

A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF CLASSICAL MUSIC IN HAMILTON

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By

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A Critical Portfolio

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ABSTRACT

Many people consider Hamilton a slightly distant suburb of Toronto, as well a city reliant on a struggling steel industry. Those interested in the arts may question what kind of classical music scene could exist in such a locale.

This critical portfolio strives to answer this question, demonstrating that Hamilton possesses a rich classical music scene. The focus on seven local organizations supports this conclusion. These are Opera Ontario, the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra, chamberWORKS!, Symphony Hamilton, the John Laing Singers, the Bach Elgar Choir, and the Canadian Orpheus Male Choir.

Through detailed background articles on each of these organizations, including examinations of their past, present and future, the issues affecting each are brought to the forefront, as are the attempts to find solutions. Reviews of concerts by each of the musical institutions reveal how well each is succeeding in producing high-quality events.

An introductory essay sets the economic and demographic scene of Hamilton, with emphasis on how its characteristics affect the organizations. Parallels are drawn among issues affecting the seven groups, such as declining government grants and aging audiences.

A portfolio focusing specifically on the classical music scene in Hamilton has never been produced by a Master of Arts student in the Music Criticism program. This work will hopefully serve as a reference for those new to the area as well as those deeply involved in the city's classical musical scene.

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Introduction

Hamilton, Ontario is famous for being one of Canada's major industrial cities. Its nickname, "Steeltown," is commonly used in local and national newspapers. However, there is much more to this town than steel.

The 2001 Census of Canada reported that the population of Hamilton is 490,268, but the current population is closer to 503,000 according to the City of Hamilton. This figure makes Hamilton fourth largest city in Ontario, preceded by Toronto, Ottawa and Mississauga. What else is there in Hamilton? McMaster University, which has a prestigious medical school, has a tremendous impact on the city. Besides boasting a student population of over 20,000, the university provides 3,300 jobs.

Hamilton Health Sciences Corporation (including McMaster University Hospital) is the city's top employer with 9,000 employees. The City of Hamilton provides 7,500 jobs, while the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board employs 5,900 people. However, Stelco and Dofasco also provide thousands of jobs; 7,200 and 5,000 respectively at the time of writing.

This combination of white collar and blue collar industries has created a diverse economy. While there are extremely wealthy people, there are also many living below the poverty line. The population is also an aging one. Roughly 60 per cent of the city's population is over the age of 40.

When I moved to Hamilton from rural Saskatchewan in fall 2003 to become a student in the Master of Arts program in Music Criticism at McMaster University, I knew very little about the city. The large population was displayed proudly on its blue highway

sign, and the billowing clouds of smoke coming from the steel mills clearly indicated that it was an industrial city.

As a professional journalist holding a Bachelor of Journalism degree with a double major in Music, I was attracted to the program for its critical portfolio option. This allows students to submit a dossier of reviews in lieu of a thesis. Because of Hamilton's close proximity to Toronto, considered one of the richest artistic cities in the country, I assumed that my interest in reviewing would lead me to spend most of my time there. During my second semester, I reviewed several concerts in Toronto for reading course Music 704. However, as I started attending concerts in Hamilton, the richness of the city's classical music scene surprised me. By the end of March, my supervisor Professor Paul Rapoport and I decided to focus on the Hamilton scene. This is something that had not been done by previous Master of Arts in Music Criticism graduates who completed a critical portfolio. I was enthusiastic about producing a portfolio that would demonstrate the richness of Hamilton's music community.

Because my interest was in classical music, the following performing groups were selected: Opera Ontario, the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra, chamberWORKS!, Symphony Hamilton, the John Laing Singers, the Bach Elgar Choir and the Canadian Orpheus Male Choir.

As the focus of the portfolio is on performing groups rather than hosting organizations or series featuring different performers, some organizations were not included. Such examples are the McMaster University Celebrity Series and the Lunchtime Series, the Hamilton Conservatory for the Arts Chamber Music Series, as well

as concerts hosted by various churches in the area. However, these excluded organizations make valuable contributions to the city's music scene.

The reviews of the selected Hamilton organizations are written as if for publication in a major daily Canadian newspaper. Therefore, they are approximately 800 words in length and are written in daily newspaper style with short paragraphs. Canadian Press style dictates the language usage. My personal belief that a good review should include positive and negative comments is evident. As I also believe that a review should educate readers, I include background information on composers and pieces when possible.

An informative summary about each of the seven selected organizations is included to put the reviews in an artistic and organizational context. Due to my journalism background and the nature of the reviews, I wrote these in a daily newspaper arts-feature style. My interview list includes approximately four interviewees from each organization, encompassing general directors, artistic directors, board members and musicians.

Before performing the interviews, I did intensive research on each organization, compiled a substantial amount of information from different sources and found dozens of past articles from the newspaper archival resource *LexisNexis*. I used academic journals and referred to each organization's Web site. Over the summer of 2004, I interviewed each of the 20 people on my list. Each interview took one to two hours. The interviews were recorded with permission and then transcribed into text.

The background articles reveal several trends of Hamilton's classical music scene. The main attribute the organizations have in common is their poor financial situation. Every organization, with the exception of the John Laing Singers and chamberWORKS! is struggling to find enough money to continue. The two largest organizations, Opera Ontario (which has a budget of about \$3 million) and the HPO (which has a budget of \$1.2 million) are faring the worst. Neither is receiving enough funding from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Trillium Foundation. The City of Hamilton is considering placing a \$50,000 cap on grants for arts organizations, which would drastically affect both organizations. Symphony Hamilton, a community-based orchestra, has a budget of \$70,000 and struggles with a small deficit at the end of each season. The choirs in the community are not doing much better. The Bach Elgar Choir is recovering from major debt. The Canadian Orpheus Male Choir has never been in the red but is finding it hard to maintain this record. Even the John Laing Singers and chamberWORKS! reduce programming if their budget becomes smaller.

Another characteristic the organizations share is the struggle for ticket sales. While the required level of this source of income varies among organizations, it remains important. Every organization has been affected by Hamilton's aging population. As audiences grow older, they are less willing or able to go out for concerts. Organizations are therefore scrambling to attract families and students. All offer student pricing. Some, like chamberWORKS!, sell student tickets for only \$5. The HPO and Opera Ontario know their time will soon come to an end if they don't get younger audiences through the

door. However, young people seem more interested in popular culture attractions like pop concerts and movies than classical music events.

The slumping economy is also impacting the organizations. Some general managers argue that the economy started declining decades ago when companies relocated their head offices from Hamilton to Toronto. However, recent developments in the local economy are also making an impact. Stelco, a major steel company in Hamilton, applied for bankruptcy protection in January 2004. It subsequently laid off 400 of its employees, with 500 more lay offs expected over the next three years. This has caused a ripple effect, creating a tighter economy that has left residents with less disposable income, and businesses with less money for sponsorship of the arts. Almost all of the organizations have sponsors, with the exception of the Canadian Orpheus Male Choir and the John Laing Singers. However, both of these groups are starting to look for sponsors to ensure their longevity.

While money remains the single factor that will determine the future of these seven organizations, their general managers, artistic directors and conductors are optimistic that they will be able to survive what appears to be a bleak period. Stéphane Potvin, board president of Symphony Hamilton, believes that the organization has nowhere to go but up. Richard Querney, president of the board for the Canadian Orpheus Male Choir, argues that despite their aging choir members, young Welsh-Canadians will take over the choir. Ian Sadler, artistic director/conductor of the Bach Elgar Choir, hopes he will be able to take the choir on a tour of Europe in a few years. Optimism is lacking, however, at HPO and Opera Ontario.

The City's cut to the HPO's funding has caused Alex Baran, the orchestra's general manager, to question how much longer the struggling orchestra can survive. Ken Freeman, who was general director of Opera Ontario for 10 years, quit in summer 2004 over funding problems. He did not want to disassemble what he worked so hard to create. Under David Speers, the new general director, hundreds of thousands of dollars are still needed for the opera to sustain its current production schedule. Freeman says the company will likely become a mere shell of its former self, just like the HPO. The orchestra, which was once one of the premiere orchestras in the country, had more than 70 performances during a 35-week season in the 1980s. It folded in 1996, restarting in 1997 with a dramatically scaled back concert schedule. The 2004–05 season features a mere ten concerts.

The sole thing that has not changed among organizations is their members' belief that they are important to the community and that classical music is needed in the city. Sadler commutes from Stratford to Hamilton every week to hold choir rehearsals. James McKay, music director of Symphony Hamilton, travels from London. These are just two examples of individuals who are making an extra effort because they believe in their organization and won't let money troubles hamper their musical efforts. However, will this be enough to save all of these organizations? While some are better off than others, the continuing problems of aging audience members, cuts in government funding and the weak Hamilton economy will continue to threaten their existence. In the end, the people of Hamilton, whether business owners, CEOs, politicians or blue-collar workers, will decide what role classical music will play on the city's artistic stage.

Chapter 1 – Opera Ontario

1-1 Opera Ontario faces uphill battle

Producing opera is expensive. There are singers, musicians, lighting and stage managers, make-up artists and chorus directors. Everything has a cost, from the tassels on the chorus' costumes to the light bulbs on the backdrop.

Regardless, the presence of Opera Ontario in Hamilton is invaluable. The opportunity to attend a quality opera without having to battle traffic to see a production by the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto is priceless for opera lovers.

However, the future of opera in Hamilton is uncertain. There are several threats to the company's livelihood, predominantly Hamilton's faltering economy. There are fewer area businesses to solicit for sponsorship, and these businesses have less money to give to the arts. Ken Freeman, who served as general director of Opera Ontario from August 1994 to May 2004, is very concerned about the company's future.

“We are at a time right now when people are holding onto their discretionary income a bit more tightly,” he notes. “You have things like the bankruptcy protection of Stelco, which affects a lot of people and represents 16 per cent of Hamilton's tax base.”

The company has been through a number of ups and downs since its inception as Opera Hamilton in 1980. When Freeman arrived in 1994, the company was struggling. It had lost \$100,000 each year since 1991 and reserves were exhausted. This financial situation got worse with the election of the Harris Conservative government in 1995, which resulted in severe funding cuts to the provincial arts council.

The first thing Freeman did to remedy the situation was fast-track the expansion of the company to Kitchener-Waterloo in 1995 under the new name of Opera Ontario. The second thing was to work with the board to find more corporate sponsors. These two moves were successful, as Kitchener-Waterloo welcomed opera in their city. Hamilton businesses, which were more plentiful in the mid-1990s, opened their purses.

However, Freeman had more plans for the company than just fixing the financial situation. His experience working as general director for Virginia Opera had taught him a few things about repertoire. Opera Hamilton had produced three productions a year since the 1989/1990 season, mainly Italian operas. Freeman decided to make a few artistic changes.

“It was a challenge to expand the repertoire from all Italian, all the time,” he states. “The company also had that terrible disease of thinking that there were not a lot of talented Canadian opera singers. That was absurd. If you are willing to scour the world for someone, yes, you’ll likely find that star singer, but you’re never going to develop your own native talent. I pushed hard for Canadian talent.”

Keeping his dedication to Canadian talent and expanding the repertoire, Freeman developed a formula for each season in conjunction with artistic director Daniel Lipton and production director Thomas Schweitzer.

“Every company needs a strong title each season,” he explains. “You either open with it or close with it. Around that you can experiment. I always looked for something that was going to give us a solid box office base with an A list title. Then something from the B list, and then a C or D.”

Freeman considers A list operas to be the most popular, or financially put, ones that are guaranteed to sell out. Taking the 2004–05 season as an example, Georges Bizet's *Carmen* is the A list opera.

“The first thing that drove the selection of *Carmen* was the box office need, because the budget is getting so soft,” he states. “It was chosen because nothing sells better than *Carmen*, and the board was pushing so hard [for *Carmen*].”

B list operas are usually selected on the basis of what Canadian talent is available. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* was chosen because Canadian singing sensation Jane Archibald was available. The 2004–05 season's C-list is Gaetano Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*. Although it is a lesser-known opera, the Wild West version, complete with cowboys and a saloon, is expected to attract opera enthusiasts. While selecting each season's program was chiefly Freeman's responsibility, the board's financial bottom line sometimes created friction with his artistic-driven outlook.

“You cannot say enough about *Carmen*'s brilliance, but when it is your fourth time producing it, after the last time I did it when I got it absolutely right, there's a hesitancy,” Freeman explains. “I would prefer not to have the repertoire driven by box office consideration, but it has to be done.”

Freeman's battle to produce German and French operas has not been easy, but he has succeeded in including an opera outside of the Italian repertoire almost every season since his appointment. Because of these efforts, Hamilton and Kitchener-Waterloo audiences have been able to see such operas as Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*, Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, Léo Delibes's *Lakmé*, as well

as a French double bill of Francis Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine* and Jules Massenet's *Le Portrait de Manon*.

Opera Ontario, Canada's fourth largest opera company in terms of main stage audience attendance and budget, has been praised by national and international newspapers. The company was awarded the prestigious Lieutenant Governor's Award for the Arts in 1996 and 1998. These awards, which are Canada's largest monetary prizes for arts organizations, recognize Ontario-based arts organizations that have maintained a high level of artistic excellence while demonstrating exceptional community and private sector support.

Opera Ontario has also brought a more accessible form of opera to the masses with Popera. A brainchild of Daniel Lipton, the company's artistic director, Popera showcases opera's greatest moments with four celebrity opera singers. The evening offers popular arias, duets and overtures from beloved operas. The Opera Ontario Chorus also takes part in the event. There are no sets, costumes or special lighting, making it relatively inexpensive to produce. Popera has been extremely successful since it premiered in the 1986–87 season. It will likely be a part of the company's seasons as long as it exists. Opera Ontario has even copyrighted the name of the event.

The company can also be credited with developing Canadian talent. Bios of dozens of Canadian singers boast that they were part of an Opera Ontario production. Freeman is especially proud of the fact that in the 2002–03 season, there was only one major role that was not performed by a Canadian. The 2003–04 season had three roles that were not Canadian. Every role except two was sung by a Canadian in the 2004–05

season. Interestingly, it is often the Canadian singers who get the most praise. Quebec soprano Lyne Fortin astonished audiences and critics alike with her vivid portrayal of Elle in Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine*. John Fanning, a native of Dundas, Ontario was a convincing Iago and the star of Verdi's *Otello*, despite American Mark Lundberg playing the role of Otello.

Freeman's dedication to Canadian talent hasn't always rested well with the board. However, it scores big points with the Canada Council for the Arts, an important contributor to the organization. While funding has dropped off over the years, the Canadian content ensures the grant does not disappear.

"When I started, the Canada Council for the Arts was giving us \$76,000 a year," he notes. "I got them up to \$297,500 a year. I did that by the changes I made, including expanding repertoire, increasing Canadian talent and sharing the company between two cities."

The Ontario Arts Council provided \$170,000 a year when Freeman arrived.

However, over the passing years, this grant has been reduced to \$59,100, due to government cutbacks. The Canada Council for the Arts has only promised \$260,000 a year for the next three years.

Opera Ontario seems to be caught in a vicious cycle right now, as less money is coming in from ticket sales, subscriptions and donors, meaning the company is not growing. Because of this, it does not look as good on paper, causing grants to decrease. Financial problems created tension between Freeman and the board, and ultimately led to his resignation.

“Not all fundraising is the responsibility of the board, but high end gifts, whether from corporations or individuals, is up to them,” Freeman says. “Those doors don’t open for me or the staff.”

According to Freeman, the board raised \$1.2 million in the 1999–2000 season. In the 2003–04 season, they raised \$480,000. This cut in fundraising resulted in the board’s suggestion to start scaling back, but Freeman was not ready to compromise.

“The difference was over the future of the company,” Freeman explains. “If the community cannot support the art form, you have to scale back. A good general director has three choices: find new sources of revenue, scale back or quit. I did not want to take steps backward after I worked so hard to move forward.”

Albert Alexanian, president of Opera Ontario’s Board of Directors, says that fundraising is not a major responsibility of the board.

“The preferred role of the board is to suggest avenues where you can get funding,” Alexanian says. “A lot of boards introduce the staff to potential funders. The board, then, is hopefully connected to some people or groups that can support the company.”

Alexanian says that it is hard to find money in the Hamilton economy. He has served on the board for 20 years and says it used to be easier to find donors.

“Traditionally we had some very large industries who had a very large stake in the health of the arts community, such as Westinghouse, Firestone, Otis Elevator, Stelco and others that would support the arts by giving big chunks of money,” he states. “They have mostly disappeared, so our reliance has been more on smaller companies and more of them, which makes the task considerably more difficult for arts organizations.”

Expansion saved Opera Ontario in 1995, and Freeman says it could possibly save the company again, by spreading to cities such as London and Windsor. However, performing in more cities could mean fewer performances in Hamilton, of which there are currently three for each production. Freeman says the board will not go for this idea as soon as it should. Alexanian agrees with Freeman that Opera Ontario is struggling, but says it will be a few years before the company performs in other cities.

“You have to be fairly financially secure to be able to take that significant risk, because only about 40 per cent of our revenue comes from seat sales, so you have to raise a lot of money from other sources,” he states. “There are lots of opportunities, but funding is a major issue.”

