

ROCO launches 2nd season with style

By CHARLES WARD
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THE River Oaks Chamber Orchestra looks like it won't be a one-season wonder.

The musician-led group kicked off its second season Saturday with style, imagination and momentum. It featured the American premiere of a very agreeable violin concerto that elicited applause and cheers from the near-capacity audience at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church. It tweaked listeners' ears with some quirky but accessible music by Igor Stravinsky.

Michael McLean's *Elements*

for solo violin and strings provided the program's theme. Coming up with appropriate musical examples for all the elements proved a challenge, but guest conductor Alastair Willis and executive director Alecia Lawyer tried gamely.

The unannounced opener — a ROCO tradition — was the Hornpipe from Handel's *Water Music*. With the nickname *Fire*, Haydn's Symphony No. 59 filled that element of nature. Stravinsky's Octet for Winds was the real stretch, representing air, Willis said.

Elements, written for ROCO concertmaster Brian Lewis, lies squarely in the tradition of 20th-century string orchestra works like Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* or, slightly more

bitingly, the Concerto for Double String Orchestra of Sir Michael Tippett.

McLean crafted the music with a sure hand. The style, though borrowing freely from established ideas, had a bedrock comfort because of its obvious roots in American film music (McLean has taken the influential film scoring course at the University of Southern California.)

The second movement, *Fire*, was a homage to Bernard Herrmann, most famously the composer for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. More generally, if you took away some of Lewis' compelling solos, the music would be perfect for arty films needing punctuations of mood and intensity.

But crucially, the music had

character and a distinct point of view (beyond the title and the philosophical roots in the symbols of Carl Jung). The style was conservative, but McLean showed an ear for getting fresh sounds from a standard group of instruments, as well as a skill for unclichéed reusing of those well-used composition ideas (a trait McLean and Willis sketched effectively for the audience before the performance).

Overall, Lewis was a confident performer, pleased with what he was hearing from the orchestra and what he himself was playing. Music in his high register occasionally sounded rough, but his performance was vigorous and exciting.

Willis took the Hornpipe at a festive clip. It was a blast of familiar air.

The interpretation of the Haydn symphony started out with an excellent infusion of the lighter, reduced-vibrato style favored by period-instrument performers for music of Haydn and Mozart. But as the piece progressed, the performance retreated toward standard big-personality orchestra playing (except for ongoing horn bloopers). Overall, the Haydn had crisp form and sinuous melodies, characteristics Willis took into the Stravinsky octet.

It comes from the composer's neoclassical period (which followed things like the revolutionary *Rite of Spring*). Rhythms were quirky, and timbres spare but unusual. Melodies were less important, but when they came along, they had an even bigger impact through the ensemble's fine playing.

With its rhythms and instrumental sounds, the piece stretched the ear but simultaneously comforted it with a solid reliance on the harmonies found in earlier periods of classical music.

In a way, the piece and performance formed a metaphor for ROCO's season-opening concert.



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