them to Europe's public funding systems. There was a long delay before NMBx responded, and when they did, they had already edited it and deleted about half of the article (literally.) In the meantime, ArtsJournal.com agreed to publish it where it was widely read. I also preferred that my article be presented in its completeness, especially since the wide deletions significantly changed its meaning. The article still averages about 300 readers per month and can be found here:

http://www.osborne-conant.org/arts_funding.htm

I have a good deal of new research, and neoliberal philosophy has demonstrated further weaknesses since then, but I've been too preoccupied with composing, and too lazy and depressed to write another article.

I should stress that my concerns are not about specific rules or philosophies about the payment of musicians (like commission fees, licensing fees, new media, orchestras, or salaries for musicians,) but rather with the fact that the USA is the only developed country in the world without comprehensive systems of public arts funding. The idea that government should be reduced to a bare minimum ("and drowned in a bathtub" as Dick Cheney put it) is part of the neo-con agenda. This includes eliminating public arts funding and situating the arts as entrepreneurial activities.

Ms. Lawyer travels around the country working as a consultant and advocate specifically for arts entrepreneurship. Sometimes musicians do this because they are conservatives, and sometime simply because they've picked up ideas without realizing their full political implications.

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