Another threat to Opera Ontario is the opening of the Canadian Opera Company’s opera house in 2005. A flashy, new theatre may draw opera lovers from Hamilton, leaving fewer audience members for Opera Ontario. Freeman says it will be a permanent threat. Alexanian disagrees.

“Many opera goers will go to more than one city to see an opera because they like to see how one company does it compared to another,” Alexanian explains. “Artistically, our productions over the years have been first rate. Some of them compare very favourably to what the Canadian Opera Company puts on. I think it is exciting we have a new opera house being built in Toronto. I think it will be positive in that it will raise awareness for the art form.”

The one thing both Freeman and Alexanian agree on is that David Speers, the new general director, has a lot of potential. Speers has spent the past five years as general

director of Arizona Opera, which divides its productions between Phoenix and Tucson and is a larger company than Opera Ontario. He was invited to Hamilton in summer 2004 to participate in Opera Ontario's strategic plan. Shortly after his arrival, Freeman left and Speers was offered the job of general director.

Speers is optimistic about the company's future and after only a few months on the job, has made some progress. A major development that came out of the strategic plan was the realization that cash was desperately needed to address the company's \$500,000 debt. A \$160,000 stabilization grant was applied for and approved for the company from the Bay Area Arts and Heritage Stabilization Program. Donations from Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo and surrounding communities are also helping.

While Opera Ontario has mainly produced Italian operas by composers such as Giuseppe Verdi, Giacomo Puccini and Gioacchino Rossini, Speers, like his predecessor, would prefer to create more varied seasons, with French and German operas for example, as well as 20th century works like Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*. The company is also in the process of commissioning a Canadian opera on the life of Joseph Brant.

Speers is redressing other aspects of the company. Currently, Opera Ontario gives three performances in Hamilton and one in Kitchener-Waterloo for each production. The 2005–06 season will feature two performances in Kitchener-Waterloo.

“We think a Sunday matinee in Kitchener-Waterloo would do well because there is a large senior audience and a large family audience,” he stated. “It seems silly to do only one performance there because your cost on the second performance is probably only \$20,000 to \$30,000. Even if you sell your house 50 per cent, you'd get that back.”

Among all this planning, administrative changes are also occurring. Speers is considering taking on the artistic director position, dropping Daniel Lipton's role to conductor.

"We want Daniel to remain a part of the company," Speers explained. "He's been a big part of it, but we are negotiating with him as to what role he will play. Hopefully he'll be conducting one or two things a year for sure."

Among all these changes, one thing that hasn't changed at Opera Ontario is its mandate to produce high quality productions in Hamilton and Kitchener-Waterloo. Speers says he will do everything he can to ensure opera stays in these cities.

"There are challenges and they are specifically cash challenges," Speers comments. "However, there are things that can be done to ease cash problems, and we've got some fairly good friends in the community who are willing to help us in the short and long term. I think for the future, audience growth is really important. We are dealing with that and are very optimistic that everything is going to work out fine."

1-2 *La Voix Humaine* excellent in French double-bill

January 31, 2004

Hamilton Place

Love was in the air Saturday evening during Opera Ontario's performance of *Le Portrait de Manon* (*Portrait of Manon*) and *La Voix Humaine* (*The Human Voice*). Both are one-act operas, by French composers and on the theme of love – lost in *La Voix Humaine* and restored in *Le Portrait de Manon*. While we all enjoy happily-ever-after endings, it was the tragic tale of *La Voix Humaine* filled with heartbreak and sorrow that was the more effective performance of the evening.

Francis Poulenc composed *La Voix Humaine* in 1959. The opera tells the realistic story of a woman on the brink of suicide because her lover has left her. The sole character, referred to only as Elle, spends most of the opera on the telephone. Through Elle's one-sided discussion, we learn that she is unable to accept that the affair is over and that she has attempted suicide. She mostly talks to her lover, but there are wrong numbers, crossed lines and other problems related to the French telephone system that was notoriously unreliable in the first half of the 20th century. In the last few moments of the opera, she strangles herself with the telephone cord.

Poulenc, who suffered from nervous exhaustion and depression, portrays this tragic story with expressive recitative by the soprano and panicky outbursts from the orchestra. Chromaticism in both the voice and the orchestra verifies the diminishing mental state of the lead character.

Lyne Fortin's portrayal of Elle was outstanding thanks to her expressive voice and beautiful stage presence. She made excellent use of the basic set, which was equipped

only with a couch, bed and telephone. She was believable as a woman on the edge and was riveting to listen to and watch. The Kitchener-Waterloo Orchestra conducted by Tyrone Paterson was also adept at their understated role.

No love was lost in the opéra comique *Le Portrait de Manon*, a one-act sequel to the five-act opera *Manon*. Jules Massenet, a Romantic French composer, composed both. *Manon* premiered in 1884 and was highly successful. In *Manon*, the beautiful woman is torn between her love for the young Chevalier Des Grieux and her attraction to material possessions. At the end, Manon is arrested for being a prostitute and dies in Des Grieux's arms.

Le Portrait de Manon is set many years after the death of Manon. Des Grieux, now in his fifties, is jaded by love and still haunted by the memory of his beloved. When his nephew, the young Viscount Jean de Morcerf, confesses he is in love with a girl named Aurore and wishes to marry her, Des Grieux disinherits him. His friend Tiberge, who tutors Aurore, tries to convince Des Grieux to give his blessing to the young lovers, but he remains unmoved. It is only after Tiberge disguises Aurore as Manon and reveals that the young girl is Manon's niece that Des Grieux gives his blessing. The two lovers rejoice at the news and love triumphs.

Although unsuccessful in its first performance in 1894, the opera contains beautiful melodies, likable characters and an entertaining plot. While the orchestra did an excellent job and some roles were well cast, the presentation of the two main characters of Aurore and Viscount Jean de Morcerf hampered the performance.

Louise Guyot was a poor choice as Viscount Jean de Morcerf. While a woman playing the role of a male character is common in operas today, Guyot was unconvincing as a man. She looked too feminine, her movements on stage were graceful rather than manly, and her declamation of the text was wanting.

Laura Whalen, who played Aurore, was also disappointing. She lacked femininity, sang only bearably and failed to convince us that she was head over heels in love. The kissing scene was terribly platonic with not a whiff of *amour* in the air. The failure of the two lovers to show anything but sisterly liking (not even sisterly love) ruined the story line. Theodore Baerg proved a competent Des Grieux and Steeve Michaud an expressive and lively Tiberge, but their roles were too minor to make up for the women's deficiencies.

The costuming was also questionable. Aurore's dress was not in the same period as the trousers and suit jackets of her colleagues, and her transformation as Manon's ghost was through the addition of a shawl, rather than a more convincing period dress.

The stage direction and set were plain. The simple park-like setting did not permit interesting movement. Special effects, particularly the release of glitter over the "lovers" at the end, was more comedic than romantic.

While the French double bill was a welcome change of repertoire for the Opera Ontario stage, the two performances were far apart in calibre. Lyne Fortin made the night worthwhile with her portrayal of Elle in *La Voix Humaine*. Opera Ontario's decision to place this opera at the end of the evening was the right choice, even though it does not end happily ever after.

1-3 Opera Ontario's *Otello* delights the senses

April 29, 2004

Hamilton Place

Crashing thunder and brilliant lightning bolts flashed in the great hall of Hamilton Place Thursday night for the turbulent opening of Opera Ontario's *Otello*.

A ship carrying Otello, the future governor of Cyprus, is tossed about in the stormy sea. A great crowd of islanders pray the ship will reach harbour safely. Their prayers are answered and they rejoice in a dramatic choral number. Otello appears high above the crowd, celebrating his safe return to Cyprus with his thundering voice.

We can thank Giuseppe Verdi for this masterpiece, although he cannot take all the credit. It was the great Shakespeare that first penned the story of Othello; a story that would inspire Verdi from a very young age. When librettist Arrigo Boito presented the 70-year-old Verdi with a libretto based on this Shakespeare tragedy, the composer was initially reluctant. He exclaimed that he was too old and lacking the creative energy to produce yet another opera. However, Boito's faithful adaptation ignited Verdi's creative flame and resulted in his twenty-seventh opera.

The libretto, like the original play, is based in 15th century Cyprus. Otello has just returned from battle to become the new governor. Among those anticipating his return is his new wife Desdemona and his ensign Cassio. Iago, embittered by the appointment of Cassio over himself, hatches a plot that will ruin Otello. Throughout the opera, Iago manages to deceive Otello that Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair. Otello's grief turns to anger and he murders Desdemona. When Iago's plot is revealed shortly after the murder, Otello kills himself in an act of passionate guilt.

This combination of Shakespeare and Verdi creates a work that demands both great actors and talented singers. Opera Ontario was successful overall in casting appropriate singers for the major roles. John Fanning was a convincing Iago and the star of the show. Through his powerful arias and dominating stage presence, he was believable as a man consumed by evil.

Simona Bertini's Desdemona was also superb. Her "Willow Song" aria in Act IV was especially moving, enhanced by her angelic voice. Her character's pain and fear of Otello's wrath were realistic and conjured sympathy from the audience. Kurt Lehmann also deserves special mention for his outstanding performance as Cassio. When he was joyful, we felt his happiness. When he was stricken with sorrow, we shared his tears. His clear voice had an air of naiveté about it, which is essential for the role.

The disappointment of the evening was Mark Lundberg's Otello. While he had a powerful voice that was well suited to the role, this was the only thing that made him a good Otello. His acting was terrible, particularly his attempt to portray a man in love. There was no chemistry between him and Bertini. While she tried to caress his hand and press herself against him, he reacted as though he didn't know what to do with a woman. The decision to do fake kissing scenes was a terrible choice, hampering the passionate storyline.

While Otello couldn't act, he could sing like no one's business. Combined with an overwhelmingly talented cast, his poor acting could often be overlooked. Minor characters also contributed to the believable drama. Sarkis Barsemian was a fine

Roderigo, Elizabeth Turnbull a more than competent Emilia and Nelson Sierra a talented herald/official.

These exceptional singers were matched by the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra, who performed better than they have all year in their regular concert series. The strings were on top of things, the brass brilliant and the woodwinds appropriately delicate. There was a small issue of tuning in the violins and double basses during Act IV, but despite this, their performance was far better than anticipated. Conductor Daniel Lipton can be seen as a miracle worker. However, the use of a raised platform and spotlight to remind the audience of his presence was not discreet.

The Opera Ontario Chorus also performed well and met the challenging role Verdi gave them. The basses and tenors were very powerful, especially in the opening of Act I, where they played a prominent role. The sopranos and altos were not quite as good, but sufficed nonetheless.

The problem with the chorus, however, was the acting. This issue lies with the stage direction, which was mediocre throughout the entire opera. Jeannette Aster made the chorus behave more like children than adults. Her direction of Otello was also questionable, particularly during scenes with Desdemona. Having Lundberg flop on the ground in grief twice in Act III was more comedic than dramatic.

Cameron Porteous should be commended on his set design. The backdrop that changed from day to night, complete with pink clouds that turned to stars at dusk was beautiful. His creative reuse of two pillars at each side of the stage for the three different scenes was also clever. The lighting enhanced the scenes with frequent use of the

spotlight to illuminate Iago, Otello and Desdemona during the signature arias. However, the lighting was a bit too dim in the final bedroom scene.

The costumes were quite wonderful. Desdemona and Emilia's dresses were elegant, the soldiers' costumes realistic and Iago's black leather ensemble well suited to his character. The chorus was a bit shabbily dressed, as was Otello, who wore the same baggy white bodysuit that looked more like bedding than the outfit of a governor.

This is the first time Opera Ontario has staged this powerful Verdi opera. With a large chorus, challenging orchestration and demanding leading roles, this opera is difficult to not only stage, but to stage well. By the end of the night, it was evident that the risk Opera Ontario took was worth every penny.

1-4 Opera Hamilton goes wild with *Don Pasquale*

October 16, 2004

Hamilton Place

If you combined opera with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, you'd end up with something like Opera Hamilton's production of Gaetano Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*. The Wild West version of the opera kicked off the company's 2004–05 season, complete with cowboy boots, chaps, guns and even a horse (it was fibreglass, but close enough.)

Don Pasquale premiered in Paris in 1843, minus the Wild West theme. The comic opera was a great success, soon being performed to great acclaim in theatres throughout Europe. From its earliest days, it was recognized as the true successor to Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. *Don Pasquale*, which was Donizetti's 62nd opera, remains one of his most famous works today.

The storyline of the opera is one of romance and comedy. Don Pasquale, an old wealthy bachelor, is considering marriage. His nephew and sole heir, Ernesto, refuses to marry a woman Don Pasquale finds for him, as he is in love with a young, pretty widow named Norina. Don Pasquale has decided to disinherit Ernesto by marrying and starting his own family.

Dr. Malatesta, Don Pasquale's physician, and good friend of Ernesto, contrives a scheme to marry the old bachelor off with his 'sister' Sofronia, who is none other than Norina. Don Pasquale meets this timid sister and the two are married by a fake notary. However, his new bride's manner immediately changes, as she becomes bossy and condescending. Don Pasquale realizes his mistake. Once the scheme is revealed, he consents to the marriage of Ernesto and Norina.

The opera was a great success during the late 1800s because of its witty storyline, likable characters and beautiful music. Donizetti wrote the work in the tradition of bel canto, adding his own sense of dramatic realism that anticipates the verismo style of Verdi and Puccini. Coloratura arias, duets and ensembles reveal a level musical wit lacking in the majority of the opera buffa repertoire. Opera Hamilton's solid production demonstrated why *Don Pasquale* is still popular after 161 years.

Gregory Dahl was superb in the role of the jovial Dr. Malatesta. His bold baritone voice displayed a uniform tone throughout the registers. His acting matched his vocal skills, making him a favourite of the evening.

Soprano Laura Whalen was enchanting as Norina. From the moment she started to sing, she held the audience spellbound. She was believable as a woman in love, willing to

do anything, including marry the enemy, to prove a point. Her aria in the second scene of Act I, “So anch’io la virtù magica” tugged at the heartstrings.

Stuart Howe, who played the role of Ernesto, was also well cast. His sweet but powerful tenor voice was incredibly moving, especially during his lovesick arias, such as “Cercherò lontana terra” at the beginning of Act II. But placing Howe naked in a bubble bath (still wearing his cowboy boots) with three prostitutes watching and washing lessened the intended sorrow of the aria, creating more laughter than tears.

However, not all of the main characters were able to ride off into the sunset with a good performance. Gregory Atkinson was an ineffective Don Pasquale. While he was a fine actor, his singing was weak. His voice was not able to fill the concert hall. His duet with Dr. Malatesta in the fifth scene of Act III, one of the most comic moments of the opera, was a failure because of his inability to sing the syllables at the rapid tempo required.

The chorus appears only in the third act, where they are servants in Don Pasquale’s household. The Opera Ontario chorus’ singing and acting was outstanding.

The orchestra, under conductor Daniel Lipton, was mediocre. While Whalen, Dahl and Howe had powerful voices, the orchestra played too loudly, especially during the ensemble scenes. The orchestra was also under prepared. The strings were sloppy, while the winds and brass were consistently late on their entries. The overture nearly fell apart, failing to serve its purpose of suggesting the lively tone of the opera.

Other aspects of the production were wonderful. The costumes reflected the real Wild West with spurs on the cowboy boots and fringes on the chaps. The authentic sets

included Don Pasquale's household and private office, Norina's bedroom, Ernesto's bathroom and a garden. Each had appropriate antiques, art and fabrics. The artistic backdrop of canyons among expansive blue sky was able to transform from a sunny day to a beautiful, pink sunset.

The staging was adequate, with lots of movement. There were extras in less exciting scenes, including a drunk who was entertaining to watch. The lighting ensured the scenes were bright enough. The only questionable feature was the decision to lower a backdrop in the middle of a scene. This happened twice in the opera; both times were awkward, creating embarrassed laughter among the audience.

While the Wild West theme was well received by the audience, it poses the question of whether it was necessary. *Don Pasquale* is not performed frequently in Ontario, so were the cowboys really needed? Some opera lovers would argue that this masterpiece can stand on its own without resorting to extreme measures like a fibreglass horse.

1-5 Mozart opera fails to abduct audience's hearts

February 12, 2005

Hamilton Place

As the curtain fell on Opera Hamilton's production of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*), the audience reaction was not what the cast and crew had hoped for. The usual enthusiastic response garnered from an opening night crowd was noticeably absent. There was hardly enough applause to raise the curtain a second time.

David Speers, the company's new general director, had worked with his production team to create a high-quality musical product in attractive packaging, but a string of unfortunate events worked against the intended result. Problems started three weeks ago when Madeline Bender, who was scheduled to play Konstanze, became ill and was unable to continue with rehearsals.

Illness also struck her leading man, but at a much more inconvenient time. During intermission on opening night, it was announced to the audience that Benjamin Butterfield, who played the role of Belmonte, was ill, but that he would still return to the stage.

The illness of the two leading singers, combined with opening night problems like set change delays, did not impress the audience. Regardless, there were many great things about this production that deserve much more credit than the halfhearted applause indicated.

When *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* premiered in Vienna on July 12, 1782, many arias had to be repeated during the performance because of the audience's enthusiasm. Austrian Emperor Joseph II commissioned Mozart to write the work for the National Theatre. Mozart selected the libretto *Belmont und Constanze* by Gottlob Stephanie, with whom he worked to perfect the story. The result is a charming opera with a strong Turkish influence.

