

CBC Infoculture Magazine

The Sad Saga of one Symphony

DAN BJARNASON

The National Magazine April 13 1999

THUNDER BAY, Ont. - This is a story about a symphony, one that has enriched a community for years. It's also the story about the musicians in that orchestra: how they work and what they play. Well they see themselves as one thing -- Revenue Canada has a very different idea. It's a situation that could have a profound effect on orchestras across the country. Here's is the Magazine's Dan Bjarnason.

Thunder Bay: at the top of Lake Superior; a city where pulp and paper drive the economy. Ships bulge with their cargos of prairie grain as they prepare to sail south. When winter swoops down from Hudson Bay, there's nothing like a bit of Beethoven to warm the soul.

For almost 40 years, the Thunder Bay Symphony has been bringing classical music to audiences here. Meet the Gibsons: Jeff, principal French horn player; Colleen Gibson, the orchestra's principal oboe player. They met here, married, and built careers for themselves in this city with this orchestra

Now the life they have made is in peril:

Colleen Gibson: "There's nothing keeping us if there isn't an orchestra, because that's our main role here in town.

Jeff Gibson: "Well if the orchestra didn't survive I would be very affected. You know, we would have a bunch of choices -- do we change careers? Do we change cities?"

Orchestra's have a tough enough chore at the best of times. The appeal of classic music is limited, but it's a nightmare of a task when drastic funding cutbacks are combined with an almost unbeatable hurdle -- a battle with the tax collector.

This whole crisis started when a visiting musician from Quebec returned home and applied there for employment insurance. That simple innocuous step unleashed a chain of events that has brought the Thunder Bay Symphony Orchestra to the brink of disaster.

When that cellist returned to the Quebec City Symphony, he applied for employment benefits. When he indicated he'd also worked for the Thunder Bay Orchestra, Revenue Canada took a closer look. They granted the musician his employment insurance, but at the same time changed the status of all the other musicians in Thunder Bay to employees, and all immediately lost their freelance status.

Colleen: "We spent 15 years working happily as self-employed musicians, getting used to a complicated tax form that we had to fill out, and a certain way of looking at ourselves as a small business.

Harold Weavers wonders: why is Revenue Canada gunning for the musicians? "Were they out to get us? I don't think so, beyond what I somewhat philosophically feel is that people who live these 9 to 5 jobs are unconsciously resentful of musicians and their so-called freedom. We pay very much for our freedom; we pay very highly for our freedom, financially."

This is Harold Weavers at work, at the job he loves -- principal bassoonist; a quarter century vet with the orchestra. And this is his other career: a carpenter and window installer. If music is what Harold does for love, he says this is what he does because he must.

"I remember a few years ago, there was an article in the paper about the terrible condition of the Naval cadets in Vancouver, that they were living on poverty income, making less than \$25,000 a year. Well that's a joke for musicians. I think I'm -- because of seniority, other than the concert master, I'm the highest paid musician here and that's \$18,000.

It's not just the musicians who've been caught in a squeeze when their tax status changed. Their employer, the symphony, now owes Revenue Canada \$220,000 in back taxes-- to cover Canada Pension Plan, employment premiums and vacation pay; a bill that's almost a quarter its annual budget, with much of that budget coming from government grants.

Michael Comuzzi/President, Thunder Bay Symphony: "When you think about it, you've got one arm giving money and one arm taking money.

Meet the man who handles the money. When car dealer Michael Comuzzi volunteered to become president of the symphony, it seemed like a straight forward gesture of public service. Surely, he thought, it couldn't be more complex than running his business. It's ironic, says a baffled Comuzzi, that the government both smothers and funds the arts:

"There's a fair amount of contradiction and it really needs to be fixed, and this goes beyond whether you are an art lover or not. It's just basic good business sense to look at the big picture." What does this financial crisis mean to you, personally?

"Now that keeps me up at night. Certainly if the organization fails, the directors are liable to Revenue Canada."

The symphony, now with a fiscal gun at its head, is desperately shopping around for support. It's taken to putting on little supermarket symphonettes, trying to raise its profile.

Bjarnason: "What do you make of this music?"

Unidentified person in the mall: "Pretty good!"

Bjarnason: "Who do you think they are?"

Unidentified person in the mall: "Salvation Army?"

Bjarnason: "They're in a lot of financial trouble, and they're trying to get some backing. You know they need people like you to go to their concerts."

Unidentified person in the mall: "Well if they could play 'Van Halen,' maybe."

