



Music lovers pay what they can afford

By PAUL McEWEN

It is amazing how one experience can change your outlook. This happened to me several years after I began playing trumpet with the West Coast Symphony. The experience showed me how music can positively impact some of the more isolated members of our communities.

One day after a concert on Bowen Island near Vancouver, an audience member approached our principal flute player and said, “We really appreciate that your orchestra came to play here today. My son is autistic. He gets very agitated and it’s often tough for him to be focused, but when you played, for that half an hour he was totally engrossed in your work.”

That brief exchange has stayed with me over the years. As a musician, you often think that you’re just up there playing the notes and making your own personal connection to the music. But when you learn that your playing is bringing joy into another person’s day, the satisfaction runs much deeper.

Making connections to the community is one of the mandates of the symphony and one of the reasons I joined the group in 1997, soon after moving to Vancouver to continue my career. One afternoon I got a call from a member of the trumpet section who asked me if I’d be interested in performing the *Romeo and Juliet* suite by Sergei Prokofiev for an upcoming concert. I jumped at the opportunity. I had played trumpet since my childhood — first



Members of the West Coast Symphony trumpets, from left, Reinald Foci, Lelo Dilaver, Paul McEwen and Gazmor Halilaj, performed in Tirana, Albania last May.

in school band and later in the Hart House Orchestra while doing earning my bachelor of science at the University of Toronto — but I had yet to get fully immersed in the Vancouver community orchestra scene.

After a short while, I became a full-time member of the orchestra. I was instantly impressed by the symphony. It was committed to providing high quality, accessible music to the public.

Originally founded in the early 1970s in Vancouver, the mandate of the symphony is to provide a quality musical performance to anyone, for whatever they are able to pay. There is no ticket price. Admission to concerts is by donation — whether you have \$2 or

\$100 to pay — and nobody is turned away. The pay-what-you-can admission structure is a way for people who might not ordinarily get to listen to classical music to have the opportunity to hear it live and in full force. In some of the venues where we perform, you can find yourself sitting just a few feet away from the first violins.

The symphony is special to me because it is a high calibre non-professional orchestra, although it does include some professional musicians who donate their services. Our concerts attract people from all walks of life and of all ages, from children to young adults with enough piercings to set off metal detectors at 50 paces, to my great aunt, who will soon celebrate her

99th birthday.

When I joined, I found myself among other professionals with day jobs — doctors, lawyers and fellow accountants who were also accomplished musicians.

For me, tapping into my passion for orchestral music while contributing to the community seemed a good fit.

As one of three trumpet players in the symphony, I am in an average of 15 concerts throughout the lower mainland of British Columbia every year.

Under the guidance of our Albanian-Canadian principal conductor, Bujar Llapaj, we have played many pieces by Albanian composers, including several at a benefit concert in Vancouver commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth of Mother Teresa.

In May 2011, in my informal role as symphony ambassador, I played a televised concert in Tirana, Albania with the Albanian National Radio Television Orchestra as part of their regular concert series. I performed in the *Roman Carnival Overture* by Hector Berlioz, which was enthusiastically received by a discerning Tirana audience.

I am sometimes asked how I balance my musical life with my life as a chartered accountant and chartered business valuator. To answer this, I have to go back a little. During my undergraduate studies, I was committed to being a good student; it was just study, study, study. In my second year, I joined numerous student groups

(including the Hart House Orchestra) and, interestingly, my grades went up about six to 10 points.

I found that time away from my desk once a week helped me to connect to other people and use both the left and right sides of my brain. It was demanding and energizing. The same can be said for how I view my work with the symphony today. I give a lot to it but it gives me back even more, including the satisfaction of providing access to high quality orchestral performances to those who might not otherwise be able to afford it.

As a musician in the symphony, I’m able to apply some of the skills I use every day as a CBV. When you play in an orchestra, you are part of an interdependent team. Team collaboration is equally important when completing a file at work. Precision and thoroughness are also very important.

Orchestral music is a very precise exercise and if you don’t play the right notes and rhythm, everyone will know. Likewise, as a CBV, precision and thoroughness are key, especially when testifying as an expert witness in court as to the value of a business or the amount of business loss, which I have done on numerous occasions.

When everything comes together in a musical performance, it can be an incredible rush. In both orchestral playing and as a CBV, communication, discipline, team-

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Boosting confidence helps open new doors

By RICHARD PITICCO

Imagine being a child who has a medical condition or is undergoing treatment that results in the loss of their hair. Adults have enough trouble adjusting to life with hair loss or no hair at all, so it’s hard to put ourselves in the shoes of a young person going through such a confidence-sapping ordeal.

Since university, I’ve been involved with many not-for-profits that help children, most recently on the board for A Child’s Voice Foundation — a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to programs supporting the wellbeing of financially disadvantaged children facing illness or disability.

Since the doors opened in 1995, the foundation has worked to improve the lives of children across the country through its signature programs, Angel Hair for Kids and Kids Life-Line. They provide children with products and services not otherwise available through health care plans, government or other

organizations.

Angel Hair for Kids is the only program of its kind in Canada. It provides wigs and hair loss solutions to financially disadvantaged children who have lost their hair due to a medical condition or treatment. Using donated hair the foundation can create wigs and hair additions and provide them at no cost to the child’s family. It takes 10 to 12 donated ponytails to make one and \$800 to \$1,000 is budgeted by the foundation to cover manufacturing and related costs.