Die Entführung aus dem Serail is set 16th century Turkey. Belmonte, a Spanish nobleman, has travelled there to rescue his fiancée Konstanze from the Pasha Selim. Konstanze, along with her maid Blonde and Belmonte's servant Pedrillo, were captured at

sea by Turkish pirates and sold as slaves to the Pasha. Konstanze has become the Pasha's favourite, but she will not return his love. Blonde has been given to Pasha's servant Osmin. She too refuses to return his advances. Belmonte poses as an architect to gain access to the palace, scheming with Pedrillo to rescue Konstanze and Blonde and return to Spain. Their escape is foiled and the four face the Pasha's wrath. When the Pasha finds out that Belmonte is the son of his enemy, he decides to be the better man and release the two pairs of lovers.

Opera Hamilton's production has a few twists. One is that it is set in the 18th century. Another twist is that it reveals the Pasha as Belmonte's long lost father. These were not the only alterations. Michael Albano, stage director, decided to shorten the wordy German dialogue, translate it into English and inject more humour. Several of the arias were also condensed to tighten the production.

While these changes were clearly meant to make the opera more audience-friendly, some of Mozart's magic was lost because of these revisions. The English dialogue was easy to follow, but the added jokes were too modern for a Mozart opera. As some of the best arias in the work were shortened, it robbed the audience of beautiful music.

While the alterations to the libretto were questionable, Speers and his team succeeded in other aspects of the production. The casting was excellent. Benjamin Butterfield was a charming Belmonte in the first half with a soaring tenor voice. His stage presence and acting abilities succeeded in portraying the character as a passionate man, willing to die to save his beloved Konstanze. The signature aria "O wie ängstlich" was

powerful and showed the versatility of his voice. It was very disappointing that Butterfield fell ill halfway through the performance and returned to the stage singing with only a half-voice. He proceeded to struggle through the remaining arias, but nonetheless valiantly delivered as good of a performance as he could.

American soprano Cheryl Evans, who is no stranger to Mozart's operas, was a suitable Konstanze. She boasted a rich, velvety voice with a vast range (as evidence, she has performed the role of Queen of the Night in *Die Zauberflöte*). However, her acting skills left something to be desired. The Singspiel tradition of spoken dialogue did not help, especially when it came to her declarations of love for Belmonte. While she could convince us that she loved him while she was singing, she could not while speaking.

The secondary characters in the cast really shone in the production, enhancing it both dramatically and musically. Sookhyung Park was an appropriately witty Blonde, with a bright soprano voice and mesmerizing stage presence. She captured the essence of this cunning character perfectly and was a highlight of the evening.

Park's abilities were complemented by those of Alexander Savtchenko, who played opposite her as Osmin. His booming bass voice with an exceptional lower range brought the character to life. We feared his wrath when he caught Belmonte and Pedrillo attempting to abduct their women, and we felt sorry for Blonde when he expressed his misogynist views.

The Pasha Selim, a speaking-only role, was well cast with musical theatre actor Sandy Winsby. His commanding stage presence was ideal for such a dominating character. Pascal Charbonneau's youth betrayed him in his portrayal of Pedrillo. His

vocal control is not yet fully developed, nor is his confidence on stage, but he has tremendous potential. We will likely be seeing much more of him in opera productions here in Canada and abroad in the coming years.

The Kitchener-Waterloo Orchestra performed Mozart's joyous music with energy and enthusiasm under the baton of Daniel Lipton. Every section of the orchestra was right on for the performance, especially the percussion, which is the heart of Mozart's Turkish-inspired music. The chorus, prepared by Peter Oleskevich, was also solid in the few scenes where they appeared.

Besides the qualified cast and lively orchestra, the staging enhanced the production. The lead characters moved about the stage during dialogue and arias, breaking any visual monotony. Chorus members doubled as extras in many scenes, some as servants, and others as guards. They entered and exited the stage during scenes, being anything but cardboard cutouts.

The production also benefited from the borrowed sets and costumes from L'Opéra de Montréal. The structure of the palace itself was not only visually stunning, but practical as well, with doors and window shutters that actually opened. A large ship sailed across the stage to take the four lovers back to Spain at the close of the opera. The props were numerous, with rich tapestries, jewels and even torture devices. The costumes complemented the set; Turkish characters wore rich red and orange garments, while Belmonte and Konstanze donned blue velvet and silk.

While some issues negatively affected the production, such as the English translations and the musical cuts, as well as other problems that were beyond anyone's

control, the overall product was much finer than the crowd's reaction suggested.

Audiences at the second and third performances will hopefully recognize the high quality of the production and show the appreciation that Opera Hamilton deserves.

Chapter 2 – Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra

2-1 Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra has long and winding road ahead

It's been a long and winding road for the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra and the journey is not yet over. Once one of the premiere orchestras in the country, with more than 70 performances during a 35-week season, it is only a shell of its former self today. The 2004–05 season features a mere ten concerts, consisting of five classical and five pops performances.

The orchestra hit rock bottom in January 1996 when it folded due to severe debt. The “New Hamilton Orchestra” took to the stage in Hamilton Place on February 16, 1997. Although the orchestra was renamed the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra in 2000, it has yet to return to its former glory.

Alex Baran, the HPO's general manager since 2003, has big plans for the orchestra, but is taking the steps towards development slowly.

“It would be great if we could increase our season up to 18 to 20 concerts,” Baran explains. “We would have a classical series, a pop series and a third series, so long as we could be sure we could sell it, get it sponsored, and find the funding for it.”

The 2004–05 season has been scaled back from the previous year, with 10 concerts instead of 12. The orchestra posted a small, unanticipated deficit of \$26,000 for the fiscal year 2002–03, and subscriptions were down for the 2003–04 season, leading to a more conservative season for 2004–05. The decision turned out to be a good one, as the City of Hamilton reduced its funding grant from \$125,000 to \$75,000 at the end of the

2003–04 fiscal year. Baran appealed the funding cut but was only able to get back an additional \$11,652 for a total of \$86,652.

Fortunately, subscriptions were strong for the 2004–05 season. Over 80 per cent of last year's subscribers renewed, which Baran says is important as it provides the orchestra's core support. However, it is still an uphill battle when it comes to single ticket sales.

"Ticket sales for the last four years are down," he states. "Close to three-quarters of our audience buys at seniors' rates, so we know that we have a fairly old audience. As people get older, they are less able and willing to get out, especially in evenings and winter. So, what we're seeing is a fluctuating softness in the classical concerts and a slight decline in the pops."

The HPO staff has come up with several programs to attract younger audiences. The Hi-Five program was launched this season, where kids of high school age and younger may attend for five dollars. If a child requires parental supervision, the first parent comes at half price. University and college students up to age 29 may attend for \$10. Baran hopes that this incentive will draw a younger audience, who will continue to come to the orchestra as they grow older.

Besides making the orchestra more affordable, Baran also works closely with Michael Reason, artistic director, to create attractive programming. The classical concerts feature big names like Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky, Ludwig van Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Gustav Mahler, George Frideric Handel, Hector Berlioz and Franz Liszt. The pops concerts, which are better attended than the classical ones, feature music

by the Gershwin brothers, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and the Beatles, among others.

Baran's philosophy is the bigger the names, the bigger the audience.

“For the 2004–05 season, Michael Reason and I had to create a season that was solid, standard repertoire, still met our commitment to Canadian content in respect to the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, and had enough in it from our composer-in-residence, Heather Schmidt,” Baran explains. “With this very conservative audience in Hamilton, we can't alienate concert goers by putting in music that they don't recognize. Generally, someone will buy a ticket for a concert based on the familiarity of a composer's name. You've got to have a recognizable name.”

However, familiar repertoire is not enough if it is not performed well, which has been a common complaint of critics and some audience members since the orchestra reformed in 1997. The majority of the musicians are paid per service, as opposed to on contract, adversely affecting the number of qualified musicians available in the community, according to Jean Norman Iadeluca, who has been the HPO's principal timpanist since 1971.

“When the musicians were on a weekly salary, there was a guaranteed amount of money for the season,” Iadeluca states. “Right now we have 10 concerts, and we are paid per service. For someone starting out, I don't see him or her staying here very long when there is hardly any money to be made and there is not that much freelancing. If you have a mortgage, car payments, student loans and whatever else, there isn't enough money.”

Iadeluca has seen the orchestra at its best and its worst, and believes that the quality of playing can be increased by having more concerts and going back to a salaried basis.

“If you repeat concerts and even sell half the house, the HPO will still make money if the musicians are on salary,” he explains. “I don’t see much of a future here unless the HPO goes back to salary.”

Nancy Bourdon Nelson, second oboe and English horn, has been with the orchestra for 29 years. She also says the performance level has been affected since the switch from contract to per service.

“There are a lot of great musicians in the orchestra, so I think the only thing affecting the performance level is the fact that some orchestra personnel may change at some concerts,” Nelson explains. “If any of the regular players get offered freelance engagements that may have more services and therefore more pay, then a temporary replacement for that musician is required. This replacement may be a great musician, but since all orchestras have their own style, they would need time to 'mesh in.' Because it is not a full-time engagement anymore, if given the opportunity, most musicians have to decide which single engagement would benefit them the most.”

Nelson says she is lucky because she plays a less common instrument and has a steady flow of freelancing jobs in Niagara Falls, Kitchener, London and Toronto. However, she would like to see the number of performances increase again for the HPO and has a few ideas of how to increase ticket sales.

“We could repeat some of the past ideas, such as free concerts outdoors or performing at malls,” she says. “Other places where we used to perform could possibly be approached, such as the Royal Botanical Gardens, churches in Burlington, the Oakville Centre for the Performing Arts and Milton.”

More concerts and salaried musicians are a long way off, according to Baran. The orchestra currently has a budget of \$1.2 million a year, half of which goes to the musicians, the artistic director and the composer-in-residence. The remainder is for operating costs.

A large portion of the budget comes from grants provided by various levels of government. The Canada Council for the Arts provides about \$90,000. The Ontario Arts Council gives \$78,000. The Ontario Trillium Foundation provides a three-year declining grant. The 2003–04 grant was for \$81,000. The City of Hamilton also provides an annual grant from a pool for all the arts organizations in the city. Baran says the orchestra plays an important role in Hamilton, and he would like to see the City make a solid commitment to the orchestra.

“The City would be better served, its money better spent and the arts organizations more equitably treated if we were removed from the current small grants pool and placed as a line item in the budget on a three-year plan, much like the Canada Council for the Arts does,” he says. “We would know what we are getting and the city would know what its commitment is for budgeting purposes.”

Baran is realistic when it comes to the future of the HPO. Toronto and Buffalo boast well-known orchestras, possibly attracting people from the Hamilton area.

Stelco, a major steel company in Hamilton, applied for bankruptcy protection in January 2004 and subsequently laid off 150 of its employees, with more layoffs expected over the coming years. This caused a ripple effect, creating a slump in the Hamilton economy that has left residents with less disposable income and businesses with less money for sponsorship of the arts.

“Money is the single factor that is going to determine whether the future manifests itself in our favour,” he says. “There is a fair amount of competition for the artistic dollar in this town, but it is up to every arts group to make its case convincingly. We’re a year-long operation that employs dozens of people and bring tens of thousands of people into the downtown core every year. The Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra not only creates huge economic spin-offs, but makes a tremendous impact on the quality of life for the city.”

Reason announced in September 2004 that he would be leaving the orchestra at the end of 2006 to conduct a music ensemble based in the Niagara region. His departure may be a signal of tough times ahead for the orchestra. However, a new artistic director may be what the orchestra needs to freshen up its programming and bring younger audiences through the doors of Hamilton Place.

2-2 Tchaikovsky surprise highlight of HPO concert
January 10, 2004
Hamilton Place

A small crowd braved the bitter cold for Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra's first concert of 2004 featuring *Piano Concerto No. 2* by Heather Schmidt, but it was Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky's lively *Symphony No. 4* that was worth the winter trek to Hamilton Place.

Tchaikovsky wrote the symphony at the peak of his career. It is a challenging program symphony on the theme of the struggle between happiness and fate. The first movement started off well with the brass section giving proper justice to the ominous fortissimo fate theme that opens the piece. The remainder of the movement continued to be powerful. The string section demonstrated a mastery of the dominating chromatic runs. The wind section, however, occasionally struggled with late entries. Although the strings and brass made up for the ailing wind section in the first movement, they failed to do the same in the second movement.

Described by Tchaikovsky as the yearning one feels when taking up a book and letting it fall listlessly and recalling the memories of one's life, the second movement features a soaring melody introduced by the solo oboe. The weak wind section resulted in less warmth than demanded by the composer. Despite the minor setbacks of the first two movements, the remaining two were breathtaking. The third, a scherzo that features pizzicato in the strings, was brilliantly executed by the orchestra. The pizzicato was clean and lively, with great expression.

The spirit of the piece enthralled the crowd, and the leap directly into the fortissimo runs of the fourth movement without pausing for a breath was thrilling. The

strings and brass were powerful in this final movement, despite the wind section's late entries. The return of the fate theme was more dramatic than in the first movement. Tchaikovsky's underlying theme that life is worth living exuded in the closing notes of the work.

The low point of the evening was *Piano Concerto No. 2* by the HPO's composer-in-residence Heather Schmidt. The Calgary native began composing for the piano at the age of five and predictably continued on to a bright academic career, including a Bachelor, Master's and Ph.D. in Music from Indiana University. Her *Piano Concerto No. 2* was a commissioned work by the CBC and the Canada Council for the Arts, and was completed in April 2001.

The work is in the typical format of a concerto, with three movements in the fast-slow-fast format. The piece has a very modern feel, with fragmented melodies, unusual use of instruments and daring percussion. There is a definite flavour from the Far East, evident through the violin writing and the use of the gong. The HPO performed their part well.

While the orchestration is melancholy and unpredictable, the piano's role is not. Throughout the three movements, the piano part features arpeggios, chords and fifths. While impressive initially, it tended to become tedious. Schmidt demonstrated she was a fine pianist, but her writing for the solo instrument did not allow her to "show off," as in many piano concertos.

Schmidt's concerto was outshone by the overture to Richard Wagner's opera *Der Fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*). A central feature of the work is a myriad of

chromatic runs in the strings, symbolizing the crashing waves of the sea. It is believed that this motive was inspired from Wagner's tumultuous journey by sea from Riga, Latvia to London, England. The voyage was so stormy that it stretched from the predicted eight days to three and a half weeks.

The string section aptly portrayed this hellish maritime passage in the overture. The French horn section consistently provided the powerful Flying Dutchman theme. The winds struggled throughout the work, often failing to play in unison at the essential moments when the overture softens. However, the winds were the only weak section. The percussionists were outstanding, with precise timing and polished rolls. The HPO's strength as a whole was evident in their flawless execution of the *ritenuto* and *a tempo* sections in the piece under the careful guidance of conductor Michael Reason. He deserves praise for preparing the orchestra so well for the first concert of 2004.

2-3 HPO ends season on high note

May 29, 2004
Hamilton Place

The Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra brought the house down with their final concert of the 2003–04 season on Saturday night. The program was stacked with Ludwig van Beethoven, George Frideric Handel and a world-premiere by Heather Schmidt, the orchestra's composer-in-residence. However, it was the dark horse, Dmitri Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony* that rode away with the fame and glory.

Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony* is among his most popular works, but the orchestra's subscribers had a vested interest in hearing the work, because they were allowed to vote in advance for either the symphony or Béla Bartók's *Concerto for*

Orchestra as the concert's closer. The subscribers wanted Shostakovich and the orchestra valiantly delivered.

The story of the *Fifth Symphony* is as stirring as the music itself. Shostakovich wrote it in 1937 after he had been publicly denounced by the Soviet Government. The infamous Joseph Stalin had walked out of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* just a year before, and the composer was on the threshold of being extinguished by the government when the *Fifth Symphony* premiered.

The work appeased the critical Soviet government, who considered the march-like final movement to embody nationalism. Many of the citizens present in the audience at the work's premiere in 1937 wept openly in the theatre. They understood Shostakovich's struggle to appease the terrifying government all too well. They heard their story told in the tender melodies of the third movement.

The *Fifth Symphony* is heroic in nature, employing a large orchestra complete with a substantial percussion section. The HPO performed the work with precision and great emotion. Soloists featured in the work were up to par, especially the flute and harp in the lyrical third movement. The brass and percussion sections enhanced the glorious melody in the final movement, with energetic contributions from the timpani and bass drum.

Beethoven's *Fidelio Overture* was performed well, with only a few minor problems. *Fidelio* was Beethoven's only opera. He viewed as a failure and unsuccessfully attempted to revise it on several occasions. The overture alone was rewritten three times.

The *Fidelio Overture* as we know it today is the fourth and final version, first performed in 1814.

The overture features all the characteristics of a good Beethoven piece, with moments of dominating musical ecstasy alternating with tender passages. The percussion was out-of-sync in a few places and the strings were occasionally a bit too harsh, but the piece still came off well, resulting in a thrilling opening to the concert.

While the opening and closing pieces filled the hall with electric energy, the middle of the concert lagged a bit. The decision to perform an arrangement of Handel's *Music for Royal Fireworks* by Hamilton Harty lessened the effect of the piece dramatically. Harty's placement of the melody in the strings rather than the brass in the majority of the four movements created a bland sound.

