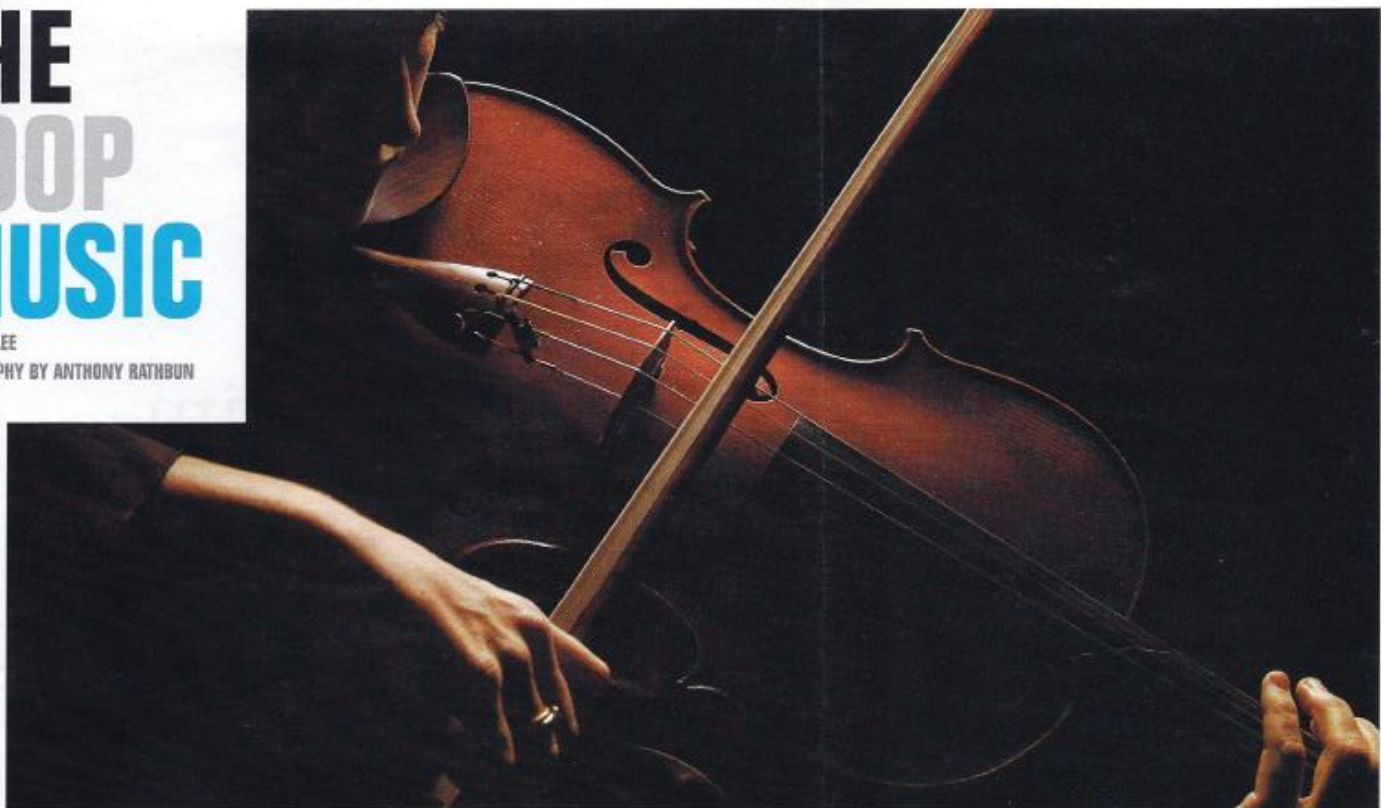


THE OOP MUSIC

MARC LEE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANTHONY RATHBUN



HEART STRINGS Viola player Suzanne Fevre joins the orchestra for its Valentine's concerts.

CHAMBER MADE *The innovative new River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, celebrating love in two Valentine's shows, hopes to get you hooked on classics*

Alecia Lawyer loves her job.

As founder and principal oboist for the still brand new River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, which will celebrate love in two big Valentine's shows this month, Lawyer's been swept up by the group's phenomenal success. Now, not even halfway through the orchestra's second season, she's seen her fledgling idea about taking music to the people turn into a season of sold-out shows and CDs of the group's work.

"It's taken off like a rocket," she says breathlessly. Almost too breathlessly for a classical musician. Let's face it, the cliché most of us hold in our heads is that of a white-haired old man with a head full of arcane knowledge and the personality of a fish. But that picture of classical music is exactly what Lawyer set out to change. "It's about breaking down barriers between the music and the audience. An orchestra is made up of personalities, and the idea is to bring you into the musician's world."

The orchestra goes so far as to bring audience members to the rarefied atmosphere of the stage. There, they can not only hear a program like the group's Feb. 10 Valentine's performance of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6* and Alan Hovhannes' *Fantasy on Japanese Woodprints for Solo Marimba and Orchestra*, they can see what the musicians see and feel the music flow around them.

To the lucky few who get to sit onstage, hearing the delicate rasp of bow on violin string and feeling the vibration of the percussion is alone worth the price of admission. The rest of the audience isn't sold short, however. Lawyer chose the orchestra's home, St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, for its wonderful acoustics and intimate atmosphere.

While ROCO is a happy success, it was born of frustration. Lawyer grew up in a musical family, attended SMU and earned her musical degree from Julliard. But armed even with these credentials, she found it impossible

to get a job with an orchestra. Musicians hang onto orchestra jobs for life. She married and lived in France for a time, then moved to Houston and volunteered for nonmusical organizations. "I was ready to give up the oboe."

Instead, she realized she had found her niche. Like all successful inventors, she would work outside the system. She'd gather her fiery personality, business skills and music know-how and take it all to the people herself, sharing with them what music meant to her.

This simple revelation is what makes ROCO so successful. The orchestra's members interact with the audience just as much as the music does. Instead of the usual intermission, there's a "Take-Five," where the musicians and audience mix, asking questions and answering them, finding out about not only music but each other. From the stage, the musicians tell "gig stories," odd and funny tales they've collected from years of playing bat mitzvahs, showcases, parties, whatever. "I played a mafia wedding, once," Lawyer recalls. "At least I think it was mafia. I sure wasn't going to ask."

Families have flocked to the concerts, which start at an early 5PM and offer childcare until 9:30PM so that parents with small children can have dinner after the show. The kids get pizza and a dose of musical education with caretakers who give instrument demonstrations, lead music-related games and allow them a peek at what the musicians are doing in the hall.

"You give of yourself," Lawyer says about what she's learned from ROCO's success. "That's what people come out and support. You sure don't learn that at Julliard." ■

ROCO's Valentine's concert Feb. 10, 5PM, St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, 2450 River Oaks Blvd., 713.622.3600; encore performance Feb. 11, 6:30 PM, Temple Emanu El, 4500 Sunset Blvd., 713.529.5771. www.rocobouston.org. Tickets \$10-\$25.