

LONDON FREE PRESS. Saturday March 4, 2000

## **Why I quit Orchestra London's board**

**As the city gets involved in the affairs of arts groups, there will be limits on public debate**

**By Peter Desbarats -- For the London Free Press**

My resignation from the board of Orchestra London, although a minor blip in its history, might be open to misinterpretation at this critical time in the orchestra's history. So I'll begin this explanation by saying what it doesn't mean.

It doesn't mean I am giving up on the orchestra. Far from it. I regard the orchestra's hard-earned win at city council last week as a turning point in its history. More important than the loan of \$110,000 is the subsequent involvement of the civic administration in the affairs of the orchestra. This partnership means the city will be deeply immersed in all decisions affecting the orchestra's future -- and that's probably a good thing.

With the Grand Theatre in almost the same position as the orchestra right now, the end result before the civic election next fall is going to be, at long last, something resembling a civic arts and culture policy.

Nor does my resignation mean I am just fed up with being lectured about good business management and efficiency by the experts on city council, drawing their comfortable stipends and planning the layouts of their new offices. That's a little hard to take when you're an unpaid volunteer board member sitting under a fluorescent tube in the orchestra's basement "board room," trying to figure out how to run an orchestra with no permanent conductor and a general manager who has to double as a musician.

No, my decision to resign from the board originates right here, in this weekly column. My right to express opinions about local politics and politicians while serving on the board of the orchestra has become an issue at city hall. And that means that I've become a liability for the orchestra. This isn't a judgment members of the board have expressed to me, but it's evident in attitudes at city hall.

To some extent, local politicians have a point. As a general rule, journalists who are covering politics can't be involved in politics. For that reason, during my 30 years as a working journalist, I never joined a political party and never held office, even in a parent-teacher association.

But when I left full-time work in news media to come to London as an academic in 1981, for the first time I could play a role in community affairs. And I enjoyed exploring this new freedom.

For a few years I edited a small neighbourhood newsletter. I held office in my church. Then I became involved in a summer Mozart festival at the Grand Theatre. I joined the board of the Lawson Museum. About six or seven years ago, I joined the board of Orchestra London because, like other board members, I love music, particularly live orchestral music.

At about the same time, I started writing this column on a more regular basis, always on the understanding with the editors that, whenever I wrote about organizations in which I was involved, I would clearly state the association. The other side of the coin is I never used, in my journalism, information that came to me privately as a board member.

When I picked up the column again in 1997 after two years spent largely in Ottawa with the Somalia inquiry, the same rules applied and there didn't seem to be a problem. In fact, having retired from Western, with a little more time on my hands, I re-discovered the joys of freelance journalism.

I've often joked, when talking about these Saturday columns in recent years, that I seemed to be writing with more freedom than ever before. Or maybe I was just getting crankier as I aged. If I thought a political decision or a politician was bone-headed, I said so. If he or she didn't like it, so what?

The problem now is the question has been answered, at least in the case of Orchestra London. When the recent loan was being debated, I understood my presence at city hall as a board member, would not be appreciated by some of our councillors and might hurt the orchestra. And now that the civic administration is working closely with the board of the orchestra -- a good development in principle -- board members will be very restricted in what they can say publicly.

My guess is the same rules will apply at the Grand. The lid is on, at least until after the civic election next fall.

Under these circumstances, almost anything critical I might write about local politics or politicians could rebound negatively on the orchestra. That creates an impossible situation for me and the orchestra.

So it came down to a choice between the column and the orchestra. I've decided to continue writing, while remaining part of Orchestra London's appreciative audience, at least for the time being.

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