

Getting in tune with family concerts

■ River Oaks Chamber Orchestra to offer options for parents, children

By CHARLES WARD
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

The warnings are tucked away in the fine print of theater and concert programs.

"Older children are welcome, but children under 5 years old are not permitted at the Alley," notes the city's premiere professional theater.

"Infants will not be admitted to the concert hall," advises the chamber music organization Da Camera of Houston.

So what are parents with young children supposed to do?

They'll find welcoming open arms — and child care for ages 2 months through 10 years — when oboist Alecia Lawyer launches the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra this fall.

Herself the mother of two young children, Lawyer designed an orchestra for her generation — parents who realize that classical music is missing from the lives of their families and yet need some help in balancing concert-going with raising young children.

So, her Saturday concerts will start in the late afternoon (5 p.m.). And, in a radical departure from usual practices, she'll provide child care to allow parents to attend performances and enjoy post-concert receptions.

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She'll use local, state and nationally known musicians. Scott Yoo, founder of Boston's Metamorphosen Chamber Orchestra and music director of summer festivals in Colorado and California, will conduct the opening program. The concertmaster will be Brian Lewis, a friend of Lawyer's who teaches at the University of Texas at Austin. The orchestra will have a core roster of 35 players, mostly local freelance musicians.

A native Texan, Lawyer grew up in Van, a small town northwest of Tyler. Her parents were high school music teachers. "I've witnessed the 20-year siphoning of the arts out of the Texas public schools," she says.

She attended Southern Methodist University, where she majored in physics and oboe, and then went to New York's Juilliard School for a master's degree. The year of her graduation, 1992, she was a soloist for the legendary Russian cellist/conductor Mstislav Rostropovich when the Juilliard Orchestra was in residence at France's Evian Festival.

Except for a year when her husband attended a school in France, she's lived in Houston since 1993. (Her husband, Lawrence Lawyer, is a former midlevel employee of Enron who is waiting sentencing after pleading guilty in 2002 to filing a false income-tax return. He is not involved with the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, Alecia Lawyer says.)

Along the way, Lawyer has been involved with OrchestraX, the American Radio Chamber Orchestra and the Houston Chamber Orchestra. She was also a graveyard-shift DJ for the now-defunct classical radio station KRTS. (Outside of music,



CARLOS JAVIER SANCHEZ : FOR THE CHRONICLE

FAMILY FUN: River Oaks Chamber Orchestra founder Alecia Lawyer, with her children Jacob, 5, and Zachary, 2, plans to provide child care at the organization's concerts.

she's been a docent at two Houston museums and taught karate in the Fifth Ward.)

With each orchestra she be-

came involved with the backstage intricacies of running a professional music ensemble. That led to the idea of the River

Oaks Chamber Orchestra.

"I wanted to address the needs of the audience," she says.

"So many of my age group want their kids to be involved with music, and they want the experience themselves. They miss it," she says. It's the generation "that had no exposure to the arts (in public school) and little interest in them, including music."

Lawyer had the idea for her group early in 2004 and began organizing in September. Seven months later, she was out in the community introducing the new chamber orchestra and raising money through house concerts and other events.

A key factor was the major renovation of the sanctuary at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church at Westheimer and River Oaks Boulevard. The project includes a major upgrading of acoustics, a revamping of the altar area so it can serve as a platform for performances, and a large new pipe organ. Lawyer will begin each program with a short organ work.

She approached the church's vestry, or governing council, and it donated space for rehearsals and concerts, she says.

Her concerts' informality won't compromise their quality, she says. "It's about building personal relationships with the audience."

She envisions musical surprises, remarks from the conductor and comments from individual members of the orchestra that reveal their individual personalities.

"I want the audience to know all the people on the stage — not just the conductor."

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