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Violinist learns to lead by example

**By Steven Brown**

February 14, 2014

Musician Andrés Cárdenes says his career has it all. He performs as a solo violinist. He plays chamber music. He conducts. He teaches.

"It's very fulfilling. I'd rather have my career than anybody else's," he says.

Cárdenes will blend several of those roles when he directs the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra's annual

Courtesy photo

Violinist Andrés Cárdenes will lead the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra's annual conductorless concert from his seat in the orchestra.

conductorless program. From his spot amid the musicians, he'll lay out ideas about how to shape the music, but the others also will contribute.

"We want to make it into a large chamber ensemble," Cárdenes says.

"Most players enjoy that setting now and then - when they have a voice and can make a suggestion. ... One of the things that's gratifying is to get a united concept of what we're trying to do, rather than (having) a conductor coaxing you to do his interpretation."

Cárdenes also will take a few solo turns in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "Serenata Notturna."

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Many helping hands

Though Cárdenes was a prizewinner in the 1982 Tchaikovsky International Violin Competition in Russia, he never wanted a strictly solo career. He attributes his outlook to the diverse experiences he enjoyed as a young violin student in Los Angeles.

The conductor of an orchestra geared mainly toward musicians in their 20s offered Cárdenes his first professional job at age 12. The leader of his youth orchestra gave him the chance to conduct. The director of a community orchestra made him concertmaster. As a student at Indiana University, he assisted his own instructor, revered pedagogue Josef Gingold.

"You know the Hillary Clinton thing about how it takes a village? That's exactly what happened with me," Cárdenes says. "It took a lot of people to get me to this point - people who believed in me and gave me so many opportunities."

A few years after Cárdenes became the Pittsburgh Symphony's concertmaster in 1989, the group put a rotating roster of players into a chamber orchestra, with Cárdenes as conductor. Though he led the smaller ensemble for 11 years, he was never tempted to conduct full time.

"For me, playing is a constant reminder of how you want to be treated, how you want to communicate, how you want to make music with other people," Cárdenes says.

"When you're a conductor, you have to think of yourself more. ... When you're a player, you've got your feet on the ground with your colleagues, and there's a camaraderie that you hope exists, even if you're a

leader."

Cárdenes left the Pittsburgh Symphony in 2010 to focus on teaching at Carnegie-Mellon University; playing in two chamber-music groups; and conducting the orchestra at the Strings Music Festival in Steamboat Springs, Colo.

Up to the challenge

In the conductorless program, Cárdenes and the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra will perform some of the music the way it was originally played.

When Joseph Haydn premiered his "Drum Roll" Symphony in 1795, he led the musicians from the keyboard; the first-chair violinist helped give signals. Not until the 19th century, when orchestral works exploded in length and complexity, did conducting become a separate role.

"When you have a conductor, you get spoiled, in a way, because you have somebody directing traffic all the time," Cárdenes says. "When he's not there, you have to be an independent thinker and an independent listener. ... Everyone is having to take on more responsibility and contribute more."

That will be especially true during Arnold Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony No. 2. Though it's rooted in traditional harmony rather than the atonal style Schoenberg pioneered, its thick textures can easily bury the music's lyricism.

"With something that dense, you've got to make sure you've got the balances right. Otherwise, the piece sounds like you're slogging through mud," Cárdenes says.

"That's going to be a challenge without a conductor. You're not going to have somebody put a hand up to tell a section to play less. ... It's going to take a tremendous commitment from (the players) to make it work. But it's totally possible."

River Oaks Chamber Orchestra

When: 5 p.m. Saturday at Church of St. John the Divine, 2450 River Oaks Blvd., and 6:30 p.m. Feb. 23 at Sugar Land Auditorium, 226 Lakeview, Sugar Land

Tickets: \$20-\$25; 713-665-2700, rocohouston.org

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