

River Oaks Chamber Orchestra Delights MCPAS

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The longtime reputation for excellence associated with performance offerings arranged by the **Montgomery County Performing Arts Society** (MCPAS) was certainly enhanced by last Sunday evening's wonderful concert from the **River Oaks Chamber Orchestra** (ROCO) set in the elegant surroundings of Conroe's beautiful Crighton Theatre. Having guest conductor Mei-Ann Chen at the helm was just icing on the cake for an evening of entertainment that has been aptly described as, "the most fun you can have with serious music."

ROCO's Artistic Director and Principal Oboist, Alecia Lawyer is founder of the group, and the sought-after Ms. Chen is Music Director of both the Memphis Symphony Orchestra and the Chicago Sinfonietta. Chen clearly enjoys her work and literally beams with joy as she introduces her talented musicians and conducts this splendid orchestra. The concert was billed as *ROCO Celebrates Asia* and featured both composers and compositions that were heavily influenced by Asian cultures.

The first work presented was ***Teen Murti for String Orchestra*** by Indian composer, Reena Esmail. The haunting mystery of its opening passages evolved into pulsing rhythms from opposing sections of the strings. The exciting composition moved on to take many unexpected twists and turns, somber one moment, and full of surprising tempo changes the next.

The second selection was one that is rarely performed, and I suspect that may be because of the considerable musical sophistication required of both musicians and audience for the somewhat *avant-garde* ***Serenade for Tenor, Horn and String Orchestra*** by Benjamin Britten. Britten, who was known for his extensive poetry collection, composed this work to accompany a tenor's performance of several poems reflecting on the close of day, the arrival of night, and even the end of life. Those poetry selections were beautifully sung by tenor, Zach Averyt, and included poems by such literary giants as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, William Blake, Ben Johnson and John Keats. Performing the extraordinary horn solo segments with exquisite clarity was Danielle Kuhlmann, who described the challenging composition as her, "favorite piece of all time." As for Mr. Averyt, the rich warmth and power of his voice was well suited to this multi-faceted and demanding work. Even during the extended passages for orchestra-only that came between poems, he had a notable stage presence with solid theatrical bearing and intense focus.

The orchestra signaled the end of *Intermission* by playing a thrilling "Fanfare," that was an original composition by the group's Principal Trombonist, composer Anthony DiLorenzo. That set the stage for the orchestra's dazzling performance of composer Béla Bartók's musical feast in the ***Second Suite, Op.4***. It is a thrilling work that seems to take us on an exciting full tour of the orchestra. Lovely and lilting work from the harp offers a subtle backdrop that seems to punctuate the beautiful melodies that shift from strings, to brass, to woodwinds in this brisk, bright and sweeping piece full of shimmering variety. Watching these fine musicians at work somehow reminded me of the occasional short-subject MGM Orchestra specials that would sometimes accompany the feature film in theaters years ago.

The final selection of the evening was ***Folk Songs for Orchestra***, by Huang Ruo. These three works, representing different regions of China, featured unusual percussion instruments for drums, cymbals and gongs that were typical of Chinese music. The charming “Flower Drum Song from Feng Yang” made me wish there were Oriental dancers on stage. The “Love Song from Kang Ding” had lush romantic moments as gentle as a wind chime. The exciting melody of “The Girl from Da Ban City” rotated from brass, to strings, and then percussion before the full orchestra focused its brilliance on the thunderous and thrilling conclusion. The audience leapt to its feet in celebration.