Unusual collaboration sings the praises of mothers

By Colin Eatock

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This is Musiqa director Anthony Brandt, taken by another composer on the Musiqa artistic team. Photo: Photo Courtesey Musiqa Artistic / DirectToArchive

Life

Mother's Day isn't until May - but the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra will honor the mothers of the world today, in a concert at the Church of St. John the Divine.

On the program is "Maternity - Women's Voices Through the Ages," a new work for soprano and orchestra by Houston composer Anthony Brandt. Based on a text by Houston neuroscientist and author David Eagleman, it's a tribute to every mother who ever lived.

It was more than a year ago that Brandt, who teaches at Rice University, approached the best-selling writer about a musical collaboration.

"I'm a big David Eagleman fan," Brandt says. "It was reading his book, 'Sum,' and that drew me to him. The book is about 40 visions of the afterlife. It isn't really a religious book, but a speculation on how we live by looking at how different after-lives might be."

More Information

ROCO in Concert: Season Finale
When: 5 p.m. Saturday
Where: The Church of St. John the Divine: 2450 River Oaks Blvd.
Tickets: $10-$25; rocohouston.org

The text for "Maternity" is based on a short story by Eagleman called "The Founding Mothers." It's also speculative - peering back through time at all of the mothers who have made the human race what it is today.

Moving rapidly, Eagleman introduces a succession of mothers in the fragmentary glimpses. There's a mother who "gave up cigarettes in her 30s," and a great-grandmother whose "beauty stopped traffic."

Leaping through generations, there are mothers from the Dark Ages, ancient Egypt and the Stone Age. Finally, Eagleman's mothers pre-date the human race itself: a monkey, a fish, and a single-celled creature.

When Eagleman showed Brandt "The Founding Mothers," he was immediately interested in the story.

"We're raised by our parents," he notes, "and if we're lucky, we get to know our grandparents, too. But our vision into our past, on a personal level, soon gets very vague and hazy. We don't know much about earlier generations. But if anything happened to any one of those links, we wouldn't exist. All of the little motivations, and things that drew people together hundreds or thousands of years ago - they add up to us."

As well, there were personal reasons. Brandt lost his own mother in an accident in 2008, and the sudden loss made him reflect on the value of motherhood. As well the soprano soloist for the premiere performance will be his wife, Karol Bennett (herself the mother of three children), and he views his new piece as a "love poem" for his wife.

However, Brandt's found that his chosen text also posed artistic challenges.

"How do you depict millions of years in about 15 minutes of music?" he asks rhetorically. His solution was to come up with a short theme to tie the stories of all 22 mothers together.

"You could say the piece is a theme and variations on a lullaby," Brandt explains. "It will start with a mother singing to her child. And the audience will follow the transformations of the lullaby through each of the generations. The farther away in time you go, the more unusual and difficult to recognize the lullaby gets. It goes through a whole variety of styles - and this enables me to tell the story."

ROCO artistic director Alecia Lawyer, who commissioned "Maternity," says the piece "definitely carries the mood of moving back in time."

As well, she points out that projections, during the performance, will help clarify which mother is which. (For example, the single-celled creature is "great-grandmother 706,406,493.")

"We'll be projecting which mother Karol is singing about. We change mothers every half-minute."

Tonight's program, led by guest conductor Alastair Willis, also features Gioacchino Rossini's "Overture to the Silken Ladder," Zoltan Kodaly's "Dances of Galanta" and Richard Wagner's "Siegfried Idyll."