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Struggling orchestra clears first cash hurdle

By **BRODIE FENLON AND DEBORA VAN BRENK**, Free Press Reporters

Cash-strapped Orchestra London threw up all its balls yesterday in the symphony's biggest -- and possibly last -- juggling act for survival.

Last night, about 150 orchestra supporters filed into the ballroom at London's Hilton Hotel for a fund-raiser to hear impassioned pleas for donations to keep the orchestra alive.

By the evening's end, more than enough was raised to meet a demand the city made Monday to raise \$50,000 no later than this afternoon to qualify it for the rest of a city loan worth \$110,000.

The board also used the occasion to announce details of a proposed three-year business plan and an aggressive fund-raising drive that seeks to raise \$330,000 by May 31.

The move came on the heels of a proposal for restructuring, filed in court Monday by a trustee for the orchestra, that will attempt to clear its debt.

Among last night's pleas were emotional tributes to the joy of music in London by several orchestra musicians, who donated \$13,500 and offered to defer their next paycheque.

"This is a treasure that belongs to all of us. It's one that we don't want to lose," said London Mayor Dianne Haskett, who asked the community to rally together "like a Hollywood movie" and save the orchestra.

John St. Croix, regional vice-president of Merrill Lynch and an adviser to the board, outlined an aggressive, three-year plan for the orchestra. The plan aims to make the orchestra self-sufficient by the 2004-2005 season.

But before that's possible, an immediate goal of \$330,000 in public and corporate donations, gifts and subscriptions must be met before May 31 or the orchestra will fold, he warned.

Trustee Tim Carson of Courage & Associates Inc. in Sarnia filed the proposal for restructuring Monday. Under a restructuring plan, an insolvent organization that can make formal repayment arrangements with creditors can live to play another day.

"This thing has to cash-flow from now on," Carson said.

"The reason for going through the formal process is that all of the stakeholders in Orchestra London realize that the cycle of debt has to stop."

Part of the board's three-year proposal outlined last night includes repackaging classical music performances to draw higher audience numbers, similar to the orchestra's Jeans and Classics and Pops series.

"In the age of the micro chip, MTV and Who Wants to be a Millionaire, it is imperative to maintain artistic integrity, yet create fun," Le Croix said.

Other proposed changes include:

- New orchestra venues, added theatrics, poetry readings, video screens, an outdoor concert and widespread school performances.
- A "fortified" board, with six to 10 new influential members, whose sole mandate is fiscal responsibility.
- Stronger ties with the Grand Theatre and London Regional Art and Historical Museums.
- A proposed London Arts Council.

Carson said the board agreed last Friday to restructure because it believed that is the best way to rebuild.

The orchestra's creditors would vote on the restructuring plan. It passes if it's agreed to by a majority of creditors who are collectively owed at least two-thirds of the debt.