Kids Life-Line extends a helping hand when all other resources have been exhausted. This unique program strives to provide a necessary product or service that will enhance a child’s quality of life and which is not otherwise provided. Its goal is to meet an immediate essential and sometimes critical need for a child. We understand that caring for a sick or disabled child can be financially challenging and sometimes life can take unexpected financial turns.

This program is here to extend that much needed life-line.

I believe most people have a desire to give back to their communities and many do so in various ways. We tend to support causes that have a personal connection and my experience is no different. When I was growing up our family lacked the resources to provide for much beyond the basic necessities. As a result, I spent the vast majority of my upbringing in government-subsidized housing.

During that period, a university education was never discussed, and quite frankly, I hadn’t even considered it an option until an intervention, of sorts. Like most of our neighbours, our family was focused on meeting immediate needs, so securing a part-time job took priority. It wasn’t until high school that a couple of educators took an interest in my potential. Those encounters led to a whole new journey, which ultimately resulted in a series of opportunities.

Fortunately, I didn’t suffer from a medical condition like many of the children A Child’s Voice Foundation supports, but there are parallels with the underlying themes. Research shows that children who live in poverty encounter more hurdles to healthy development and are at an elevated risk for a wide range of negative outcomes. The guidance and support from a third party not only assists in addressing the immediate need, but just as importantly, helps kids focus on what they should care about, such as staying in school and realizing their potential.

There are many reasons why families end up suffering from financial hardship, but in none of these cases should children infer they are less deserving of an education, nor should roadblocks prevent that. I’ve seen it all too often — circumstances beyond kids’ control can result in decisions being made that can be difficult to reverse later on in life. Providing the support and infrastructure during these forma-

tive years pays huge dividends, not only to the individual, but also to society.

The benefits accrued from contributing to a charity, either financially or through volunteering, are rarely questioned. With the recent economic downturn, people understand that it is the financially disadvantaged who are most impacted.

A Child’s Voice Foundation recently suffered a decrease in contributions, resulting in fewer children being supported despite increased demand. The theme is similar with many other not-for-profits. We’re all being asked to support what seems to be a growing number of causes.

I also fully appreciate our desire for a better work-life balance can imply limited availability to volunteer.

Today, accountants are some of the most sought-after volunteers, especially as charities work to digest

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work, mutual support, and self-reliance are of paramount importance.

Yet this balance doesn't come without its challenges. Often, making the time to 'get it all done' can require one to juggle various responsibilities. Recently, I had to take an important conference call from 5 to 7 p.m., and my rehearsal was at 7:30. I just managed to get there in time. Afterward, I went back and worked until midnight. Practising at home is a different matter. I usually do it for about an hour a day, three or four days per week.

Over the years I have learned that some things are pressing and need to be done right away or not missed (like conference calls and rehearsals) and other things are more flexible. It's just a question of finding that balance through experience.

For people who are looking to find ways to give back to their communities, I would suggest trying out a small commitment to begin with, something manageable yet recurring. Honouring one's word is important as most commu-

nity organizations rely on a small, close-knit set of volunteers.

More than anything, I recommend that people choose a volunteer position that they're passionate about. I recently joined the board of Vancouver Opera because I'm passionate about orchestral music. Don't do something because it will look good on your resume.

If you are truly passionate about what you are doing — whether it be participating in an arts initiative, building houses for the needy or working with at-risk — the time and energy spent will pay dividends in emotional satisfaction. I know from experience. Whenever I step on stage, I see an auditorium filled with enthusiastic concertgoers who are waiting to be affected by our performance. Almost every time, we are able to meet or exceed those expectations.

Paul McEwen is a partner and the British Columbia leader of Ernst & Young's valuation and business modelling team in Vancouver. For more information about the West Coast Symphony, visit their website at www.westcoast-symphony.ca.

Crucial role can be played by accountants in groups

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changing accounting standards, increased accountability and improved visibility. In addition, the more lucrative contributions from the corporate community typically require audited financial statements. This is completely understandable, but for smaller charities it emphasizes the need for volunteers who can assist with an appropriate infrastructure to minimize the cost of the external audit.

For A Child's Voice Foundation, the return on financial support is an easy business case: \$800 to \$1,000 goes towards building up self-esteem and confidence by providing a child who lost their hair a wig; and as little as \$25 to \$100 can buy much needed medication that isn't otherwise available.

I struggle with a desire to do more. We increased our investment to support a new territory, revamped our public relations campaign, have become more successful in securing donations from the corporate community and are launching a series of new key management reports.

But A Child's Voice Foundation is at a critical crossroads. Increasing



From left, chartered accountant Richard Piticco, Alex Weaver, Sarah Weaver and A Child's Voice Foundation executive director Roslyn Yearwood at a recent haircutting event.

corporate donations will become more important because of the higher number of children seeking assistance. The charity is always looking for people willing to share their expertise and insights, whether at the board level, on a committee or through informal counsel.

A financial professional can make a meaningful contribution that impacts hundreds of children. However, we got to our current

positions, we are fortunate to have accrued the benefits and have an obligation to give back to those not so fortunate.

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