

LONDON FREE PRESS Wednesday, April 5, 2000

Orchestra open to any idea for Sinfonias

By JOE MATYAS, Free Press Arts & Entertainment Reporter

Picture this: an Orchestra London concert with the musicians performing smack dab in the middle of the audience instead of on a stage.

It isn't going to happen tonight when guest conductor Kirk Muspratt guides the orchestra through a program of music written in the airy French style.

But it could in the future if that's what the audience wants.

The orchestra's board is willing to listen to any idea that will increase the popularity of the Sinfonia series built around its core of 26 full-time, professional musicians.

The series has been a cornerstone of programming since 1974 and needs revamping to boost its popularity, said John St. Croix, chairperson of the orchestra's advisory board and fund-raising committee.

"If placing the musicians at the centre of the concert hall will create a better experience, then that's what we'll do."

He probably wouldn't get any argument from Muspratt, a new generation conductor who doesn't stand on ceremony or the autocratic aloofness of the old school.

"I'm from a coal-mining town and that background has shaped me," said the native of Crow's Nest Pass, Alberta. "They don't let you get pompous at the Italian, Polish or Ukrainian halls in my home town."

Muspratt studied music at Temple University in Philadelphia and then the Vienna Conservatory, where he won the conducting prize.

Called "a born opera conductor" by an Austrian paper, Muspratt has built a reputation in Canada and the United States as a guest conductor and was recently hired as music director of the Indiana Symphony Orchestra.

Muspratt will be appearing tonight with Orchestra London for the fifth time.

"I enjoy this orchestra," he said. "It's full of nice people who play well. They're well prepared, attentive and they respond quickly."

Pianist Pauline Martin, guest soloist for tonight's concert, is the sister of two of the orchestra's violinists -- Sigmar and Melvin Martin.

"My mother was a fine pianist who studied seriously and taught until she was 78," said Martin. "Her brother was a violinist and they were our entry into music. We all studied piano and violin and eventually chose one instrument over the other. We played a lot of chamber music with each other along the way."

The Martins were Manitobans and big brother Sig attended Brandon University. Pauline and Mel opted for Indiana University and post-graduate degrees at the University of Michigan.

Pauline now teaches at Wayne State and Oakland University in Michigan and performs with the St. Clair Trio, which has produced two CDs.

She'll perform Gabriel Faure's Ballad Opus 19 for Piano on tonight's French program.

"It's a very romantic, impressionistic work," she said. "It's about colour, transparency and subtlety" -- all characteristics of the classic French sound.

This concert will be the second last in the history of the Sinfonia series.

Faced with a \$330,000 debt that must be discharged by May 31, the orchestra is engaged in a number of fund-raising activities, including a contest to rename the series.

New names can be suggested at a cost of \$10 each. The winning name will bring its contributor four free tickets to every Orchestra London event for life. The decision will be announced June 9.

IF YOU GO

What: Pauline Martin performs Faure's Ballad Op. 19 for Piano with Orchestra London and guest conductor Kirk Muspratt. Also on the program: Mozart's Les Petite Reins Overture, Mercure's Divertissement, Gounod's Petite Symphonie and Ibert's Jacques Divertissement.

When: Centennial Hall, London

Where: 8 p.m., tonight

Tickets: \$13 to \$30