

The Windsor Star

GUEST COLUMN

Sharing music keeps WSO alive

By Susan Haig

What is the future of the Windsor Symphony Orchestra?

The answer is hiding in some other questions: What is the orchestra's perceived value in the community? How effectively does the orchestra serve its community? How many citizens want to experience live symphonic music?

Not long ago, it was enough for symphony orchestras to simply play music and feature a 'big-name' guest artist for added variety, quality and promotional value.

But in 1992, after the Toronto Symphony's cliff-hanging escape from bankruptcy, not to mention the WSO's near collapse three years ago, it is clear that orchestras must change drastically.

No longer can orchestras take their existence for granted or assume safe passage through a recession. Now they must work diligently to justify themselves, not only by presenting better concerts, but also by educating, challenging, engaging and inspiring their listeners.

Consider the mandate of developing a larger audience.

Granted, there are a certain number of devoted classical music fans. But what about all of the people who think they don't like classical music, or think they don't understand it? Or that they can't afford it? Or won't appreciate it? Or won't know when to clap? Or just prefer staying home?

How is a symphony orchestra, such as Windsor's, to survive this perceptual jungle, win over the skeptics, galvanize the couch potatoes and encourage people to come out and enjoy the music?

THE ONLY practical approach is to disprove all those negative assumptions, not once in a while, but every time a concert is performed.

Here is the strategy:

- To enable the audience to feel welcome
- To ensure the concert will be enjoyable for everyone, even those who have never experienced a symphony performance before and have never wanted to.
- To equip the audience with information for listening.
- To ensure the audience gets to know their musicians.
- To provide a live performance experience that is unique and full of life; that far surpasses, through its spontaneity and communality and energy, the more predictable experience of staying home and listening to a recording.

IS THIS strategy a burden? Not at all. In fact, it makes performing a lot more fun. For when listeners are involved and enthused, so are the performers, and *visa versa*. A live performance thrives upon the audience's presence, participation and appreciation.

The new approach is, in a sense, a simple diversification strategy. It involves redefining 'artistic excellence' in terms of the quality of the listener's experience, not just the performance 'product.' It means ensuring that the audience's enjoyment is rich and varied and not dependent on any one component. It means taking responsibility for the audience's understanding, appreciation and involvement in the music.

Might our less formal approach to performing signal, in any way, a creeping loss of 'professionalism'? A curious question! Like suggesting that if a good restaurant provides more courteous and personalized service, it may somehow compromise the quality of the food.

No. Given creative, intelligent artistic policies, there is no inherent conflict between professionalism and audience-orientation.

After all, customer service or satisfaction has long been a precondition for excellence in business. So it has become a precondition for excellence in the performing arts, where the customers are the audience.

But, does this relationship between excellence and service raise the specter of commercial mediocrity or creative inhibition? Not if orchestras are true to their other related mandate, namely, education. For in order to educate, one must question, change, develop and create, not pander to.

THE CHALLENGE for orchestras and all arts organizations in a relentlessly commercial society lies in discovering all the vibrant connections between artistic excellence, education, public service and customer (audience) satisfaction.

It is a pleasure to recall that the final Orchestral Showcase on May 8 was sold out, even without a 'big-name' guest artist. And the award presentations included one by the Ontario Arts Council, which gave the orchestra national recognition. Obviously, the perceived value of the event lies in the orchestra itself and the music performed. This, for me, is the single most encouraging indication that a healthy future for the Windsor Symphony is a possibility.

For, if enough citizens of Windsor, of all ages, are willing to try something new and come and experience a live performance, the future of the Windsor Symphony will be bright indeed.

Here's to our growing audience!

Incidentally, the rules of Symphony Etiquette are simple:

- Come and enjoy the music.
- Clap and cheer when it's over.
- Come back and bring everyone you know.

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