Music for Royal Fireworks was composed for a fireworks display in London in October 1786. The dominating brass solos in the original score are breathtaking, matching the colourful and exciting fireworks they were intended to accompany.

The lack of brass solos in Harty's arrangements was disappointing. When the small brass section of three trumpets and three French horns was given one of the catchy tunes, it left us wanting more brass. Although performed well by the orchestra, the arrangement did very little to stir any emotion from the audience. It's a shame there were no fireworks to make up for the loss of excitement.

The mediocre middle section of the program continued with the premiere of Heather Schmidt's *Blue Morphos*. Schmidt was inspired by the Blue Morphos species of

butterfly in this work, as it musically portrays the transformation from caterpillar to butterfly.

The one-movement piece is written for orchestra, piano and dancer, which initially promised to be visually dramatic. Schmidt proved to be an experienced dancer, but her choreography was uninteresting. Using a combination of movements from ballet, modern dance and Asian dance, she moved mechanically about the stage. The simple lighting did not enhance the impact of the dance.

Blue Morphos was reminiscent of mid-20th century American and Russian music. It offered disjunct melodies, instrumental experimentation and heavy use of percussion. In the final minutes of the piece, Schmidt switched from dancer to pianist. The addition of the piano was pleasant, featuring swelling arpeggios in the manner of Rachmaninoff. The HPO was very focused in this piece. While *Blue Morphos* was a departure from the ordinary, the work simply lacked the magic of Beethoven's *Fidelio Overture* and Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony*.

2-4 HPO pays homage to the great Romantics

October 7, 2004

Hamilton Place

A modest-sized crowd came out for an evening of Romantic music performed by the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra in its first classical concert of the 2004–05 season on Thursday. The music was not Romantic in the sense of candlelight dinners, but rather Romantic in style, with Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 5*, Jean Sibelius' *Violin Concerto* and the overture to Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Der Freischütz* (*The Sharpshooter*).

The concert was part of the city's annual Great Romantics Festival. The event celebrates the Romantic period of compositions that appeared roughly between 1820 and 1900. The HPO gave its audience a decent performance under the baton of guest conductor Robert Trory.

Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 5* was the most powerful work of the program. Tchaikovsky composed it in the summer of 1888, more than ten years after his *Symphony No. 4*. While Tchaikovsky provided a written, full-scale interpretation of the earlier work, he only included such details for the first movement of *Symphony No. 5*. However, it is clear that the ideas of complete resignation before fate, and the conflict between freedom and predestination, are central to both symphonies.

The HPO emphasized the fate theme whenever it appeared. The strings were strong throughout all four movements, producing great power when needed, particularly in the first and fourth movements, and dropping down to the faintest whisper in the second. Trory deserves credit for his careful management of the orchestra. His cues and motions were emphatic, maintaining the attention of the musicians and keeping them together, especially during the faster tempi in the fourth movement.

The brass section, for the most part, was right on, but tended to be a bit overwhelming at times, especially in the first and third movements. The French horn section, which struggled last season, put in a consistent performance. The soaring French horn solo in the second movement, performed by Neil Spaulding, was weak at the beginning, but soon improved and was as poignant as Tchaikovsky intended it to be. The

trumpet and trombone sections deserve special mention for their efforts, especially in the final movement.

The winds were a little meek, possibly intimidated by the wind coming from the brass players sitting behind them. While the solos throughout the work were clear and audible, especially those by clarinetist Stephen Pierre and bassoonist Eric Hall, the section as an ensemble was inconsistent on its entries. This did not seriously affect the overall performance of the piece, which on whole was passionate and stirring.

Sibelius' *Violin Concerto*, featuring violinist Jonathan Carney, was likely meant to be the focal point of the evening, but several problems hampered the performance. Sibelius penned the work in 1903, but after its premiere it received heavy criticism and was labelled "unoriginal." Sibelius revised the concerto, presenting it in 1905. This easier version is more commonly performed.

Carney, concertmaster of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, gave an uninspired performance. It was evident he knew the work, but he presented it with an air of boredom that resonated throughout the hall. His technique was strong, with clean runs, solid trills and good intonation, but he failed to excite the senses.

Another major problem that hampered the performance was the volume level. Carney underestimated the acoustics of the building, leaving the people in the "cheap" seats in the balconies straining to hear him. He was also not always on the same page (the same measure, to be exact) as the orchestra. This was the fault of Carney and the conductor. While Trory was able to create many beautiful, sweeping moments with the

orchestra, he failed to take sufficient heed of the soloist. The performance was good enough for the crowd Thursday evening, who gave a warm response.

The overture to Weber's *Der Freischütz* worked well in the Romantic program; however, the HPO's lacklustre performance merits little mention. Despite Trory's noticeable efforts and gestures, the orchestra fell short of the passion he was trying to exude. There were some pleasant sections, such as the definitive clarinet solo played by Pierre, and the dramatic crescendo at the end of the piece, but it did not put the overture on the pedestal Harold Schonberg did when he labelled the opera as the composition that "set off the Romantic age of music."

2-5 HPO enralls audience young and old

November 20, 2004

Hamilton Place

The lobby of Hamilton Place was alive with the sound of children's voices before the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra's concert on Saturday night. Fifty students from Caistor Central School, along with 60 parents attended the performance, adding a whole new dynamic to the evening.

The program of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's overture to *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*), the world premiere of *Planet* for soprano and orchestra by HPO composer-in-residence Heather Schmidt, Mozart's *Exsultate, Jubilate* and Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* was cause for pre-concert excitement. The combination of beloved works like Beethoven's *Fifth* and a Mozart overture, with a world premiere of a Canadian piece gave the audience something to look forward to. The presence of the enthusiastic

students dressed up in their Sunday best raised the excitement to a whole new level. The HPO did not disappoint their eager fans.

Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* was the highlight of the evening. Beethoven composed the symphony between 1804 and 1808. It premiered in Vienna in December 1808 in a landmark concert consisting entirely of Beethoven premieres, including the *Fifth* and *Sixth* symphonies and the *Fourth Piano Concerto*, among others.

From its premiere through to today, *Symphony No. 5* has been recognized as a work of genius. The ground-breaking, four-note theme that starts the opening movement and subsequently unifies the piece is recognizable around the world.

The HPO's rendering of these famous four notes at the opening of the piece Saturday night thrilled the audience, young and old. The orchestra maintained their attention through to the closing chord with a technically sound performance. The strings were powerful, especially in the opening *Allegro con brio* and *Andante con moto* movements. The cellos and double basses are to be commended for their warm, full sound.

The wind section was consistently on time with their entries, with individual members contributing precise solos. There was harmonious ensemble work between flutist Paula Elliott, oboist Jon Peterson, clarinetist Stephen Pierre and bassoonist Melanie Eyers.

The brass players, especially the French horns, were outstanding. Timpanist Jean Norman Iadeluca was the glue of the work with his precise playing. The only problem

was Michael Reason's conducting. The musicians had their parts down cold, but he could have drawn more passion from the orchestra.

The overture to Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* was also technically sound. *Die Zauberflöte* was Mozart's last opera, premiering in September 1791. Mozart fell gravely ill during its run and was bedridden. While at home resting, he would look at his watch and follow the performance in his imagination. Two months later he died.

Beethoven prized *Die Zauberflöte* over any other Mozart opera not only because of its plot, but also because of its wide variety of beautiful music. The overture presents snippets of several of these charming melodies.

Judging by the HPO's performance, it was evident they thoroughly enjoyed playing this work through their graceful and playful reading. The winds, in particular, gave an inspired performance with great precision, especially among Elliott, Peterson, Pierre and Eyers.

The HPO maintained the spirit of Mozart in the motet *Exsultate, Jubilate*. Mozart composed the work at the age of 16 while in Milan for the premiere of his opera *Lucio Silla* in 1772. The famous castrato Venanzio Rauzzini sang the leading role, inspiring Mozart to write *Exsultate, Jubilate* specifically for him. The work's virtuosity and florid, coloratura style gives us some idea today of the capabilities of Rauzzini's voice.

The HPO performed the piece well, but soprano Martha Guth left something to be desired. Guth has been labelled a future opera star by several Canadian music critics and is currently a member of the Royal Canadian Opera in Toronto. However, these

credentials fell flat on Saturday. Her weak lower register combined with poor enunciation and lack of emotion ruined the performance.

Guth fared better in Schmidt's *Planet* for soprano and orchestra. Schmidt based the piece on the poem "Planet" by Canadian author Jane Urquhart. She created the eight minute work around the text with the idea of portraying the vastness of the universe.

What resulted was something between Richard Strauss' *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and the soundtrack of the television series *Star Trek*. Schmidt created an aura of infinite space by using such devices as arpeggios on the flute and harp, solos in the upper register of the first violin and percussive outbursts of the gong, cymbal and xylophone. The soprano's part utilized a wide range, emphasizing key words of the poem.

The combination of the appealing program, exceptional playing and enthusiastic young audience members resulted in the finest concert of the season. As it is only November, one can only hope this wonderful combination will appear in future concerts.

2-6 Schmidt fails to satisfy Rolston-deprived audience

February 26, 2005

Hamilton Place

Saturday night's Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra concert started with the announcement that Canadian cellist Shauna Rolston had the flu and would not be performing the celebrated *Cello Concerto in B Minor* by Antonín Dvořák. Alex Baran, the orchestra's general manager, announced that it wasn't a problem, as composer-in-residence Heather Schmidt was on hand to perform Franz Liszt's *Piano Concerto No. 1 in E flat Major*. Within the next half-hour, it was revealed that Schimdt may not have been the best choice as a replacement.

There is nothing wrong with Liszt's concerto itself. While it breaks away from the popular concerto-style of the Classical era, it has many appealing aspects. Liszt's pieces may be more flashy than musical, but in this work the composer wanted to create a concerto that was not only technically demanding, but truly musical. Liszt spent over 20 years working on the piece. It did not premiere until 1855 and was not immediately accepted. Today, it is recognized as a prime example of the mature Liszt style and is a ground-breaking work in the piano repertoire.

This was not evident from Schmidt's performance. She mastered the technical aspect of the work, but the musicality that Liszt was so careful to inject into the piece was noticeably absent. While some people may think technical mastery is enough for Liszt, in this piece it proved to be inadequate. Schmidt flew through the endless runs and arpeggios, but was not always in control, hitting many wrong notes. Accented chords in the lower register of the piano were banged out as though she was hammering a nail; the melody in the right hand was often sacrificed because of this.

Michael Reason was not able to successfully meld the orchestra and piano. Entries were late, shared passages were not cohesive, and balance between the two elements was rarely present. The musicians, for the most part, did their best. The strings gave an excellent reading of the work, especially the first violins, while the winds were consistent. The brasses, who were unable to control their volume for the entire concert, were obtuse. Audience reaction to the concerto was understandably lukewarm.

Alexander Borodin's *Prince Igor Overture* was also thrown into the first half of the concert to fill time from the absent cello concerto. *Prince Igor* was Borodin's only opera;

at the time of his death, it lay unfinished. The overture appeared years later, arranged by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov.

The orchestra did not always succeed in bringing out the virile and energetic nature of the overture. The string section was in top form for this work, especially the cello section, which was flawless during its solo, but the wind and brass sections brought down the level of performance. The flutes were flat, the French horns unprepared, and when combined with a shaky opening and awkward tempo changes, the result was anything but what Borodin would have had in mind. It sounded like the musicians were playing the overture for the first time.

Baran and Reason's programming strategy of placing a big bang piece in the second half of a concert proved successful. In this case it was Johannes Brahms' *Symphony No. 2 in D Major*. Brahms did not compose a symphony until the age of 43 because he was haunted by the success of Beethoven. His *First Symphony* premiered in 1876 but was criticized for relying too heavily on the symphonic style of the legendary composer.

Brahms spent the next year and a half working on his second symphony. When it was first performed in 1877, the Viennese public responded favorably, labelling Brahms the Beethoven of his day. The piece has been described by many critics as "filled with warm sunshine." The work is deeply emotional and a true representative of the Romantic era.

The orchestra seemed much more prepared for the symphony than the other pieces on Saturday's program. The cello section shone in this work again, especially in the first

movement. The principals of the wind section could be counted on for clean, tuneful solos throughout the piece, especially in the second movement. The brass, however, lessened the beauty of Brahms' music. Already powerful in numbers, with tuba, trombones, French horns, and trumpets, they outplayed anyone unluckily scored against them. Reason is equally to blame for failing to pull back these wild musicians.

By the end of the symphony, the crowd's spirits almost seemed revived from the disappointing first half. Reason's decision to do an encore made things even better. Explaining that he felt the audience was cheated out of hearing any Dvořák, he ended the concert with the *Slavonic Dance No. 1 in C Major, Op. 46*. The lively tempo, spirited melody and overall acceptable playing excited the crowd and helped them to leave smiling.

Chapter 3 – ChamberWORKS!

3-1 ChamberWORKS! integral part of Hamilton music scene

Jack Mendelsohn believed that chamber music had a future in Hamilton back in 1994. Although he had been a part of two chamber ensembles in the Toronto area that had failed to make a lasting impression, he felt that such an ensemble could thrive in Steeltown, which was currently lacking this element on their classical music scene.

Using his knowledge of the chamber music repertoire and his relationship with some of the best musicians in the Golden Horseshoe region, Mendelsohn started a new group called chamberWORKS! Finding repertoire and musicians was easy, but raising enough money to make his dream a reality was another thing.

It took several months for Mendelsohn to get chamberWORKS! approved as a non-profit organization and find a group of sponsors who could help the ensemble get going. Finally, the first concert was presented on February 26, 1995. As word spread about the new chamber music ensemble, audience numbers started growing, as did the number of concerts.

“In our first year there were only two concerts, but after that there were four concerts each season,” Mendelsohn says. “We received a Trillium grant in 2002 that spanned three years, allowing us to do five concerts a season.”

The first concert featured Mendelsohn, who is also the principal cellist of the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as other musicians such as pianist Valerie Tryon, flautist Suzanne Shulman and clarinetist Stephen Pierre. Anyone who has attended a chamberWORKS! concert over the past 11 seasons will recognize these names. Violist

Douglas Perry and violinist Mark Skazinetsky have also become well-known faces over the past four years. While the instrumentation required varies for each concert, Mendelsohn tries to maintain a consistency among the performers.

“This is not a revolving door type of chamber ensemble,” Mendelsohn explains. “We are not exactly the same group all the time, but if you look at past seasons, it is generally the same people performing.”

Hiring the same instrumentalists for concerts is especially important, because rehearsals only start two weeks before a concert. Heavier pieces require more time. Unlike a string quartet, which uses the same four musicians every time, chamberWORKS! concerts feature an average of six musicians, with an occasional concert requiring nine or ten. Mendelsohn is sometimes required to bring in a new performer if a regular musician is not available, which can threaten the balance that is essential to a small ensemble of performers.

“The challenge of chamberWORKS! is keeping a balance,” Mendelsohn verifies. “Especially when you have to prepare a piece with someone new over a short period of time. It would be nice to have enough concerts so we could achieve more consistency in our performances.”

Mendelsohn also tries to find a balance in programming. ChamberWORKS! has become well-known for concerts featuring famous and lesser-known composers. The ensemble has been successful in presenting works by such composers as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Joseph Haydn, Antonio Vivaldi, Johannes Brahms and Richard Strauss, as well as those by Friedrich Kuhlau, Carl Maria

von Weber, Jean Sibelius, Benjamin Britten and Sigismund Neukomm. Programs are dominated by European composers.

Mendelsohn also strives to include pieces that require different ensembles of musicians, rather than solely a string quartet, for example, for an entire concert. This includes such variety as flute quartets, piano quintets, and clarinet quintets.

Musicians introduce pieces with interesting background information. This interaction with the audience eases the tension often felt at classical concerts. Musicians further interact with audience members after concerts over complimentary coffee and dessert. This informal atmosphere combined with high-quality musicians and varying repertoire has been a success with audiences. Over the 2002–03 and 2003–04 seasons, audience numbers have increased over 20 per cent each season, according to Mendelsohn.

“It seems that we’re now at a turning point,” Mendelsohn states. “We are able to finance more musicians, which should make for more interesting programming. Therefore, we can do the five concerts, but we are cutting back on our advertising budget.”

Ticket sales are only one source of revenue for chamberWORKS! The ensemble has an annual operating budget of \$100,000. The budget consists of money from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, as well as corporate sponsors such as Dofasco, Siemens, Girard Translation, Taylor Leibow, CIBC, TD Canada Trust and BMO. Private donors and fundraising also contribute to the budget. Mendelsohn is proud to state that chamberWORKS! has never had a deficit.

“We always live within our budget,” he says. “If we don’t have the funds, we have smaller programs.”

The Trillium grant has enabled chamberWORKS! to do more than perform an additional concert each season. The group recorded their first CD with grant money in the early summer of 2004. ChamberWORKS! has also expanded its in-school interactive concert presentations.

After the ensemble’s first season, Mendelsohn was inspired to perform concerts in schools in the Hamilton-Wentworth District Board of Education. As music programs were slashed from school budgets, chamberWORKS! kept students interested in music with their school concerts. During the first year of the program in 1996 there were three concerts. Eventually that number climbed to 12. Now, with the Trillium grant and funding from TD Canada Trust, chamberWORKS! has performed in 24 schools for about 7,800 students each year for the past three years.

