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It's time for orchestra to face the music

By Larry Cornies -- Forum Editor

Orchestra London's board of directors mustered the courage this week to tell city council, through a set of confidential briefing notes, the details of the orchestra's real financial position.

The notes sent to councillors said the orchestra needs a cool $1.2 million to cover its obligations this year alone. And over the long term, the city will need to contribute $500,000 annually to keep the ensemble viable -- more than quadruple its current yearly grant.

It all makes last month's "loan" by the city of $110,000 -- half of which has already been spent on salaries -- look like a pittance.

Bankruptcy, the orchestra's board says, remains a very real possibility.

The most pressing problem faced by the orchestra now, of course, is the perception among would-be donors that they may be throwing good money after bad. Like a run on a bank in the pre-Depression era or a massive selloff of shares on the stock market, the mere whiff of trouble is enough to make many normally good-intentioned investors (or donors) skittish. The only way to rebuild is from the ground up.

Even the arrival of a white knight with a saddlebag of cash in tow -- expected by some to arrive at the orchestra's doorstep just ahead of the launch of a major fund-raising campaign this week -- may not reassure many longtime supporters, politicians or taxpayers.

How much will be enough to give the city's musical jewel a fresh start? One hundred thousand dollars? Half a million? A million?

The stark reality is that nearly no amount of money, at this point, will reassure the orchestra's various publics in the absence of a radical makeover of the orchestra's business plan, administration and perhaps even its musical staff.

During the mid-1990s, I was invited to serve on the board of governors of a church college affiliated with one of Ontario's universities. It took only one meeting to learn that the institution's survival was being threatened by some serious financial problems. An interim president had discovered the problems upon the departure of his long-serving predecessor, who had left to take up a similar post at an American institution. The college was running an annual deficit. It had accumulated a sizeable debt. Financial support from the school's constituencies -- churches, alumni, corporations and individuals -- were drying up, because, quite simply, they knew something was wrong and weren't inclined to support an institution -- even a non-profit entity built around a mission with which they sympathized -- that couldn't get its house in order.

When the presidential search committee invited its preferred candidate to attend a board meeting for a formal interview, he put us governors on notice. The bleeding, he said, would stop. Hard decisions would be made. And be forewarned, he told us. If we hired him, he'd turn each and every one of us -- about 18 -- into fund-raisers. We'd be accountable to him just as he was accountable to us. We'd make phone calls and knock on doors. The job of a board member would no longer be simply to attend meetings and make strategic decisions.

We hired him. We also began trimming administrative costs. Ironically, the college's development director was one of the first to go -- a good personal friend. Her responsibilities were reassigned to the president. In addition, the administrative vice-president's position was eliminated, his duties reassigned to the business manager and his colleagues. The yearly contract of another staff person wasn't renewed, her duties dealt to others. And, yes, one faculty position was eliminated by not replacing a professor who retired. And within six months, board members were each responsible for about two dozen files of past, present and potential donors. The president chose to approach the largest and potentially largest donors personally. "Working lunches" literally plugged the noon-hour holes in his calendar. And twice a year, board members reported to the president's administrative assistant on progress made -- complete with handwritten notes on the conversations -- on each of the files for which that member was responsible.

By the time my three-year term on the board expired, the college was budgeting yearly surpluses. Within two years of my leaving, the debt had been retired. Now, despite cuts in financial support from the university, the college is thriving. Donations from both individuals and corporations are pouring in. Building plans are in the works.

What changed were not the intentions of board members, faculty or staff, who, all along, had cherished education and the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others. What changed was the ability of the college to demonstrate its ability to assemble a plan, make some excruciating decisions and prove to supporters and would-be supporters that their money, trust and aspirations would be safe and jealously guarded. And in the life of a non- profit organization, that's something money just can't buy, no matter how large the amount.

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