

CLASSICAL MUSIC

River Oaks orchestra making new connections

■ Chamber group offering nontraditional events to mix music and fun

By TARA DOOLEY
ARTS WRITER

The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra is mixing it up.

For the past five years, the ensemble founded by oboe player Alecia Lawyer has tried to think outside the concert hall. Its 2010-11 season adds a few tricks.

Regular concert goers can park themselves on a pew at The Church of St. John the Divine in River Oaks for programs that feature concertos, symphonies and, often, a surprise piece or two.

The group opens its sixth season Saturday with conductor JoAnn Falletta leading the 40 players in a Mendelssohn symphony



ENID BLOCH

SEASON OPENER: JoAnn Falletta will conduct the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra as it opens its sixth season.

and a bass concerto composed for the ensemble and its bass player, Sandor Ostlund.

But the season also offers recitals by ensemble members, wine-tasting evenings that pair vintages and music, and alternative-venue programs such as Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* at the Houston Zoo.

This year, the chamber orchestra added a "pro-

am" program that matches amateur adult instrumentalists and musical coaches from the ensemble.

"We have a lot of different ways for people to connect with us," said Lawyer, who is the group's executive director and principal oboist. "There is something for everyone."

And by everyone, she also means children. The season's main concerts feature a program that allows parents to drop off their children before the 5 p.m. show for some educational baby-sitting and pick them up at 10 p.m., allowing for an after-concert dinner date.

Lawyer is fond of talking about making connections. That philosophy extends to the 40 orchestra players who are contracted for the concerts.

"Musically, it is all

people you want to hang out with and play with," said Ostlund, a double bass professor at Baylor University in Waco. "This is really about an impassioned sort of performance and the music making."

Saturday's concert will not be just about making music, but playing newly created music.

Ostlund and the chamber ensemble commissioned a work by Baylor composer Scott McAllister.

"It contributes to the furthering relevancy of orchestras," Lawyer said of the commission. "It keeps us in the here and now."

The new piece, *Rhapsodie for String Bass and Chamber Orchestra*, was an opportunity to add to the solo repertoire for bass, taking into account advances in technique for the

RIVER OAKS CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Concerts that are part of the main series are performed at The Church of St. John the Divine, 2450 River Oaks.

■ **Season opener:** Bass player Sandor Ostlund performs the premiere of Scott McAllister's *Rhapsodie for String Bass and Chamber Orchestra*; JoAnn Falletta conducts the program that includes Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 3. 5 p.m. Saturday; tickets \$25. (Also performed at 7 p.m. Sunday at First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood, 5520 Kingwood Drive in Humble.)

■ **Amahl and the Night Visitors:** The one-act opera by Gian Carlo Menotti about the Epiphany. 6 and 8 p.m. Jan. 6

■ **Conductorless! Valentine's Concert:** The chamber orchestra plays works including Haydn's "Surprise" symphony without a conductor. 5 p.m. Feb. 12.

■ **Season finale:** Robert Moody conducts; program includes Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7* and Copland's *Clarinet Concerto* performed by Nathan Williams. 5 p.m. April 9

■ **More concerts, info:** www.rocohouston.org or 713-665-2700

instrument, Ostlund said.

The *Rhapsodie* alternates between high-energy, virtuosic passages and more mournful chorales, Ostlund said.

"It is not so esoteric

that nobody will understand it," he said. "It exploits the instrument, and it is fun to play and fun to hear."

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