“It’s great for the kids, because a lot of them haven’t seen orchestral instruments,” Mendelsohn comments. “We try to bring in a variety of instruments. For the last three years, we’ve been going in with five musicians playing clarinet, bassoon, horn, cello, recorder, guitar and bass among other instruments. There are a lot of schools and we’ve played in most of them, but not all of them yet.”

The financial situation of ChamberWORKS! is monitored by a board of nine community members, many of whom are actively involved in the arts community. Mendelsohn says they are effective in serving as a mirror of the community, letting him know if his programming is on target. The board also plays the essential role of finding

and maintaining corporate sponsors. Each board member also donates approximately \$500 to \$1,500 out of his or her own pockets. Mendelsohn says he is lucky to have such an exceptional board.

“We have a unique board, as everyone is a chamber music lover,” he states. “They actually show up at all the concerts, as well as serve on the board.”

Mendelsohn believes the future of chamberWORKS! will be much more of the same. He says that their first CD will help with promoting the ensemble. Ideally, he'd like to expand the season, but is cautious of doing too much at once. The 2004–05 season had 10 concerts, including four summer concerts at the Royal Botanical Gardens and one at Festitalia. Mendelsohn is not sure if he can sustain this number of concerts in coming seasons. As other music organizations are struggling in the city during the slump in the Hamilton economy, he believes in taking things as they come and listening to the board's suggestions.

“The board has to make a decision if we will add more concerts,” he says. “I'd like to have 10 to 12 concerts a year, but it is not going to happen. I think this is too small a community to support that many concerts.”

Regardless of the number of concerts, the most important goal is to keep chamberWORKS! alive. Chamber music, and good chamber music at that, is hard to find and maintain in a city close to Toronto. Hamilton is lucky to have someone as dedicated as Mendelsohn keeping it alive in the city.

3-2 ChamberWORKS! presents works by Kuhlau and Beethoven

June 13, 2004

Dofasco Centre for the Arts

At first glance, the chamberWORKS! program for their final concert of the 2003–2004 season on Sunday evening seemed understandable with the pairing of the contrasting works *Septet in E flat Major* by Ludwig van Beethoven and *Piano Quartet in G Minor* by Friedrich Kuhlau. However, chamberWORKS! Artistic Director Jack Mendelsohn did not choose Kuhlau and Beethoven randomly. While the lives of dozens of composers may be linked in some way to Beethoven (six degrees of separation, perhaps?) Kuhlau's life mirrors Beethoven's in many ways.

Beethoven was born in Germany 16 years earlier than his fellow countryman Kuhlau. Both earned early fame as piano virtuosi, as well as composers for the instrument. Napoleon impacted the careers of these two men in the first decades of the 1800s. When Napoleon occupied Bremen, Kuhlau fled to Copenhagen, where he started a new life and earned a living as a piano teacher and composer. Beethoven, who initially admired the man, came to realize he was a tyrant and subsequently changed the inscription of his *Third Symphony* from “Buonaparte” to “Symphony Eroica.”

Kuhlau and Beethoven both had a handicap. Kuhlau had lost the vision in his right eye from a childhood accident, and Beethoven went deaf in his 30s. Although Kuhlau would call Copenhagen home for the remainder of his life, his tours to Germany, Sweden and Austria allowed him to keep up to date on musical life in Europe. In 1825, Kuhlau had the opportunity to meet Beethoven, whom he had admired for so long. The two men,

along with an entourage of other musicians, spent an afternoon drinking and playing music.

Beethoven's septet was one of his most popular works during his lifetime. Composed in 1800, the work was dedicated to Empress Maria Theresa. The piece is for violin, viola, cello, bass, French horn, clarinet and bassoon, resulting in a full sound with different instrumental colours. Beethoven wrote the septet in the Classical tradition of the divertimento, with six movements.

Kuhlau's piano quartet, in contrast, features string trio and piano. The work, premiered in 1829 in Copenhagen, was considered brilliant by Kuhlau's contemporaries. The quartet has many rich, dramatic moments, most involving the piano, which are similar to Beethoven's later writing. It also has moments of lightness that may be traced to Mozart. It is rumoured that the piano part was so difficult that even Kuhlau himself could not perform it.

Pianist Valerie Tryon, however, had no difficulty with the piece on Sunday night. As usual, her performance was spirited and masterful. The piano is the centerpiece of the Kuhlau quartet while the strings serve primarily supporting roles. Cellist Jack Mendelsohn and violist Douglas Perry played their roles well. Mark Skazinetsky, associate concertmaster of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, was not as accepting of his subservient role and occasionally tried to draw attention with loud, flashy playing. He was also strident and out of tune at times.

Skazinetsky was also the weakest link in the septet. He made several mistakes during his solos and tended to rush sixteenth note passages. However, the other six

instrumentalists did an outstanding job on their respective parts. Clarinetist Stephen Pierre performed clean solos, bassoonist Kathleen McLean was consistent and Christopher Gongos hit every note on the French horn, which was especially enjoyable, as it is rare to hear a good French horn player in Hamilton these days.

Mendelsohn, Perry and bassist Rob Wolanski provided a good balance to the winds. Their passages were flawless and executed with great passion. The group's performance of the second movement, the adagio cantabile, was effective and moving. This was the most popular movement of the work back in the 1800s. The melody may also be heard in a Rhenish folk song. It is unknown whether Beethoven was inspired by the song or this movement was so well-known it became a folksong.

That Beethoven truly admired Kuhlau is apparent from an entry in his conversation notebook reading, "Kuhlau is a man of talent, isn't he... He must have had a lot to drink because he can hold his liquor."

3-3 ChamberWORKS! serves musical feast at Royal Botanical Gardens
August 5, 2004
Hendrie Park – Royal Botanical Gardens

ChamberWORKS! served a musical feast Thursday evening at the Royal Botanical Gardens. The concert was the first of a series of four, with proceeds going to the gardens.

The event started with the finest musical ingredients, consisting of HPO principal cellist Jack Mendelsohn, HPO principal clarinetist Stephen Pierre, celebrated pianist Valerie Tryon, TSO associate concertmaster Mark Skazinetsky, bassoonist Kathleen McLean and trumpeter Bob Grim.

The evening's *pièce de résistance* was Franz Joseph Haydn's *Piano Trio No. 25 in G Major*. This three-movement work was captivating. Tryon's reading of Haydn was excellent, with light two-note slurs, clear phrasing and attention to dynamics. The piano trio, composed in 1795, is one of Haydn's last. While the violin serves a subservient role in his piano trios of the 1780s, Haydn emancipates it in his later trios, providing the instrument with several brilliant solo passages. Skazinetsky mastered these solos, especially in the second movement. He used a heavier bow for this movement, which anticipated the Romantic style of composition. Mendelsohn's accompaniment was solid.

Another fine musical dish was Fritz Kreisler's *Miniature Viennese March*. The violin leads throughout the composition, which is unsurprising considering Kreisler's love for the instrument and his fame as a violinist. Skazinetsky delivered a refined performance. Although the work runs just under three minutes, it presents two opposing musical moods. One is stately, the other melancholic. Skazinetsky, Tryon and Mendelsohn were quick to adjust their tones to reflect the changing moods.

Dessert came in the form of two Scott Joplin rags. Light and sugary sweet, these 20th-century American works were a pleasant afterthought to the rich musical offerings of Haydn and Kreisler. The first treat was *The Chrysanthemum*, a piece written by Joplin in 1904. As ragtime was still considered taboo, Joplin endowed this rag with more dignity by calling it an "An Afro-American Intermezzo." The work was the first rag for bassoon and piano. McLean injected humour and liveliness into her performance, as did Tryon.

Almost as satisfying was the performance of *The Entertainer*, arranged for piano trio. One of Joplin's most famous rags, it was published in 1903 and was immortalized in

the 1973 movie *The Sting*. The trio arrangement alternated the melody between piano and violin-cello duo. Tryon, Mendelsohn and Skazinetsky brought the work to life with their spirited rendition. The only drawback was the inappropriate rapid tempo. Accounts of Joplin's piano playing stress his smooth legato, singing tone, and sense of rhythm. His rags differ from the flashy school of ragtime that developed after him.

And what would a musical feast be without kitchen utensils? Mendelsohn wittingly programmed Bohuslav Martinů's *La revue de cuisine* in Thursday night's concert. The ballet was written during the 1920s while the Czech composer was living in Paris. The city at that time was buzzing with the new sounds of jazz and raging with the latest dance crazes, from the tango to the Charleston. Discontent with his attempts at composing serious ballets, Martinů accepted a commission to write a ballet based on the story of *The Temptation of the Sainly Pot*. The ingenious story involves the dishcloth and the twirling stick trying to prevent the upcoming marriage between the pot and the lid.

Although none of the chamberWORKS! members resembled the necessary kitchen items, the music was entertaining enough. Martinů's ballet features four movements, including a tango, a Charleston, and two outer movements that are a combination of a fox trot and march. The music surrounding Martinů in France was likely so contagious that he decided to incorporate it in his ballet for mass appeal.

The performance of this piece had its problems Thursday evening, with occasional missed notes, out-of-sync duos and trios, and inconsistent tempos within single movements. However, these failed to ruin the overall effect of the playful piece.

The evening ended with an encore of the Charleston movement from *La revue de cuisine*, with the final notes echoing throughout Hendrie Park as the sun began to set. It was a perfect end to a “fulfilling” evening of music.

3-4 ChamberWORKS! enchanting at Royal Botanical Gardens

August 12, 2004

Hendrie Park – Royal Botanical Gardens

ChamberWORKS! filled the rose garden at the Royal Botanical Gardens with enchanting music on Thursday evening. The charming qualities of the harp and flute, in addition to the string quartet, created a magical atmosphere well suited for a fairy tale.

The piece that reaffirmed this evening of outdoor pleasure was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Flute Quartet in D Major*. As its title suggests, the flute is the leading instrument in this challenging work. Suzanne Shulman met the challenge and emerged victorious with a polished performance. She admits the piece is one of her favourites and has performed it on numerous occasions.

The three members of the string trio, consisting of violinist Mark Skazinetsky, violist Douglas Perry and cellist Jack Mendelssohn, were ideal accompanists for Shulman. Their performances were clean and never overpowered the all-important flute melody.

While the performance was magical, the story behind this flute quartet is anything but. Mozart was commissioned to write four quartets and three flute concertos for an amateur Dutch flautist named De Jean in 1777. Mozart was grateful for the much-needed commission, but found other distractions. He struggled with the works and in a letter to his father he wrote, “I become quite powerless whenever I am obliged to write for an

instrument [the flute] which I cannot bear.” By De Jean’s deadline, Mozart had only three quartets and two concertos composed. Accordingly, he was paid less than half of the agreed amount. Although Mozart indicated in his letter his distaste for the flute, any flautist can attest that the pieces are among the finest quartets and concertos written for the instrument.

The harp was a pleasant addition to Thursday’s night program, enhancing the mystical effect of the evening. The harp’s musical powers were made legendary in the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus played on an early version of the instrument to charm the wild beasts at the gates of Hades so he could pass by them and rescue Eurydice.

While there were no wild beasts at the Royal Botanical Gardens Thursday evening, the harp did charm the audience in Maurice Ravel’s *Introduction and Allegro* for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet. It is truly French in character, with rich instrumental colours and varied timbres. Although seven musicians are required, the harp is featured in the manner of a concerto.

The piece, composed in 1906, is one of the greatest in the harp repertoire. It was commissioned to promote a new instrument called the chromatic harp produced by the Parisian firm of Pleyel in 1897. The chromatic harp had no pedals, substituting a string for each semitone of the octave. It was not generally accepted and only has a small repertoire of music, most of which can be played on the orchestral harp.

Harpist Erica Goodman worked wonders, performing the *Introduction* with great tenderness and lyricism. Her full sound echoed throughout the tent and out into the

surrounding gardens, drawing passers-by to the venue. The *Allegro* was quicker and more demanding on the harpist. Goodman performed trills, glissandos and arpeggios with ease. The flute and clarinet were cohesive, as were the strings. It was an enchanting performance, with many moments of sheer beauty.

The harp also played an active role in *Quartet* for flute, violin, viola, cello and harp by Jean Françaix. It was composed in 1934, 28 years after Ravel's piece. Françaix continued the French musical traditions of charm and pleasure in his work, by using different instrumental combinations to produce varying musical colours in the tradition of earlier masters Ravel and Debussy.

Besides the harp, the flute and violin also have their share of the spotlight, while the viola and cello effectively provide various accompaniments. The musicians on Thursday evening had a few problems keeping together in the opening movement, but by the second movement were able to become a cohesive unit. The audience enjoyed the work, content with the fine music and beautiful outdoor setting. Some couples even enjoyed a picnic dinner while listening, reminding one of a Pierre-Auguste Renoir painting.

Antonin Dvořák's *Waltz No. 1* arranged for string quartet was a fitting after the evening's heavier works. This piano piece was arranged for string quartet in 1878 by Dvořák himself. The piano works of Schubert were the model for the waltz. Dvořák held the composer in the highest esteem. However, the Bohemian melody and rhythm clearly identify the Czech composer as its author.

The waltz is a lighter work of Dvořák's, demonstrating his dedication to his nationalistic roots. The piece alternates fast, Bohemian melodies with slower, lyrical moments. The chamberWORKS! string quartet performed it with passion and precision. Skazinetsky, in particular, injected life and love into this work.

Similar to last week's program, Mendelsohn included a Scott Joplin rag. This week's selection was *Heliotrope Bouquet* (1907) arranged for string quartet. The piece is actually credited to both Scott Joplin and Louis Chauvin. Joplin based the rag on the first two strains of a piece written by his good friend Chauvin, a Creole composer.

The performance was not as successful as the previous week's, perhaps because of the lack of the piano. A rag just isn't a rag without one. The arrangement placed the majority of the melody in the first violin, with the second violin occasionally playing along, but generally sharing the accompanying chords with the viola and cello. It proved uninteresting, and tuning problems further hampered it. The title *Heliotrope* (a type of flowering plant) *Bouquet* fit the garden setting, but the piece did not fit with the rest of the enchanting concert.

3-5 Spaghetti, wine and Verdi
September 11, 2004
chamberWORKS! at Festitalia

Each September, Hamilton is bursting at the seams with events celebrating the city's rich Italian heritage. There are spaghetti dinners, street parties, wine tastings and social dances. The official title of this celebration is Festitalia.

Festitalia wouldn't be complete without a celebration of one of the best Italian exports – its music. The list of classical composers from this heritage is extensive, but

arguably the most beloved are the Italian opera composers, especially Giuseppe Verdi, Gioachino Rossini and Giacomo Puccini. Opera would not have been the same without these masters.

While the average concert-goer would likely recognize a famous aria by any of those three composers, their chamber music would not be as easily identifiable. This is a shame, since these compositions are filled with the same high-quality instrumental material that makes their operas so beloved.

This year Mary Romeo, chair of the Festitalia music committee, recognized the importance of Italian chamber music and asked chamberWORKS! to perform. Jack Mendelsohn, the ensemble's artistic director, enthusiastically agreed.

The concert was held in the Studio Theatre at Hamilton Place, which was far too small a hall for the large crowd that came out for the event. Dofasco Centre for the Arts, the usual chamberWORKS! venue, would have been better suited for the performance. Regardless, the event was a success and gave the attending Italians reason to be proud of their country's heritage. ChamberWORKS! should be equally proud of putting on a fine concert.

Puccini's *Crisantemi* for string quartet was the most charming piece of the evening, despite its short duration of a mere five minutes. The miniature piece was composed one evening in 1890 in memory of the death of the Duke of Savoy.

Accordingly, the work portrays melancholy through its melody, foreshadowing the lyrical intimacy that would make Puccini's dramatic style incomparable. *Crisantemi* was written

before Puccini made his big break into the operatic world. The melodic material in the work reappeared in his first successful opera *Manon Lescaut* in 1893.

ChamberWORKS! performed the work as a cohesive unit. No single instrument is featured in it. First violinist Mark Skazinetsky, second violinist Jayne Maddison, violist Douglas Perry and cellist Jack Mendelsohn maintained the equilibrium of sound. The performance was tender, effectively conveying the sombre mood.

ChamberWORKS! also put in a strong performance of Rossini's *Sonata No. 1 in G Major* for two violins, cello and bass. This sonata is one of six that Rossini wrote in 1804 when he was only 12. Unusually, Rossini added a bass and removed the viola from the string quartet. The young composer was a friend of an amateur bassist named Agostino Triossi. He likely included the bass specifically for Triossi.

During the 1820s, Rossini was more famous than Beethoven, especially for his comic operas, such as *The Barber of Seville*. However, he did produce a substantial amount of chamber music that is unfortunately overlooked, making the ChamberWORKS! performance that much more important.

The talented Rob Wolanski was added to the ensemble as bassist for the Rossini sonata. While the bass plays a largely accompanying role in the work, he was consistent and maintained appropriate tempos for each of the three movements.

Maddison outplayed Skazinetsky, particularly in the first and third movements, when both violins are provided with solo material. Maddison's runs were clean and consistent. Her rich tone enhanced her precise performance. Skazinetsky did not seem quite prepared for the work. His playing was less confident and less enjoyable than that of

his counterpart. Mendelsohn and Perry were strong throughout the work, performing their solos with conviction.

