

LONDON FREE PRESS Saturday March 25, 2000

## **It's the city that owes a debt to its orchestra**

### **Orchestra London's financial woes mask the sublime contribution it makes to the city's soul**

**By Peter Desbarats**

What didn't happen was the big news about Orchestra London this past week.

It didn't fold.

When the crunch came, city council couldn't bring itself to scrap one of the city's two professional arts organizations. Even for this city's politicians, who have always ignored, minimized and discouraged what stubbornly remains a vibrant and diverse artistic and cultural community, this would have been too much.

Of course, in their usual fashion, they gave as little support to the orchestra as they could -- and in the most grudging fashion. They "lent" the orchestra some additional funds, a loan that everyone understands may never be paid back. They tied the loan to fund-raising commitments given by the orchestra, which is now negotiating with its creditors and still far from solvency. And they've left the orchestra in such a fragile position that advance ticket sales for next season will have to be held in trust until enough money is raised to ensure there will be a next season.

But members of council, according to media reports, have also said they might -- just might -- increase the city's annual grant to the orchestra if its forthcoming, three-year business plan is approved by the city. This is their first admission that the current grant of \$125,000, given with one hand and immediately retrieved by the other as rent for Centerrible Hall, is totally inadequate. If the grant had been doubled or tripled a few years ago, bringing it into line with municipal support elsewhere for orchestras, the current crisis and the orchestra's mounting deficits would have been avoided.

Still, you have to give a majority of council credit for moving in the right direction. What is still missing from the mix are visible signs of the city's role in appreciating and assisting the orchestra, and other artistic and cultural organizations, in ways that don't cost a cent but that are vitally important.

This is a real blind spot for this council. They're very good at telling the orchestra what it has to do to gain community support. But they never consider what they might do. Instead, they sit back in their salaried positions at city hall and castigate the unpaid volunteers on the orchestra's board for not working hard enough.

Part of the problem is that many members of council, from what I've observed, rarely attend orchestra concerts, the Grand Theatre, smaller theatre performances or concerts or anything more cultural than the annual rib fest. It's a bit discouraging when you try to talk to a member of council about the orchestra and the conversation begins this way: "Well, I never go to concerts myself . . ."

This attitude is blatantly evident in public statements and the city's official communications. Take the recent glossy 1999 Report to the Community: Growing the Forest City, released last January at the time of Mayor Dianne Haskett's annual state of the city address. It covers downtown redevelopment, preparations for the Canada Summer Games, sewer upgrades, bike paths -- in fact, everything under the sun except cultural and artistic activities and future projects, unless you count a mention of the proposed downtown hockey rink and "entertainment complex."

The promotional video released at the same time by the city repeats this omission. Entitled London . . . from the hip! (first prize of a weekend in booming St. Thomas for anyone who can tell me what that title is supposed to mean), the video is an impressionistic, nine-minute montage of London scenes -- automated car plants (in London?), local sports, restaurants, fun at the beach (looks like Lake Erie), hospitals and golf courses -- against a background of peppy elevator music.

A good deal of attention -- 16 seconds in all -- is devoted to stock car racing. Baseball at Labatt Park gets 11 seconds. The University of Western Ontario is given seven seconds. Our art gallery merits two seconds inside and a two-second outside view. The Grand Theatre gets 2.5 seconds, which is a half-second more than Orchestra London. And it isn't as if the makers of the film didn't understand the commercial potential of culture, because there's quite a nice shot of the Festival Theatre at Stratford!

The film was produced for the city by On Air Productions, which gives addresses in London and Sacramento, Calif. This particular epic looks as if it was edited in Sacramento. In fact, it looks as if it almost might have been shot in Sacramento or any other medium-sized American city. It's so intent on being hip, it communicates nothing of London's special character.

It was Toronto's celebrated analyst of the modern city, Jane Jacobs, who reminded us during a visit here this past week that our "capacity for aesthetic appreciation" is a distinctive and vital human trait. Other animals can harvest, manufacture and house themselves. But is that the end purpose of life? Only humans can write novels and plays, compose music and organize theatrical companies and symphony orchestras.

Jacobs would probably argue, and I would agree, that the ultimate purpose of London and other cities -- their only activity that has truly lasting effects -- is the financial support of arts and culture.

When local politicians begin to understand this, they'll start to talk about what London owes to its orchestra and not what the orchestra owes to London.

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