

Thursday December 16 1999 01:38:10 pm

Ontario orchestras brace for visit from the tax man

BOB STEELE - CBC Radio Arts

LONDON, Ont. - Ontario's tax collectors have set their sights on orchestras in the province. Last month, Orchestra London and the Windsor Symphony were audited by Ontario's Ministry of Finance. Then, they were each hit with a tax bill in the thousands of dollars, an amount the government says should have been paid on behalf of the musicians. It's also an amount few orchestras can afford, since most are struggling just to stay afloat. The symphonies are planning to appeal.

Earlier this year, Ontario's Ministry of Finance ruled that the symphonies should have been paying Ontario's Employer Health Tax on behalf of their employees. But many symphonies in Ontario consider their musicians to be self employed. They say they're not responsible for paying their benefits.

Windsor was hit with \$65,000 in back contributions while Orchestra London is now facing a tax bill of more than \$128,000. Orchestra London was on target for a balanced budget this season until they were audited.

Astrid Augspols is with Orchestras Canada, an association representing many of Canada's orchestras. She says the association is looking for ways to turn over those judgements.

"We've put in a great deal of work behind the scenes and have solicited advice and information from various levels of government and from our lawyers," she says. "We wanted to find out more about the judicial path. We are putting together a list of points and issues that can be brought to bear on the appeal process."

Both London and Windsor's orchestras plan to appeal. They are also considering lobbying the government to change the status of orchestral musicians from employees of the symphony to independent contractors.