Verdi composed his only piece of chamber music, the *String Quartet in E Minor*, at the age of 60 after he had already been crowned the king of opera with works like *La Traviata*, *Otello* and *Rigoletto*. ChamberWORKS! brought out some of the quartet's most beautiful moments. Skazinetsky played better in this piece than the others, and his solos were more confident, with a warm tone. The musicians maintained a constant tempo in the fourth fugal movement, failing to give in to the problems that threaten any performance of a fugue, primarily rushing and getting lost in the music.

The concert closed with the *Quartet No. 7 in E Major* for violin, viola, cello and guitar by Niccolò Paganini. Considered one of the best violin virtuosos in music history, he was also adept on the guitar. Paganini composed many solo and ensemble guitar pieces that are not as well known as they should be.

Arguably, the most entertaining part of *Quartet in E Major* is the second movement, with pizzicato throughout. The ensemble executed this movement almost perfectly. Mendelsohn's primary pizzicato solo was clean and audible. The problem that slightly hampered the movement, and seriously affected the rest of the piece, was that the guitar was inaudible most of the time. Wolanski appeared to know the guitar part well, but it could not be heard among those of the other musicians.

ChamberWORKS! received a well-deserved round of applause at the end of the evening, suggesting that they might become as common a part of Festitalia as the spaghetti dinners.

3-6 ChamberWORKS! their magic again

November 14, 2004

Dofasco Centre for the Arts

ChamberWORKS! has garnered a reputation in the community for giving high-quality concerts. Despite some new faces on the stage at their first concert of the 2004-05 season Sunday evening, the chemistry was still there, resulting in a first-rate performance.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Quintet in E flat Major, K. 407* was the most prepared and enjoyable piece of the program. Mozart composed the quintet in 1782 for his friend, Ignaz Leitzgeb, who was a cheese handler, as well as one of the best horn virtuosos of his time. The work is a combination of a quartet and concerto, meaning the horn part is difficult, to say the least. The quintet is representative of Mozart's musical style, with light textures, an abundance of two-note slurs, and charming little melodies.

Christopher Gongos was the right man for the job. As associate principal horn of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, he has earned his laurels. His warm, powerful tone enveloped the audience Sunday, grabbing their attention from his first notes. He tackled the work with gusto, giving a nearly flawless performance. The challenging runs in the Allegro and Rondo-Allegro movements were effortless and polished.

A tender moment occurred during the Andante movement through the horn and violin duet. Violinist Mark Skazinetsky was an able partner for Gongos. The two violists, Chau Luk and Daniel Blackman, were consistent. Jack Mendelsohn was at his best, providing a strong cello line.

ChamberWORKS! also gave an effective reading of Johannes Brahms' *Sextet in B flat Major, Op. 18*. Composed in 1860, it is Brahms' first major piece of chamber music.

The composer was 27 when he wrote it, as he had been previously occupied with compositions for the piano and voice. The work contains sections of lighter textures typical of the Classical period, as well as segments featuring the Romantic ideals of expression and passion.

The musicians brought out both styles throughout the sextet. ChamberWORKS! regular violinist Jayne Maddison, and newcomers Luk, Blackman, and cellist Marsha Moffitt joined Mendelsohn and Skazinetsky for this piece. While the sextet is not as charming as Mozart's horn quintet, it still has moments of melodic bliss. The Andante is haunting, with a beautiful melody first presented in the violin, then the cello. Skazinetsky and Mendelsohn performed the solos with warm tones, rich in vibrato.

Maddison and Moffitt contributed clean parts. Luk and Blackman weren't as successful in this work because they didn't meld with the group. This was demonstrated in their solos and duets in the opening Allegro. ChamberWORKS! regular violist, Douglas Perry, was sorely missed.

Luigi Boccherini's *Quintettino in C Major, Op. 30, No. 6*, also named, "La Musica Notturna delle Strade di Madrid" headed the program. Boccherini composed the work while serving as the chamber composer to the Infante Luís in Madrid. The quintettino, although written in the Classical era, has a Baroque feeling to it with its stately and reserved melody. As Boccherini was also a cellist, he was fond of writing cello concertos, as well as quintets for two cellos, two violins and viola, such as this one. Accordingly, he gives important melodic lines to the instrument.

Mendelsohn, Moffitt, Skazinetsky, Maddison and Luk gave the work a regal feeling. They paid close attention tempo, dynamics and phrasing. Mendelsohn's cello solos were graceful. His duets with Maddison, whose rich tone was pleasing, were majestic. There were a few timing problems in the work, as well as tuning issues, but these did not ruin the performance. The pizzicato sections thrilled the audience.

If Sunday's performance was any indication, we can expect another fine season from chamberWORKS!.

3-7 ChamberWORKS! fumbles on SuperBowl Sunday

February 6, 2005

Dofasco Centre for the Arts

There was likely more than one football fan in the large crowd at the chamberWORKS! concert Sunday night who groaned on discovering that the chamber group's first event since November was scheduled the same night as SuperBowl XXXIX. However, there were likely even more groans among football lovers and music lovers alike following the concert. ChamberWORKS!, who consistently puts on top-notch concerts, did not live up to its reputation.

Problems occurred from the start of the concert when a group of tired looking performers took the stage. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's charming *Flute Quartet in D Major* did not inspire the musicians, who performed the notes, but little else. The work is one of three Mozart composed in Mannheim in 1777 from a commission by an amateur flautist named De Jean. He wrote the piece under the influence of the current musical style in Mannheim, and as a result, it is melodic, gracious and absent of deep emotion.

Flautist Suzanne Shulman, a regular on the chamberWORKS! stage, performed the work with ease, but perhaps with a little too much familiarity. Shulman has played Mozart's flute quartets numerous times, and while she has no difficulty with the phrasing, runs and trills, her performance of the work has lost a bit of its edge and freshness.

Stylistically, this Mozart work requires a restricted amount of passion, but there was far less than the desired amount produced by violinist Jayne Maddison, violist Chau Luk and cellist Jack Mendelsohn. Their parts are subservient to the dominating flute, but still require careful attention and cohesiveness. At times the three were apt accompanists, at others they were three people who happened to be on the same stage.

The program departed from its standard 18th and early 19th century repertoire with Nina Rota's *Trio* for flute, violin and piano and Jean Sibelius' *Suite for String Trio in A Major*. Rota, a 20th century Italian composer who is most famous for his film scores, composed the *Trio* in the 1960s. The central idea of the work is the competing flute and violin, with the piano serving as the mediator.

The combination of Maddison, Shulman and the brilliant Valerie Tryon was promising, but the result was an unpolished work that needed much more rehearsal time. Maddison and Shulman seemed unconfident in their entries, while Tryon played on, often too loud to serve her intended role as the mediator. It seemed at any minute the thin rope the performers were treading on would break and all would be lost.

Jean Sibelius' *Suite for String Trio in A Major* fared worse, with audience members actually starting to talk before the work was over. Perhaps it was the fact that it was the last piece before intermission or that the audience was bored with the tired

playing, but this piece also received an uncharacteristic mediocre response from the audience.

Musically, it is an interesting work with unique use of melodic colouring combined with bold rhythmic patterns. What is most surprising about the piece is that Sibelius wrote it while studying at the Helsinki Music Institute in 1889 when he was only 23. The work was recognized at its first performance at the school as being boldly original, but it also received negative criticism. Over 100 years later, the audience at the ChamberWORKS! concert did not know how to react either.

If Maddison, Luk and Mendelsohn had been playing up to their normal standards, the reception would have likely been more positive. Maddison, who has sat in Mark Skazinetsky's shadow, finally had her moment to shine on Sunday, but she failed to make a lasting impression. She appeared jittery in the opening movement of the piece, over anticipating her entries. While her confidence returned in the following movements, she did not always pay enough attention to her bowing, accidentally banging her bow against the side of her violin.

Her problems affected Luk, a relative newcomer to the group, who was uncertain of entries and unfocused. Occasionally the pair would find common ground, creating fleeting moments of beautiful music. Mendelsohn was the strongest player of the group, with some beautiful solos in the piece, but his lack of eye contact with the other two musicians created many problems.

It appeared that all was lost at this point in the concert, but an intermission and a much needed break seemed to inject some enthusiasm into the performers. Maddison,

Luk, Mendelsohn and Tryon returned to the stage to give a riveting performance of Carl Maria von Weber's *Piano Quartet in B Minor*.

The *Piano Quartet in B Minor* is the only piano quartet Weber composed. It was written over a period of three years, with the second movement dating from 1806 and the other three movements appearing in 1809. This work is truly Romantic in nature, filled with passionate writing for the piano.

Weber wrote the piano part for himself. Because of his large hands, it is challenging to play. Tryon had no difficulty with the piece, demonstrating a mastery over the work that stunned the audience. Her passionate performance seemed to inspire the other musicians. Maddison's solos were confident and clean, and Luk matched her playing with an equally polished performance. Mendelsohn's solos had a rich, warm tone. The three musicians created an excellent balance with Tryon, forming a driving, cohesive unit.

The chamberWORKS! concert was no competition for the SuperBowl, but the second half reminded audiences why they will come back.

Chapter 4 – Symphony Hamilton

4-1 **Symphony Hamilton gives amateur musicians an outlet for their passion**

Symphony Hamilton can be defined by what it is not.

It is not a professional orchestra. It does not have a large performance season. And it is not the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra, much to the surprise of some Hamilton residents.

However, Symphony Hamilton is an essential ingredient in the city's musical recipe. Its most important role is giving amateur musicians a place to play.

“Most of the musicians have studied music at the university level, but have chosen other professions like medicine, law, accounting, etc.,” explains James McKay, music director. “Symphony Hamilton gives them a place to still play great music in an orchestra.”

There are 85 musicians in the orchestra, with the majority around the age of 30. There are some high school and university members, who join the community orchestra to gain experience for a potential career in music. Members come from Hamilton, Burlington, Toronto and Whitby.

“Because our orchestra is actually bigger than the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra, we can do different pieces,” McKay states. “For example, Bruckner's *Symphony No. 6* and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The Philharmonic, because of its financial difficulties, has had to maintain a more Beethoven-sized orchestra.”

Symphony Hamilton collaborates with the Mohawk College Singers each year for a major work. This pairing in the 2003–04 season for Ludwig van Beethoven's *Ninth*

Symphony was a highlight of the orchestra's history. The orchestra also features winners of their annual Young Artists' Competition, which allows musicians under the age of 26 to perform as soloists.

Symphony Hamilton was founded as the McMaster Symphony Orchestra in 1973 by Lee Hepner, a professor of music at McMaster University. It was created specifically as a community orchestra and had a mix of music students and community members in its first decade. The orchestra was large in size even in its early years, permitting orchestral works requiring many musicians to be performed. According to Peter Macdonald, a member since the first rehearsal in 1973, there were several reasons why the organization was successful in its early years.

“What made the orchestra work then was that Lee Hepner considered it part of his McMaster job,” Macdonald recalls. “Hepner taught classes at the university and worked full-time on the orchestra.”

A few years later, the orchestra was incorporated and registered as a non-profit organization. There was a separate board of directors, half of which were McMaster appointees and half of which were community members.

Hepner died suddenly in 1986, leaving the orchestra to move forward on its own.

McMaster maintained its association with the orchestra for two more years, but problems arose. The first was that audiences were decreasing and the likelihood of losing money was increasing. The second problem was political.

“Officials at the university didn’t like the fact we were fundraising using the McMaster name,” Macdonald says. “Because we were fundraising on our own, that was in competition with the McMaster Development Office.”

Finally, after much infighting, McMaster University and the orchestra parted ways. The orchestra renamed itself Symphony Hamilton and formed a new board of directors. The position of music director was difficult to fill, leaving the orchestra to hire guest conductors for its performances.

In 1990, Clyde Mitchell was appointed music director. However, he had also accepted the job of resident conductor at the Vancouver Symphony, forcing him to fly to Hamilton once a week to conduct the rehearsals. The music director position soon became vacant again. James McKay was hired in 1994.

McKay has several musical commitments, but makes Symphony Hamilton a priority. He teaches at the University of Western Ontario, shares the conducting duties of the UWO Symphony Orchestra and is the university’s opera conductor. He has worked hard to improve Symphony Hamilton’s quality of playing.

“The level of musicianship has gone up tremendously with McKay,” Macdonald explains. “It isn’t just a matter of shaping one section of a movement at a time. McKay shapes the entire work. It is just amazing what we’ve been able to do with him. He makes rehearsals and concerts exciting.”

The board of directors is also very happy with McKay’s effect on the orchestra. Stéphane Potvin, who has been on the board for three years and president since December 2002, says McKay works well with both the musicians and the board.

“He is very demanding, so the quality of playing has really increased,” Potvin says “He has brought a wonderful vision. From a board’s point of view, he is someone who is a real pleasure to work with. There’s no bickering and no hidden agendas. We meet every week and share ideas for the present and future.”

Before 2003, the board consisted solely of members in the orchestra. Then the board voted to include outside members, in order to bring fresh perspectives to the table.

The board’s main role is monitoring the financial activity of the organization. Symphony Hamilton has an annual budget of approximately \$70,000. This money is used to pay McKay, as well as the concertmaster, principal second violin, principal cello, principal bass and principal clarinet. Costs are also associated with buying and renting music, rehearsal space, office space, performance venues and advertising.

Currently, money to run the organization primarily comes from government sources, including the Trillium Foundation, the Hamilton Foundation, Canada Council for the Arts and the City of Hamilton. Symphony Hamilton also relies on a number of corporate sponsors for its livelihood. The board has been working hard to find more money.

“We’ve done a lot of work over the past year and a half, including building a business plan and putting it down on paper,” Potvin says. “We’ve also been building a long-term strategic vision, and governments see that. If you visit a sponsor and you show a nice program in colour, as opposed to something that has been photocopied, it gives a better impression.”

Symphony Hamilton suffered deficits several years in a row in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but is almost back on track.

“I think within the next year or two we’ll be able to finish a year in the black, as opposed to always having a little deficit we need to figure out how to pay off,” Potvin says.

The board and McKay are considering further expansion, such as holding summer concerts in wineries in the Niagara Region. However, there is always a risk with expansion if ticket sales do not exceed expenses. Right now, the organization is not financially prepared for that gamble.

Audience revenue is another source of funds. When audiences started dwindling in the early 2000s, McKay and the board decided to double their four performances in Hamilton by adding four Burlington concerts in 2002. This proved to be a good business move, doubling audience numbers. The board has unsuccessfully appealed to the City of Burlington for funding.

However, there is still room for improvement in audience numbers. Macdonald, who is a statistics professor at McMaster University, performed audience analyses in the mid-1990s.

“One interesting thing that came out in every survey is that 40 per cent of the audience is hearing us for the first time in every concert,” he explains. “That means we are reaching new people, but we are not holding them. Another finding is that you have approximately two friends or relatives attending a concert for each volunteer performer.

The implication there for a community orchestra is that if you hire a professional, you won't bring in more audience members."

Although Symphony Hamilton and the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra target different audiences, with Symphony Hamilton offering a more intimate and family-oriented experience, it is impossible to say the professional orchestra has no impact on the community orchestra.

When the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra folded for 13 months in 1996, Symphony Hamilton offered to honour subscriptions by allowing Philharmonic subscribers to attend their concerts instead. However, Symphony Hamilton did not pick up any new audience members during this period, according to Macdonald.

"There are subscribers to the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra who are in the habit of going to the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra, and old habits die hard," Macdonald says. "Subscribers do things because it is what they have always done."

The board is considering increasing the marketing budget. This will hopefully increase community awareness of Symphony Hamilton and draw larger audiences. McKay is also considering adding another concert to the season.

"I would like to expand to five or six concerts per year. Then we could put in a real pops concert," he says. "I'd like to have a pops concert so we could get a different audience with a different demographic. I think the orchestra has a great future ahead."

McKay, who is 59, says he does not know how much longer he'll be music director and takes one season at a time. He adds that at the moment the orchestra is front and centre in his creative activities.

With McKay's leadership and the board's thorough planning, Potvin is optimistic that Symphony Hamilton's future will be bright.

"I think the orchestra's just going to keep getting better," Potvin says. "It is already excellent, but it is going to be even better. As a business, I think it is going to become more stable with the efforts that we've put into advertising, fundraising, etc. I really believe we'll be able to do consistent full houses to the point we'll have to look for another concert location in both cities."

4-2 Symphony Hamilton bravely takes on Beethoven's *Ninth*
May 2, 2004
Hamilton Place

Symphony Hamilton took the bull by both horns with a performance of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* on Sunday night. However, the musicians were trampled by this same bull, who was simply too ferocious to handle.

The main problem with the work is that it contains difficult instrumental parts. This has hindered orchestras since it first premiered in 1824. That professional orchestras have struggled with Beethoven's wild beast explains Symphony Hamilton's mediocre performance.

The first movement was generally palatable. James McKay led the group with a tempo that was slow, but safe. Tuning was the main problem in this movement, especially in the average sized wind section. McKay chose to double the size of the string sections, resulting in a sea of violins, violas, cellos and double basses. But this massive, super-sized string section did not always produce the passion that is the heart of Beethoven's music.

