



LOCO FOR ROCO

Chamber orchestra celebrates Asia with innovative concerts and world premieres

BY [JOEL LUKS](#) 9.28.13 | 11:07 am

The bulk of the repertoire performed by symphony orchestras comprises scores written by bigwigs of the 18th and 19th century plus a handful of 20th century composers. Large classical ensembles — and their audiences — seem to prefer music that's dead and very white, as in music of European pedigree written mainly by those whose names start with the letter B.

Take one look at the season pamphlets of such big groups and it becomes apparent that marketers tout either the *pièce de résistance* or an expensive soloist. The concert program is somewhat predictable as well — an overture, a big concerto of some sort and the concluding magnum opus.

When oboist Alecia Lawyer founded the [River Oaks Chamber Orchestra](#) (ROCO), she sought to deviate from programming norms by testing how audiences would react to knowing less about what's happening onstage. In essence, shifting expectations so listeners would be encouraged to attend for the experience of live music and not because of an individual title.

"It's a little bit like jazz," Lawyer says. "We announce the program order from the stage, we add surprise selections, we usher a few guests to sit within the orchestra. The conductor becomes an emcee who invites audience members to connect with the music and the musicians."

Boldface type soloists aren't flown in for special occasions. Rather, it's the regular principal players that are featured, a strategy that Lawyer says helps concert goers identify with the members of the chamber orchestra.

"I want people to attend concerts because of who we are and not what we are playing," she adds.

For [ROCO's Saturday performance](#) at St. John the Divine and the encore concert on [Sunday at the Crighton Theatre](#) in Conroe, titled "ROCO Celebrates Asia," Lawyer brings back guest maestro [Mei-Ann Chen](#) to lead an inventive concert of music that would rarely be curated together, including the world premiere of a ROCO commission from composer [Huang Ruo](#) and a Houston debut of a piece by [Reena Esmail](#). Britten's *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings, Op. 31* (featuring principal horn [Danielle Kuhlmann](#) and tenor [Zach Averyt](#)) Bartok's *Suite No. 2 for Small Orchestra*, Huang Ruo's *Folksongs for Orchestra* and Reena Esmail's *Teen Murti for String Orchestra* crafts a program that dialogues between eastern and western cultural practices.

East meets west

Ruo and his father, who's also a composer, compiled a collection of folks songs from China and published them in a book. Three of those songs, which are very popular in their country of origin, are reworked in *Folksongs for Orchestra*. The piece, however, is not a simple arrangement of a cultural staple that renders a whimsical *Chinoiserie*.

"The tune may be traditional, but everything else is new," Ruo says. "The western orchestra is like a modern picture frame displaying a centuries-old photo. Both the frame and the photo need to fit well and be in companion with each other — with original style and taste."

Esmail's *Teen Murti* was titled after an iconic location in Delhi, where the composer fulfilled the requirements of a Fulbright scholarship. *Teen Murti Bhavan*, the former residence of the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, today has been transformed into a cultural center that includes a library, museum and planetarium.

Teen Murti translates to three statues. Murti also has a religious connotation, a word that sometimes describes an object that commands reverence. Esmail plays with the concept of murti, but abstracts them as *Hindustani ragas* (a series of notes that forms the framework for melodies).

"At the many Hindustani concerts I attended while I was in India, I noticed that a curious thing would happen before each performance," she explains. "The artist would announce the raga to be sung or played that evening. Immediately, many of the devout fans in the audience would begin humming the characteristic phrases or '*pakads*' of that *raga* quietly to themselves, intoning with the drone that was already sounding onstage."

Esmail describes the ambiance as if it had a magical feeling, as if that raga was present in the air in anticipation of the performance. *Teen Murti*'s opening recalls her experience.

"For me, the western component of this work is in the specific way that I reframe the Hindustani ragas, the 'murti', while still paying respect to them," she says. "The piece is designed to be heard like *Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition*, in which the paintings are, instead, western

elaborations of traditional Hindustani ragas."

Reena Esmail's honors traditions, both east and west, by knowing as much she can about each of them. She has studied with notable teachers including [Lakshmi Shankar](#), the sister-in-law of [Ravi Shankar](#).

"I aim to learn not only the musical techniques and tradition, but also the values of the [Hindustani](#) musical culture," Esmail explains. "Past that, I try to approach my actual composition process with an open mind, taking what I know and love about both traditions and creating music that uses those elements."

The music doesn't demand musicians, whether western or Indian, to play using the physical techniques of another style, a compositional approach that strives not undermine historical context.

"As for the distinction between ancient and modern, the two traditions are equally contemporary," Esmail adds. "Though both Hindustani and western classical musics have ancient roots, they both exist for me as styles that are alive and part of the cultural backbone of their communities today."