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Orchestra London Needs You!

Despite having to endure funding cuts and costly tax rulings, stigmas, misconceptions and misunderstandings, Orchestra London and their proud and dedicated musicians continue to sacrifice for their art and for their city

Londoner **Don Smith**, a long-time arts supporter and founder of local construction giant, **Ellis-Don Ltd.**, said it best when I asked him recently about the city's commitment to the arts: "if they lose the Grand and the orchestra [Orchestra London] they might as well pull up the blanket and die. We'll lose everything. We'll have nothing to sell."

Two weeks ago, **Orchestra London** faced imminent financial collapse when a Bank of Nova Scotia overdraft agreement had reached its limit. The orchestra needed \$110,000 to avert the crisis, and asked the city to increase their core funding from \$125,000 to \$450,000 per year to resolve the issue. The city, after a three-hour in camera debate on Feb. 21, decided to loan the orchestra \$110,000 to keep it afloat. Good for them. The \$450,000 yearly grant is currently being discussed.

The Stigma of Suspicion

Arts organizations, especially our large institutions — Orchestra London, the London Regional Art and Historical Museums and the Grand Theatre — are fared with the ongoing suspicion of being free-and-easy big spenders incapable of managing their respective budgets. They are easy targets for so-called fiscally minded city council and make good cannon fodder for the local media.

At a recent roundtable discussion on the state of the arts in Ontario, almost every organization present complained about lack of funding and many voiced criticism aimed directly at the media and city hall. **Kelly Handerek**, artistic director of the Grand Theatre said, "the arts are cannibalized by the media and city hall."

The media, some city councillors and detractors in the community, were quick to pounce on Orchestra London when they finally threw up their hands, February 18 and asked for help.

After the recent marathon, behind-closed-doors meeting, city council voted 16-to-3 to bail out the orchestra and loan them \$110,000 with conditions. Councillors **Megan Walker**, **Bud Polhill** and **Bill Armstrong** voted against helping Orchestra London through its most recent fiscal crisis.

London Free Press columnist Brian (Chip) Martin said city council "succumbed to brinkmanship" when they decided to pull the orchestra out of financial trouble. Further,

LFP forum editor Larry Cornies thinks the orchestra might have been better off going bankrupt so a new, more enlightened and committed orchestra of “real music lovers” could magically appear. Cornies was careful to use the term musical “marketplace.”

This attitude perpetuates the fallacy that arts organization like Orchestra London are freeloaders that produce no economic benefit and are incapable of sound financial management. Is this a realistic portrayal of arts organizations? Further, it begs the question, ‘why do the arts need to provide a defense in purely economic terms?’

Harsh Fiscal Reality

David Haward, general manager of Orchestra London, says, “Orchestra London has by far the lowest budget of the top 10 orchestras in the country.” Larry Cornies, in his editorial questioning Orchestra London’s lack of funding, said “the orchestra does quite well by city hall in terms of the percentage of revenue derived from municipal grants,” when compared to other orchestras in Ontario.

According to **London Musicians’ Association** president **Paul Sharpe**, Cornies didn’t bother saying the Kitchener budget, for example, is almost double that of Orchestra London. (Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony has a budget of \$3.5 million, compared to a budget of \$2.1 million for Orchestra London).

In simple dollar terms, Sharpe quotes figures from the 1998/99 season, obtained from the Association of Canadian Symphony Musicians: “The Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony received city support totalling \$258,669 and London is at \$125,000.” In addition, Kitchener-Waterloo has a great, city-supported facility [Centre in the Square], which Sharpe says is a real marketing advantage.

“I wonder if the citizens of London really know they are getting the best artistic value for their money in North America,” Sharpe muses.

Spencer Phillips, principal bassoonist and vice-president of the London Musicians’ Association, says Orchestra London has kept its meager \$2.1-million-dollar budget constant since 1994. When adjusted to reflect the Consumer Price Index (inflation) the orchestra has actually cut its budget by more than 18 per cent in this period.

Phillips explained that Orchestra London has also had to compensate for more than \$200,000 dollars in funding cuts from the federal and provincial governments in the past five years — one third of their funding.

According to Orchestra London, “On a per-capita basis, Orchestra London receives about one-third the municipal support given to other orchestras in southwestern and western Ontario — Kitchener-Waterloo, Windsor and Thunder Bay.”

Joe Samuels, who sits on the Orchestra London advisory and finance committees, says London’s level of support is “so vastly inferior it boggles the mind.”

Facing the Tax Axe

In addition to funding woes, the orchestra was severely hampered by a recent Ontario Ministry of Finance ruling. Phillips says Orchestra London musicians, as a result of the bureaucratic ruling, are now considered employees and no longer self-employed.