McKay conducted with great expression, but these silent motions were not reciprocated by the musicians. The orchestra did not pay enough attention to their director in this movement and nearly fell apart at the midpoint. There were too many musicians on stage and too few watching their conductor.

The second movement started out well with the fugal passages alternating successfully between the sections. The timpanist was right on the money during this movement and throughout entire work. The brass section, especially the trumpets, was

also strong throughout this scherzo. However, the French horns were unable to contribute to the light mood of the movement. They struggled with notes and tuning.

The lovely, slow, third movement started off well with a pleasant bassoon solo. The strings produced the necessary warm sound and the music flowed along nicely. However, a series of late and early entries by various sections created a few problems.

When the fourth movement arrived, the musicians rallied to produce spirited music. This was by far the strongest movement for the orchestra, likely because it was the most rehearsed and the most beloved by the musicians. The tempo was a bit too quick in the opening instrumental section, causing many of the musicians to rush despite McKay's frantic efforts to pull back the reins. The tempo eventually slowed down, but still remained too fast for the remainder of the movement.

The Mohawk College Singers provided the essential choral element in the fourth movement. The well-rehearsed group was able to produce a strong enough sound to balance the large orchestra throughout the movement. The four soloists, all students at University of Western Ontario, were equally talented. Eva-Marie Misinski had a pure, sweet soprano voice that blended well with the rich sound of mezzo-soprano Sarah Al-Haddad. Sasha Bataligin had a powerful, well projected tenor voice. Baritone John Holland was not quite at the level of his singing companions. Although he knew the piece, his voice was not rich, bold or strong enough in tone.

Although this was not Symphony Hamilton's best performance, the musicians likely improved their skills through performing it. The opportunity to play Beethoven's

Symphony No. 9 does not come around very often for amateur musicians, so they will likely cherish this great musical opportunity.

4-3 Symphony Hamilton fills the night air with sounds of summer

May 15, 2004

St. Paul's Anglican Church

While sitting on your back deck in the early hours of a summer evening, the sounds of children playing, birds happily chirping and lawn mowers humming fill the air. Symphony Hamilton created their own sounds of a summer night on Saturday. Works by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Jeremiah Clarke and Antonin Dvořák, among many others, filled the church, rivalling the sounds of the great outdoors.

This was Symphony Hamilton's final concert of the season. Choosing a number of chamber works, members and their friends and families gathered to perform a concert that was exciting, musically interesting and enchanting.

The addition of seven choral pieces to the program performed by local choir Vox Intoxicus added to the summery feel of the evening. The thirty or so people who came out for the classical-enhanced sounds of a summer night left bright eyed and possibly bright eared after the fine performance.

The focal point of the evening was Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, one of the most widely played and popular orchestral works. Serenades were originally composed for outdoor performances, making this Mozart serenade perfect for the summer-themed concert.

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik is a very demanding piece for strings. Unlike many other serenades of the period, this work features a melodic, rather than harmonic, cello and bass

section. Symphony Hamilton provided well-equipped musicians who accepted Mozart's challenge and emerged victorious. The violas, cellos and double bass were both delicate and bold throughout the piece. The first and second violins mastered their tricky passages with ease, but were not always in tune. A quick tuning session after the first movement would have made this fine performance of Mozart's work even better. Janice Strifler conducted with great passion, but should have taken heed of the tuning problem.

While the strings had their opportunity to shine with Mozart's serenade, the brass blew away their fellow musicians with a variety of pieces from the Renaissance and Baroque. *Heroic Music* by Georg Philipp Telemann was performed just as its title implies. The work consists of 12 movements associated with a hero's honour, such as bravery, joy, love and vigour. Unfortunately only the first three movements were played by the group of two trumpets, two trombones, one tuba and an organist. Their brilliant tones and vibrant reading left the audience wanting more.

While the brass section did not play any more heroic music, they did honour loyalty with Jean Baptiste Lully's *Marche Royale*. Written for the great Sun King, Louis XIV, the piece was used as processional music. One could almost imagine the king arriving at his outdoor garden party to this music. The musicians captured the stately and royal mood of the piece.

The winds were less successful in demonstrating their talent with *Serenade in D Minor* by Czech composer Antonin Dvořák. Dvořák idolized Mozart and was inspired to write serenades after hearing his serenades, including *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. Dvořák's serenade differs from Mozart's, as it contains a large dose Czech folk music.

This Czech influence is evident in his first movement, which conjures an unpedigreed village band. The second movement draws on the Czech *sousedské*, a dance in slow triple time. The third movement is a romantic interlude in the tradition of German composers. The fourth is a joyous merry-making movement, complete with horn flourishes.

While there were many great moments in this serenade, persistent problems resulted in an unpolished performance. The first clarinet constantly played *fortissimo*, which became annoying. The horn players generally missed notes, played the wrong notes, and were out of tune. The bassoons were a bit sloppy. The oboes, however, were wonderful, although often inaudible due to the thundering clarinet. Stéphane Potvin was a proficient conductor, but could have lessened his encouraging motions to the first clarinet.

Vox Intoxicus, on the other hand, measured up to the performances by the string and brass sections. Their choice of songs was brilliant, with many reflecting long summer days and hot nights. *Sweet Day* by Ralph Vaughan Williams was splendid, as was Dvořák's *Up Sprang a Birch Tree Overnight*. The group included the African American Spiritual *Ride the Chariot*, which suited their strong voices. They performed the song with a spirit that reflected the African American song tradition. Although the choir was only nine voices strong, their sound was huge. The small sections were balanced, with talented male and female singers. They were a delight.

After the concert, the crowd slowly filed outside into the summer air. The sounds of traffic, birds and chatty joggers filled the night. It would be nice if live classical music like this could be heard every evening.

4-4 Trimming the tree with Symphony Hamilton

December 4, 2004

St. Christopher's Anglican Church

'Tis the season for Christmas concerts – and there is no lack of them in Hamilton this month. A true music lover could attend one concert each evening right up until December 25. Symphony Hamilton broke out of the traditional Christmas concert mold with a program that combined Yule time classics like *Sleigh Ride* with less seasonal works like Ottorino Respighi's *Trittico Botticelliano*.

An unusual aspect of the program was performances by the three winners of the Symphony Hamilton Young Artist's Competition. Violinist Joanna Tang was the star of the evening. The winner of the senior instrumental category performed the third movement of Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky's *Concerto for Violin in D Major*. The concerto is the only one for violin composed by the man more recognized for his ballet music, especially the Christmas classic *The Nutcracker*.

Tchaikovsky wrote the piece in spring 1878. He presented it to his teacher, renowned virtuoso violinist Leopold Auer. However, Auer declared the work unplayable, saying the solo part was too technically demanding. When it was finally premiered four years later, music critics wrote that the violin was "beaten black and blue."

This claim was supported by Tang's performance Friday night, but in this case, the beating was not a bad thing. The third movement posed no threat to the young violinist, who played it from memory while performing at the required *allegro vivacissimo* tempo. Tang's technique, combined with her passion, held the audience breathless. The orchestra seemed inspired by this young woman, playing well, but

occasionally struggling to keep up. Interestingly, this McMaster University student studies music on the side while pursuing a career in medicine.

Flautist Jenna Rak, the 15-year-old winner of the junior instrumental category, also gave an impressive performance with the Allegro from Johann Joachim Quantz's *Concerto for Flute in G Major*. Quantz, a Baroque flute maker and composer, wrote hundreds of compositions for the instrument. Rak was enchanting, with excellent phrasing and good intonation. Nerves may have played a factor in the occasional missed note, but we will likely be seeing more of this talented musician in the coming years. Symphony Hamilton aptly accompanied in a reserved, refined manner, although the keyboard in the basso continuo was noticeably missing.

A solemn selection of three of Gustav Mahler's Rückert songs was performed by soprano Marion Samuel-Stevens, winner of the vocal category. The pieces were written in 1901–02 and based on the texts of the prolific German poet Friedrich Rückert.

There is nothing festive about the songs, which are dark and expressive, in the Romantic tradition. However, amongst this solemnity the pieces are hauntingly beautiful. Samuel-Stevens brought out this beauty with her pure, expansive voice. The orchestra was equally successful at conveying the lyricism of their parts, but occasionally drowned out the soloist.

The orchestra had their opportunity to show off with Respighi's *Trittico Botticelliano*. The three-movement composition from 1927 is nationalistic as Respighi was inspired by three paintings of the 15th century Italian Alessandro Botticelli. Each movement represents a painting. The three artworks are *La Primavera*, which depicts the

beauty of spring, *L'Adorazione dei Magi*, which shows three kings kneeling at the manger of baby Jesus, and *La Nascita di Venere*, one of Botticelli's most famous paintings, of Venus emerging from the sea on a giant shell.

The performance of the first movement on Friday was vigorous, aptly depicting birds, warm breezes and dancing nymphs. The winds were slightly airy, particularly the flute, which was shrill in its upper registers. The opening oboe solo of the second movement was lovely, complemented by a solidly performed bassoon line. The oboe's intended purpose of setting a mood of religious devotion was effective. The orchestra was brilliant in the third movement under the careful direction of James McKay.

While Leopold Mozart's *Toy Symphony* was not intended to be performed during the festive season, it is appropriate with its use of toy instruments, such as the clacker, toy drum, rattle, toy trumpet and "cuckoo" sound played on the piccolo. Originally attributed to Joseph Haydn, many years of scholarly debate finally named Mozart as the composer. The addition of the toy instruments came later, likely the work of Haydn's brother Michael. Symphony Hamilton was not completely prepared to perform the lighthearted work, with unsynchronized percussion that McKay failed to correct. The strings were constant, but were ineffective at portraying any of the playfulness that made this work a favourite composition of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's father.

The carols closing the program were performed with vigour. The audience was invited to sing along in *Silent Night* and *O Come, All Ye faithful*. While the singing was not exactly top notch, the performance of the orchestra was. The audience appeared to leave smiling, filled with the spirit of Christmas.

Chapter 5 – John Laing Singers

5-1 John Laing Singers going strong after 23 years

The John Laing Singers have been performing in Hamilton for the past 23 years and they show no signs of stopping anytime soon.

John Laing, music director and conductor, came up with the idea of creating the choir in 1982 while working as music director at Christ's Church Cathedral in Hamilton. Drawing from members of his church choir and other choirs in the area, Laing decided to create the John Laing Singers.

“At the time, there were the Te Deum Singers, the Bach Elgar Choral Society, the McMaster University Choir, and the Hamilton Orpheus Choir,” he says. “Hamilton wasn't short of choirs, but there was one gap that needed to be filled with a chamber choir.”

The choir was 24 members strong in its inception year. The size has not varied much over the past 23 years, and neither has the choir's philosophy of performing high-quality works by from all periods.

Choir members vary in age, from teenagers to seniors. Most members are in their 40s and 50s. There are also several senior members who have been with the choir for many years. Besides age, social backgrounds also vary in the choir. Members encompass university students, music teachers and other professionals.

Doreen Dixon was a founding member of the choir. She works full-time as an administrative secretary at McMaster University Health Science Centre. She says her skills as a singer have improved immensely from being a part of the choir.

“The level of musicianship required to learn the music is challenging,” Dixon states. “I never go to a rehearsal that I don’t come away from having learned a lot more than the music. I can’t even tell you how much musicianship I learned from John.”

She says that Laing makes the John Laing Singers different from the other choirs in the city. “Yes, he is the boss, but he respects our musical abilities,” she explains. “He also expects we can do the impossible. For example, we did *Hymn to Saint Cecilia*. It’s almost impossible to do. When you start out, you think you’ll never learn it. You do, however, because he teaches it so well.”

Dixon says touring is one highlight of her years with the choir. The group represented Canada at international choral festivals in France (1989) and Switzerland (1992). They also held a concert in Sarasota, Florida in 1997.

“The trips were wonderful,” she states. “France was fantastic. We had an amazing response there to our singing.”

Carol Goodrow, a professor at the Sheridan Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning, has also been with the choir since its inaugural year. She agreed that the trip to France to perform in the International Choral Festival in 1989 was wonderful.

“We got to be one of the two choirs that were highlighted in the final ceremonies, and we all paraded into the centre of the city to do an outdoor performance,” she relates. “We were carrying the Canadian flag. I realized then just what Olympic athletes must feel. The reception was so warm and so positive and the response was enthusiastic. I felt really proud to be a John Laing Singer and really proud to be Canadian.”

Goodrow also says that being a member of the John Laing Singers has greatly improved her musical abilities.

“The standard that we rehearse and sing at is something I prefer,” she explains. “I love to make music casually, but if I am going to perform, I want to be able to perform choral repertoire at the highest standards that I can, and John is very specific in what he does. He puts countless hours each week into every note, every line and every bar. He comes more prepared than any chorister would be for every rehearsal. Consequently it inspires me to make sure I am prepared and singing at my best.”

Laing maintains high standards for the choir and auditions are rigorous. Regular choir members are re-auditioned at least every two years. Laing selects singers based on a number of qualities. They must have a clean, well-tuned voice capable of doing solos. Their sight reading skills must be at a high level. A John Laing Singer must also be willing to share the spotlight with the rest of the choir and work well in a team environment.

The John Laing Singers perform two concerts a year, in December and April. The choir rehearses once a week from September through April. Laing is very particular about the repertoire that is performed each season, calling the selection process a “balancing act.”

“Every year I try to have a balance of styles so those in the audience and the singers who like Renaissance and Medieval music are catered to, but also those who like music from the great tonal period of the 18th and 19th centuries, and those who like

modern music,” he says. “If I can’t do all that in one season, I try to achieve that over two or three seasons.”

A typical program of the John Laing Singers features a mix of sacred and secular works. Sacred works generally outnumber the secular works. Most of the pieces are performed a cappella, with a handful of works that require various accompaniments. These can include anything from a flute and piano duo, to an organist.

A standard John Laing Singers concert also features works in different languages. The predominant language is English, and the choir has been known to sing many English choral works by Benjamin Britten, John Rutter, John Tavener and Gerald Finzi. Latin, naturally, is another common language featured in a John Laing Singers concert. Sacred works by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Felix Mendelssohn and sections of Latin masses by other composers of the Renaissance, Baroque, Classical and Romantic eras are frequently performed. French and German works appear less frequently, but are usually represented in at least one selection per program. Laing says the choir has always taken great care to perform music from each period stylistically as faithfully as possible to the wishes of the composer.

Laing takes the responsibility of choosing repertoire very seriously. He spends his summer months listening to dozens of records, tapes and CDs to select the next season’s repertoire.

“In the summer months, I do lots of extra reading, lots of planning, lots of auditioning and lots of listening,” Laing states. “I’ve got a huge box of music and records people have given me during the year to listen to.”

The John Laing Singers have released three recordings over the past 23 years. The first is an LP from the summer of 1987 titled "Rejoice in the Lamb." It was encouraged after the choir reached the finals of the CBC Choral Competition in 1986. Their second recording, "The John Laing Singers in Concert," was released in September 1991. The tape is a compilation of works recorded live at concerts between 1987 and 1991. "My Love Dwelt in a Northern Land: A Mosaic of Choral Beauty" is their third and most recent recording. This CD features works recorded at sessions in the early months of 1998, and was issued in October of that year. Laing says that releasing a recording requires a lot of extra rehearsal time from an amateur choir, making it impossible to do more than one every few years.

The John Laing Singers' board consists of seven members, which include choir and community members. Laing works closely with the board, whose main responsibility is to manage the finances of the organization. Together, they also decide the choir's goals for the year, including the possibilities of touring and recordings. The John Laing Singers have been lucky not to have suffered any major financial hardships.

"In the 23-year history of the choir, we have never really been in any serious debt," Laing states. "We've always had a record not only for fine artistic standards, but also for being financially responsible."

Ticket sales have been strong over the years, but the group also relies on donations. Many donations come from individuals in the choir or friends and family of choir members. The choir has been less successful with corporate sponsorship, especially with the slumping Hamilton economy. The board plans to focus on this area over the next

few years to ensure the future of the choir. Government grants have not been as plentiful as they once were, but Laing is not concerned.

“There was a lovely time when you could get grant money from the three levels of government, including the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the local arts council,” he explains. “The Canada Arts Council gave up on amateur choirs in the 1980s, but we still get money from the Trillium Foundation, which has supported our soloists for the last six or seven years. At the moment, local government can’t come through.”

Laing is optimistic that the John Laing Singers will play an important role in Hamilton’s music scene for many years to come.

“I think that the standard of our singing has on the whole refined and improved as we go along, and it will continue to do so,” he says. “I think we will get into more ambitious repertoire and give more concerts around the community.”

And the position of music director will also remain constant.

“I’ve no plans to pack it in,” he says.

5-2 Spring has sprung with the John Laing Singers

April 24, 2004

Christ's Church Cathedral

The John Laing Singers celebrated the miracle of spring with music that was as beautiful as the season itself Saturday night at Christ's Church Cathedral in Hamilton.

The majority of the program featured sacred and secular works filled with spring imagery of flowers, rain, love and Easter. Guest soprano Janet Obermeyer continued the seasonal trend with her solo selections.

As expected, the choir's performance was polished and well rehearsed. The addition of Obermeyer as the evening's guest soloist was icing on the cake. However, unlike the short spring season, the concert was a good half-hour too long. Both the audience and the choir were tired by the last portion of the concert, which featured the only group of secular pieces.