Unidentified person in the mall: "The city needs culture and class and if we lose them, we're losing a lot of culture and class."

Colleen: "Not everyone in the city comes to orchestra concerts, but then not everyone in the city goes to hockey games. Not everyone is a member of the film society. It's kind of a mosaic of institutions that make up Thunder Bay."

What we have here is a small city in a remote and thinly populated area, far from the centres of political power and cultural clout. If Thunder Bay loses its symphony orchestra, it is a blow not just for this city, but a casualty for the cultural life in all of northern Ontario. If the artistic life of a city

begins to die at the top, what happens down at the roots? A class of grade eight kids are venturing into a new world at Norwesterview school.

A decade ago, to cope with budget pressures, music programs in grade schools were slashed. The instruments were simply locked away and hidden. Then teacher Pat Towell secretly them moved them from place to place over the years. And on this day, a decade later, has brought them out of hiding. Who knows what could blossom here? One local kid went to New York and made it big on "[David Letterman](#)."

Pat Towell/Highschool music teacher: "I tell them that one day, a boy named Paul Schaeffer was from Thunder Bay and was goofing around on an instrument. And today, well he's doing all right!"

Here -- in such classrooms, seeds germinate; enthusiasm is kindled.

Towell: "We have symphony musicians come in and demonstrate; we have a symphony musician that comes in every week to teach violin to grade eight students in this school as well. And they are the heart of Thunder Bay."

At another grade school, students make-do with make-shift instruments. These teachers are not school teachers, but symphony musicians stepping in --musicians like Colleen Gibson who've put together a program and are taking it around to the schools.

"The things I see that music helps with kids are skills that they need in the classroom to function and learn other subjects, such as focusing, having discipline; understanding how a group can be greater than the sum of the individuals. And that relates exactly to an orchestra, where each one of us are playing our instruments as individuals, but yet the product we end up far surpasses what we could do as individuals."

At Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, 18 of the 20 members of the music faculty also play with the orchestra. If the symphony sinks, its talent pool will surely float away and the ripple effects begins.

No orchestra. No musicians, and soon no music school.

Performance night: it's a big night for the symphony. Beethoven's on the program, and there's a larger than average audience. The symphony's hoping for some hefty donations to help them out: \$220,000 in back taxes is a big sum, and it seems like a Mt. Everest of a task.

Michael Comuzzi/President, Thunder Bay Symphony: "You don't want to be, you know knocking on the government's door every year or every second year saying help me, we need money. I want to, with the board, fix this organization's problems. And you know Minister Copps was able to get Montreal Symphony a raise. I just -- I just want to keep our musicians' jobs."

When the Montreal Symphony went out on strike a few months ago, Sheila Copps stepped in to help. Copps is the federal Cabinet minister in charge of Canadian Heritage, the arm of government that funds and supposedly protects the arts. So we wanted to know if the Thunder Bay Orchestra could count on her voice in Cabinet to present its case: either change the tax law, or come up with special funding. Despite our repeated requests, Copps would not agree to a brief interview.

Betty Webster/Orchestras Canada: "There are, or there could be, I guess, implications for other orchestras, for other disciplines.

Betty Webster of Orchestras Canada hopes other orchestras won't be next on Revenue Canada's hit list. As the lobby voice for symphonies across the country, she says the problem is that Ottawa's policy towards the arts is inconsistent:

"There is no cultural policy, and therefore you have one branch of the government giving money out and you have another branch taking it away. So no one is further ahead. One almost wonders if they purposely don't want a cultural policy. If they really don't want to support the arts, and yet I don't really believe that. I really believe that somehow this is just the way things are structured. And it has to change."

Canada has 18 orchestras like the Thunder Bay Symphony. Visiting conductor Victor Sawa has performed with many of them.

Victor Sawa / Visiting Conductor: "I feel like the Montreal Expos right here: young, eager, good. There is a good --this is an excellent orchestra."

Almost everywhere in Canada orchestras are struggling to survive, but orchestras elsewhere -- orchestras are a source of national pride. In Europe, their symphonies are a priority, says Sawa:

"After, for example, Vienna was bombed; they rebuilt their opera. That was the first thing they did. And Berlin, after the war, they rebuilt their hall. They went hungry, but they needed the music."

Harold Weavers: "They are not businesses. They are the souls of the nation."

To Harold Weavers and the others here on stage, their orchestra is a part of the fabric of their lives and of their community. The hope here is when the tax collector comes calling at the concert hall, it won't mean bye to Beethoven.