The ruling, in addition to denying orchestra musicians much-needed deductions for instruments and home studios, says the orchestra must pay the employee health tax on every musician's behalf.

"They determined in a very cursory audit that we are all employees of Orchestra London," says Phillips. "So the orchestra must pay health tax on our behalf. This amounts to approximately \$20,000 annually." The orchestra was also forced to pay back taxes of \$128,000, he said.

The big concern is if the federal government follows suit and hits the orchestra with a similar ruling: "If the feds come in, it could cost as much as \$80,000 per year," Phillips states.

The Creative Brain Drain

According to the London Musicians' Association, Orchestra London musicians haven't had a raise since 1994. Phillips says, "You would be hard-pressed to find someone that makes more than \$26,000 per year. Nobody is getting rich on this thing. It is a very lean organization ... The musicians can hardly afford to house and feed our families."

For this reason, Phillips is auditioning for an orchestra in Alabama. "It doesn't seem like the place to go to improve your orchestral standing. But financially speaking it is." Phillips says the Alabama position will double his income.

Paul Sharpe asks the question: "Does it make any sense that a pop musician can make more than an orchestral musician by playing some good bar gigs?"

Phillips says the lack of funding for arts organizations is causing artists to leave their chosen professions entirely or to seek employment elsewhere. Sharpe says this could create a significant "creative drain."

Phillips says he is disturbed by calls to cut the budget any further. "You just can't do that and have a viable organization. It is hard to put together programs that people want to hear with what we have now."

Phillips throws out the names of famous composers and classic, popular works that Orchestra London simply cannot perform due to size and budget. "There is never a decision made strictly on an artistic basis," he explains. "We always ask, number one 'what can we do?' and number two 'can we afford it?'"

The orchestra employs 27 full-time and 17 part-time players. Phillips is irked by *The London Free Press* call for a reduction in the number of full-time players. "It would erode the quality even further," he says. "We would have to bring in musicians from outside the city and we would lose the sense of ensemble we have here."

Phillips, a five-year veteran of Orchestra London who has played in orchestras in Switzerland, Portugal and the United States, has been impressed by the very stable and dedicated group here.

"They have played together so long. There is a real sense of ensemble that you normally only find in larger orchestras." And he cautions that they are "very close to losing that." "We are at a bit of a crossroads," Phillips says. "We either turn around and increase the budget or rethink our position in the community."

The orchestra and its players have sacrificed and streamlined to keep the orchestra in London. In addition, they must face stigmas and misconceptions that devalue their contributions and belittle their commitment. It is time for this city to move forward and show some leadership by allowing London to evolve into a mature, progressive city anchored by a thriving arts community.

In all fairness, what is a couple hundred grand to keep one of the finest orchestras in Canada afloat? Why not pitch in some extra funding and make it *the finest* orchestra in Canada? In fact, why not develop an overall arts strategy and pledge some serious and much-deserved dollars to the arts?

The Surprise Happy Ending?

Surprise, surprise, that appears to be the plan. Coun. Joe Swan says city staff have met with the orchestra and there is a general agreement that they will become part of an upcoming, overall arts strategy for the city.

Swan hopes to see "a common identity for the arts by combining the big three [Orchestra London, The Grand Theatre and the London Regional Art and Historical Museums]" into what he calls a "1-800-ARTS one-stop marketing approach."

As scary a thought as this probably is for artists, Swan says streamlining administration is the specialty of local government. And he insists it is the administrative and financial side of the equation city staff are looking into.

"We know we're not going to direct artistic progress," Swan states. "That will have to come from corporate sponsorship, subscription sales administrative costs, these are tangible and controllable costs that are fairly steady."

According to Coun. Cheryl Miller, core funding, or what she calls "baseline funding," is the key issue. "With the baseline constantly shifting, it makes it hard to plan," she

explains. "You can't base your whole existence on shaky ground. You have to develop a business plan that works in the community. Federal and provincial funding is gravy on top of that."

"There has always been the feeling that the zero dollar budget and cheap taxes were the way to go," Miller says. "You can't 'blue sky' unless you are prepared to make changes."

Coun. Swan echoes Miller's sentiment: "Council has to come to terms with the meaning of quality of life. You just can't get it for free."

What YOU can do

Orchestra London is one of the finest orchestras in Canada and we need to support them. The business community has already started to make it known that they value the orchestra's contribution to London. **Corus Entertainment London**, which owns and operates four radio stations in the London area, have recently committed to donating \$10,000 a year for the next five years to the orchestra. **Merrill Lynch** followed that up with a three-year funding commitment of \$90,000. And that seems to be just the beginning. But make no mistake,

Orchestra London needs you!