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Symphony moving music into schools

By Joe Matyas -- Free Press Arts & Entertainment Reporter

Orchestra London is working on an ambitious plan to bring classical music to up to 50,000 elementary and secondary school students in the region within three years.

The orchestra is working with curriculum administrators of the Thames Valley and London Catholic district school boards on the details of an outreach plan.

The plan calls for the orchestra to perform for students at schools in the daytime, for the community at night and to give special performances with the Lester B. Pearson and St. Mary's schools for the arts, Original Kids, Amabile choirs and massed choirs of students.

Under consideration is fully staged productions of the Classical Kids series developed by Toronto music teacher Susan Hammond, such as Mr. Bach Comes to Call and Beethoven Lives Upstairs.

Orchestral interactions would range from concerts by the symphony to performances by chamber groups of orchestral musicians to workshops for school bands, ensembles and choirs.

"We want to get very up close and personal and let schools take the orchestra for a test drive," said Sig Martin, violist and coordinator of the orchestra's outreach program.

"We'll be working very closely with teachers to contribute to their educational goals and in some cases they'll be conducting the musicians."

Martin said the new plan goes far beyond the orchestra's past involvement with schools, which was limited to "two or three prepared concerts a year."

"This outreach will certainly be outside of our normal comfort zone, but the idea is for it to become part of the routine work of the orchestra."

The orchestra's musicians will be adding 50 educational services a year to their schedule of 200 performances and rehearsals.

High schools with good auditoriums will become the hub for orchestral events, including neighbouring elementary schools.

Martin said the outreach is part of the orchestra's mission to become closer to the community.

"Audiences for symphonic concerts have been declining and one reason for that is a lack of musical education. We want to help increase students' knowledge and appreciation of classical music, composers, orchestral instruments, musicians and conductors."

Michael Salvatori, coordinator of language and arts programs for the London District Catholic School Board, said the board believes a partnership with the orchestra will enrich its musical education programs.

"We're moving ahead with the program," he said. "But the curriculum details and logistics haven't been worked out yet."