

LONDON FREE PRESS Thursday, June 1, 2000

## Vernon brings orchestra a different beat

By **JOE MATYAS**, Free Press Arts & Entertainment Reporter

If first impressions mean anything, then Orchestra London's new music director is a different kind of cat than its last hire.

Timothy Vernon is a fast-talking, down-to-earth bundle of energy. He's short, looks a bit like a bearded Robin Williams and has a similar off-the-cuff rapid-fire delivery.

It's a first impression not a bit like that given by Mark Laycock, the handsome young conductor from Princeton who was hired with great fanfare as music director in 1995.

From the outset, Laycock seemed careful, controlled and formal. The stuffiness never receded and Laycock was history three years later.

Laycock won his job after a season in which 15 guest conductors openly auditioned for the position.

This time, few people even knew the orchestra was looking for a new music director. The news this spring was all about the orchestra's battle to avoid bankruptcy -- a battle won last week with payment of the final instalment on a \$330,000 debt.

The announcement two weeks ago of Vernon's appointment as the sixth music director in the 50-year-history of the orchestra came as a surprise.

Vernon, artistic director of Pacific Opera in Victoria since 1980 and one of Canada's busiest guest conductors, first worked with Orchestra London in 1995, doing *La Traviata*.

"I knew minutes into my first rehearsal that this was the finest regional orchestra in the country," said Vernon. "A good conductor can take the measure of an orchestra that quickly and a good orchestra can see through a conductor just as fast. I think the musicians saw that I was for real and that I respected them."

Vernon was called back six times for guest spots after conducting the opera in concert, establishing a rapport with the orchestra and audience the board found hard to resist.

"We think Tim will be a drawing card as our maestro," board chairperson John St. Croix said two weeks ago.

Vernon said he accepted the London job knowing there's a risk.

"The orchestra has just dug itself out of a hole and is regrouping," he said. "The challenge is to produce the best music we can under austere conditions while working hard to grow our audience . . . I think it can be done."

When Pacific Opera began in 1980, Vernon was its first artistic director.

"I was young, enthusiastic and ambitious. I worked for free for four years until the opera got on its feet and the job became a paid position."

Under his baton, Pacific Opera has built a reputation as a performing arts organization that has achieved high standards while employing Canadian singers and musicians.

"It's my baby," he said. "I'm proud of what we've achieved in Victoria and I'm not giving it up."

Like Uri Mayer, Orchestra London's fourth music director, who also conducted the Edmonton Symphony, Vernon will commute between Victoria and London.

"The lifestyle won't be that much different from the way it is now," he said. "Commuting and guest conducting go hand in hand."

Vernon lives on Vancouver Island with his wife and four children in an agricultural valley enclosed by mountains and in sight of the sea.

"I love mowing my lawn because I look out over 80 acres of daffodils to the water," he said. "It's a gorgeous sight."

Vernon declared he wanted to be a conductor at the age of five after attending a concert with his parents.

At 17, he headed to Europe, where he studied at the Vienna State Academy (now Hochschule), the Accademia Chigiana in Sienna and Mozarteum in Salzburg.

The essence of conducting, he said, is research, interpretation and artistic leadership.

"You have to strive to understand the composers and their music and work with the musicians on interpretations everyone can commit to."