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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Most cities would fight to save their orchestras

When my wife and I arrived in London, some 35 years ago, we encountered several indicators here of small-town life and attitudes.

The former included a small, largely amateur symphony orchestra and a repertory-style theatre, both operating in the Grand Theatre.

The small-town attitudes were those of a city council which had little or no regard for the arts and a total unwillingness to consider models derived from other places or other cultures.

Fortunately, in the intervening period, both London's orchestra and theatre have grown to adequately represent some of the cultural needs of a city of more than 320,000 and a region of 450,000 inhabitants.

The calibre of Orchestra London is such as to place it in the top half-dozen in Canada, while the Grand Theatre provides first-class, home-based performances and is being included on a national circuit that gives Londoners access to many of the same shows as Ottawa, Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver.

Unfortunately, some things remain the same or get worse, notably the small-town attitudes and performance by city council.

The sentiments voiced by several council members in the article, Councillors cool to orchestra handout (March 19) are all too representative.

Over 35 years, council's only tangible contribution to the performing arts was to help finance Centennial Hall (32 years ago). Over the years, council has paid lip service to the calibre of the arts when it suited them, while consistently refusing to provide adequate financial support or to give any leadership in the area of new or improved facilities.

Now, at the dawn of the 21st century, we seem close to reaping the civic costs of council's small-town, philistine attitudes. For an estimated cost of under \$2 million, plus realistic annual grants, London could continue to enjoy two performing arts organizations of national calibre.

Instead, while council members hide behind calls for business plans and fiscal responsibility from community arts groups, this same group is prepared to commit \$40 million for an arena for a privately-owned junior hockey team.

I am not against hockey, but I find the difference in responses incredible and insulting to those who have supported the arts in this city for so many years.

Where does council think London is going? In virtually every other city worth its salt, council would be taking a pro-active stance to save its major cultural icons; to preserve institutions that make a city an attractive place to live. The words city and civic have the same roots as civilized and rest on a wide array of values, not least cultural ones.

If Orchestra London and/or the Grand Theatre are allowed to disappear, it will be hard to retain much civic pride in the city of London, Ont.

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