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Guest conductor wins major prize

By JOE MATYAS, Free Press Arts & Entertainment Reporter

Stephane Laforest, guest conductor for Orchestra London's final Jeans 'n' Classics performance of the season tonight, has won a major conducting prize.

Laforest was presented with the \$5,000 Heinz Unger Award at the national conference of Orchestras Canada in Montreal this week.

The award has been given once every two years since 1968 to a young Canadian conductor or one in mid-career.

Past recipients include Brian Jackson, Orchestra London's principal pops conductor, and Stan Kopac, the London Youth Symphony's music director.

Laforest has guest-conducted Masterworks, Symphonia, Pops and Jeans 'n' Classics concerts for Orchestra London during the last two years.

He'll be at the helm tonight for Friday Night Fever, a disco ball featuring music made popular by the likes of Isaac Hayes, Barry White, Chuck Mangione, the Bee Gees, ABBA and Earth, Wind and Fire.

"Stephane has written a great arrangement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony for the concert," said Peter Brennan, arranger for most of the music for the Jeans 'n' Classics series.

Brennan said the challenge for tonight's concert was to take music that was heavily produced in studios with "synthetic sounds" and turn it into symphonic instrumentation.

"Our percussionists are going to be very busy," he said.

David Haward, general manager and bassoonist, said the orchestra won't be employing as many guest conductors now that it has signed the energetic Timothy Vernon to a three-year contract as music director.

Vernon's appointment was announced Tuesday.

"There will still be guest conductors, but fewer because Tim will be carrying a big load," said Haward. "We're certainly hoping to have Stephane come back for guest spots. We've been impressed with him and he's a real gentleman."

Vernon's appointment was seen as an expression of confidence in the financially troubled orchestra's future.

The orchestra has been working hard all spring to avoid bankruptcy. It has to raise \$330,000 by May 31 to satisfy creditors and is about \$37,000 short of the goal.

Raffle tickets for a \$5,000 Mercedes Benz mountain bike will be sold at tonight's concert to raise some money for the cause.