The program was ambitious, with 18 choral selections by over a dozen composers. The spectrum of composers from various musical periods was covered, from Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina to Felix Mendelssohn to John Rutter. The concert was divided into sections linked by composer, era or genre.

The group of secular songs was the most polished part of the evening. Unfortunately this group of songs came at the end of the program, when the audience was ready for bed. A selection from Antonin Dvořák's *Songs of Nature* was arguably the best part of this segment. The Czech composer, who had a love of nature and his countryside, portrayed these images through descriptive pieces that featured soaring melodies. *Golden*

sunlight and *Slender young birch* were two pieces that mentally transported the listener outdoors in a beautiful meadow on a warm spring afternoon.

My Vistula, Grey Vistula by modern composer Henryk Górecki also featured spring imagery. Inspired by the bubbling river that runs through his native country of Poland, Górecki composed music that reflected the gentle rhythm of the flowing water. The choir was also effective in doing justice to this enchanting piece.

Another well-performed section of the program was the group of pieces by 20th century English composers. These works, by Gerald Finzi, Rutter, John Taverner and Benjamin Britten, were sacred. As most of the evening's program featured a cappella works, pieces like Finzi's *God is Gone Up*, accompanied by organist Angus Sinclair, were aural treats. *The Lord is my Shepherd* by Rutter, accompanied by Sinclair and flautist David Gerry, was also aurally delicious.

A special highlight of the evening was *Hymn to St. Cecilia* by Britten. Choral works occupy an important position in Britten's output, with *Hymn to St. Cecilia* being one of his most famous works. However, *Hymn to St. Cecilia* is a very challenging work and is not often attempted by non-professional choirs. The a cappella hymn is in three-movements. The first tells the legend of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music. The second is a frantic prayer to her from musicians to remove their artists' block. The third speaks about the power of music and how much it is needed in today's chaotic world.

The music is as unique as the text. It varies between calm, sonorous sound and sharp outbursts. The soprano section was strong in this work. The bass section, however, was weak. The problem of the women overpowering the men recurred several times

throughout the evening. While there were enough male singers, they were not singing to their full capacity.

This problem was also prominent in the weakest portion of the concert, which included sacred works from the Renaissance, Baroque and Romantic eras. Another issue is that the music of the different eras requires a specific sound. Director John Laing seemed to miss this essential element of performance practice, with all the songs in this section sounding very alike in tone. Palestrina's *Sicut cervus*, therefore, sounded similar to Mendelssohn's *Kyrie*, despite a 250-year difference.

Janet Obermeyer made up for any failings of the John Laing Singers. The soprano captivated the audience the moment she sang her first note and kept them spellbound throughout her performance. Obermeyer, who is now about 50, is still an international singing sensation. She performed a variety of pieces by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Gabriel Fauré and Charles François Gounod.

Her selection of Mozart songs and arias was breathtaking. Her love for Mozart was apparent in each selection, as was her experience performing the composer's works. Choosing German, French and Italian songs on themes of love and nature, she brought the texts to life through music. Her stage presence was captivating and her expression of the songs through body language effective. The acoustics of the church brought out the sparkling tone of her voice.

The countess' aria from *Le Nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*) was equally stunning. She had clearly performed the role more than once on stage. John Laing's

accompaniment on piano was equally skilled. He captured the light touch of Mozart, with effective two-note slurs and spirited solos.

The combination of Obermeyer and Laing was equally spirited for the performance of *Three Portraits* composed by the director himself. Laing used three poems by his friend John Ferns, an English professor at McMaster University, as the texts for his composition. Word painting enhanced the prose, with chromaticism on such words as “madhouse room” and a gentle, sonorous melody for the line, “alive, caressingly or fierce as a flame.” Obermeyer did justice to the work, while Laing’s accompaniment on piano was moving.

The Spring Concert, overall, was successful. A stirring performance by Obermeyer and a strong display of vocal talent from the John Laing Singers reminded the audience to go out and celebrate the arrival of this glorious season.

5-3 John Laing Singers serve a cup of cheer

December 5, 2004

Christ’s Church Cathedral

The John Laing Singers celebrated the Christmas season with their annual concert, appropriately titled “Rejoice.” The program featured a mix of sacred songs from the past and the present, with works by composers like William Byrd, Felix Mendelssohn, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Ariel Ramírez.

Mendelssohn’s *Te Deum* started off the evening, establishing the sacred nature of the program. Mendelssohn composed the work when he was only a 17-year-old student at the University of Berlin. Mendelssohn was studying the compositions of Johann Sebastian Bach at the time. Bach’s contrapuntal style influenced the young composer so

much that he made it an integral part of his *Te Deum*. The work is less known among Mendelssohn's compositions because the score remained hidden at the university for many years. John Laing, the choir's artistic director and conductor, said that Saturday's performance was only the second in Canada.

Te Deum is for soloists, double choir and basso continuo. The latter was provided by cellist Marsha Moffitt and organist Chris Dawes on Saturday. Soloists consisted of several John Laing Singers, as well as guests: sopranos Hollie Dunkley, Kathleen Radke, alto Richard Cunningham, tenor Bryan Rankine and bass Michael Downie.

The choir was well rehearsed, although there was the occasional mishap. Dawes did not seem prepared, needing a few more rehearsals to completely meld with the group. Moffitt, however, was right on, producing a warm, full sound on the cello, evident during her solos.

Some movements of the piece were better than others, including "Tibi omnes angeli," "Tibi cherubim et seraphim" and "Per singulos dies." The musicians mastered the complex counterpoint in these movements. Laing's careful cues kept the music flowing smoothly and maintained a balance between the female and male sections. Solos by Downie in such sections as "Te aeternum" and "Te ergo quaesumus" were the highlight of the work.

The second half of the program offered more variety, with sacred and festive works. Palestrina's five-part motet *Canite Tuba* from 1572 was performed with a light, expressive vocal texture characteristic of sacred music of the 16th century. The bass and tenor sections were clearly audible.

Lullaby, my sweet little baby by William Byrd, one of the foremost English composers of the Elizabethan age, started with the softest *pianissimo* possible, growing only to a delicate *piano* melody that could lull any baby into slumber. The sopranos, in particular, can be commended for their control and tenderness in the work. *Rejoice*, the chorus from Byrd's *Virgin Womb*, was equally effective, opening with a round that maintained a steady tempo as each section joined, enriching the musical tapestry.

Some of the pieces featuring soloists didn't fare as well. The soprano solo in *In the Bleak Midwinter*, by 20th century composer Harold Darke, was inaudible due to Susan Coleman's poor enunciation and weak projection. *Mary's Lullaby* by Randal Thompson, another 20th century composer, was also disappointing because of its soloist. Soprano Kathleen Radke was not quite suited for the role, with over-the-top vibrato.

El Nacimiento (The Birth), by contemporary Argentine composer Ariel Ramírez featured a beautiful, solo, soaring melody supported by choir. Although soloist David Baldwin has a lyric tenor voice, he struggled with the higher notes. However, the choir's accompanying role was solid, saving the overall effect of the work and proving that Ramírez' music can stand even without an appropriate soloist.

Michael Downie was the perfect candidate for the baritone solo in Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* from 1912. At the time the fantasia was composed, Vaughan Williams had already been recognized as the foremost folksong collector in England. Although the composition is intended for choir and orchestra, the combination of Moffitt and Dawes proved sufficient. Downie's luscious baritone voice filled the church.

Carol of the Bells, the only well-known Christmas carol on the program, was a favourite of the evening. Laing's steady allegro tempo and the choir's clear enunciation of the text added even more festive spirit to an evening celebrating beautiful music.

Chapter 6 – Bach Elgar Choir

6-1 Bach Elgar Choir rebuilt to former glory in time for centennial

The occasion of a Canadian musical organization celebrating its centennial anniversary is uncommon these days due to the relative young age of the country, but the Bach Elgar Choir is doing just that during its 2004–05 season.

The choir is the only independent symphonic and oratorio ensemble in Hamilton and is the second oldest choral organization in Canada. However, the large, amateur choir has seen its share of difficulties over the years, such as financial woes, bickering among choir members and declining audience numbers. Fortunately, it has been built back up to its former glory in time for its 100th anniversary.

The reason behind this recovery is Ian Sadler, the choir's music conductor and artistic director. When he started at the beginning of the 2001–02 season, the choir was in shambles. There were only 40 members, a substantial debt and a lack of enthusiasm for singing among the remaining choir members.

Sadler, who is also the conductor and artistic director of the Stratford Concert Choir, founder and conductor of the Stratford Youth Orchestra and administrative director of the Cathedral Singers of Ontario, has been working with choirs for many years. He made it his mission to revive the Bach Elgar Choir.

“One of the first goals I wanted to accomplish was building the choir up to 100 singers by our 100th anniversary, and we have achieved that,” Sadler states. “We also applied for and received a Trillium grant in 2002 for \$76,000. That has put the choir back

on its feet. We hope that large audiences in the anniversary year will further help the choir and that it will be sustainable with corporate sponsors.”

The Bach Elgar Choir holds four concerts each year. Sadler has planned a special season for the 100th anniversary, anticipating that music lovers will be eager to come out for this historic event. One of the highlights of the season is Giuseppe Verdi’s *Requiem*. The choir is believed to have performed the North American premiere with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra back in 1910, making the work well suited for the first concert of the anniversary season. Other concerts in the season include the annual performance of George Frideric Handel’s *Messiah*, Johann Sebastian Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, and a gala concert with the Hamilton Children’s Choir featuring the world premiere of *The Magic of God's World* by Ruth Watson Henderson.

The roots of the choir reach back to the formation of the Elgar Choir in Hamilton in 1905. A new choir called the Bach Choir formed in the city in 1932. During WWII, both choirs were forced to temporarily suspend operations due to the lack of male singers. After the war, both choirs resumed operation, but were still low in numbers. When the two groups decided to amalgamate in 1946, the Bach Elgar Choir was born. The choir’s status grew in the region, to the point that it was *the* choir to be in after the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir.

The choir’s growing reputation attracts members from cities such as St. Catharines, Kitchener, Mississauga, Oakville and Hamilton. Monica Dalke, an elementary school teacher in Oakville, joined the choir in 1997 and does not mind commuting to Hamilton for Tuesday night rehearsals.

“I had lived in Oakville for four years when I decided that I wanted to find a choir to sing in,” Dalke comments. “I had sung in a community choir in Oakville for a year and I really didn’t like it, so I was looking for something better. I went to a sing-along *Messiah* that the Bach Elgar Choir sponsored and I loved it. I talked to a couple Bach Elgar Choir members and decided to join.”

Dalke had several negative experiences with the choir before Sadler became director. She says Sadler turned everything around when he arrived.

“Ian knows what he wants us to sound like and he knows how to get us there,” Dalke explains. “He’s incredibly musical and really has an ability to bring out the feeling behind the words and the music.”

Anthony Ford-Jones, a doctor in Burlington, has been with the choir for over seven years. He has worked under three different conductors and says that Sadler has worked wonders with the choir.

“The choir has a real sense of cohesiveness under Ian,” Ford-Jones states. “He is able to keep his good humour, he has a real heart and I like the way he approaches the music. Not only is he an extraordinarily good musician, but on top of that, he is really a good person.”

Ford-Jones finds it difficult to be prepared for each rehearsal. Busy careers, families and other commitments keep choir members like him very busy, sometimes resulting in less than successful rehearsals.

“It is challenging to get on top of the music in a relatively short period,” Ford-Jones says. “I find it a bit nerve-wracking when it is two weeks before a concert and we

don't seem to be ready. I often wonder what Ian thinks although he never gives the impression that there will be problems."

Dalke states she gets aggravated when people miss rehearsals, are late, or haven't learned their music.

"There aren't nearly enough people who learn their music between Tuesday rehearsals," Dalke comments. "Also, I don't think there are enough people who take the commitment seriously. Many people miss a lot of rehearsals and then say, 'I'm not singing in this concert.' I find that really unfair. I'm not a professional singer, but I take being in the choir very seriously."

Working with over a hundred singers and trying to get everyone prepared for a concert can be difficult, but Sadler enjoys the challenge. His good humour and even temperament make him an ideal conductor for such a choir, resulting in more successes than failures. He says the choir is full of "gifted amateur singers" and he enjoys working with the massive group.

"A large choir can get into completely different repertoire and sing with quite a different style," he comments. "It is pretty exciting when you get over a hundred people singing with an orchestra."

Sadler works with the choir's nine-member board of directors when choosing repertoire. The board consists of choir members, people from the business community and representatives of City Hall. Sadler feels that the board truly represents the community at large and that they have a good idea what audiences will want to hear.

Within each season, Sadler works with the board to maintain a balance between single-work and multi-work concerts. He believes that a concert featuring a single work, such as Verdi's *Requiem*, may not always be as attractive to audiences as a concert featuring several works. It is not possible to please everyone all the time, but Sadler and the board do their best to inject variety into each season's programming.

Besides this responsibility, the board also tracks the choir's financial situation, sets a budget and strives to meet financial targets. The 2002 grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation has situated the choir in a position to move forward. The board is responsible for finding enough corporate sponsors and promoting concerts.

Audience numbers have been growing over the past seasons under Sadler's leadership, with an average of 400 to 500 people per concert. Verdi's *Requiem* is scheduled for performance at Hamilton Place, which has a capacity of 2,000. Sadler thinks audiences are attracted to the Bach Elgar Choir because of its size and ability to perform major pieces in the choral repertoire.

"In the Hamilton area, the Bach Elgar Choir is able to present large works such as Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Verdi's *Requiem* and Handel's *Messiah*," Sadler explains. "It fills a niche in the artistic endeavors in Hamilton and it creates quite a different concert experience for the audience."

Sadler has spent the past four years rebuilding the Bach Elgar Choir and has no plans to leave it any time soon. Despite his numerous musical commitments in Stratford, the Bach Elgar Choir is very close to his heart and he wants to take the group to new heights.

“Once our anniversary season is over, I would like to see the choir reach a wider audience through recordings and broadcasts, as well as through the CBC,” he declares. “I would also like to tour nationally and internationally. When I took the choir over, it wasn’t a question of carrying on with what it was doing, but a question of whether I could build it back up to resemble what it used to be and take it beyond that. The next few years are going to be very exciting.”

6-2 Bach Elgar Choir launches centennial with Verdi *Requiem*

November 6, 2004

Hamilton Place

The Bach Elgar Choir celebrated the beginning of its 100th anniversary season in style on Saturday night with Giuseppe Verdi's *Requiem*. The piece is intimately linked to the group, as it is believed they gave its North American premiere in 1910.

The oratorio choir combined with the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra gave a riveting performance. Conductor Ian Sadler deserves immense praise for preparing a concert of this magnitude and pulling it off with such ease.

When one thinks of Verdi, his operas immediately come to mind, such as *La traviata*, *Otello*, *Aida*, *Il trovatore* and *La forza del destino*. His *Requiem* isn't nearly as famous. That Verdi wrote this work is surprising, as he was anticlerical and composed very little sacred music. It was the death of Alessandro Manzoni in 1873 that prompted him to write a requiem. Verdi considered this writer one of the greatest and most influential Italians in history.

The idea of writing a requiem mass had been simmering in Verdi's mind since his failed attempt to gather a group of Italian composers to write one to mark the death of fellow opera composer Gioacchino Rossini in 1868. Verdi had written the final "Libera me" for this requiem. He used a revised version of it as the last movement in the Manzoni Requiem.

Verdi had not written a piece of sacred music for over 30 years, with the exception of the "Libera me," so he studied the requiems of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Hector Berlioz and Luigi Cherubini. Finally, after many months of hard work, his requiem

successfully premiered on the first anniversary of Manzoni's death on May 22, 1874 at the church of San Marco in Milan.

While Verdi may have attempted to break from his operatic compositional style in the *Requiem*, it is apparent that this was impossible. The lines for the four vocal soloists are theatrical, with flourishes and displays of virtuosity. The orchestra's part is equally sensational, with dramatic techniques such as the duet in "Dies irae" between onstage and offstage trumpet quartets. The choral writing recalls the swelling choruses used in many of his operas, such as that in the opening of *Otello*.

The musical forces on Saturday were smaller than those at the work's premiere, with 100 choristers and a 50-member orchestra. However, the two groups, along with the four soloists, were able to put on a commanding performance.

The opening "Requiem" and "Kyrie" demonstrated the vast power of these ensembles. The HPO played exceptionally well, with the cellos and violins providing a warm opening melody. The chorus entered as softly as a whisper, creating a haunting effect. The sopranos and altos, although higher in number, did not drown out the bass and tenor sections, resulting in a rounded sound.

The four soloists enhanced the solemnity of the work. Stacie Carmona, soprano, had a crystalline voice with powerful vibrato. Rebecca Hass, mezzo soprano, was an admirable counterpart with her rich tone that was especially effective in the lower registers. The pairing of these singers proved ideal in the "Recordare" and "Quid sum miser." The male soloists also held their own, with tenor Darryl Edwards demonstrating

the versatility of his sweet tenor voice in the “Ingemisco.” Martin Elliot, bass, proved he was worthy of standing as a soloist on the same stage with his solo in the “Confutatus.”

The majority of the *Requiem* flowed smoothly with relatively few problems. Occasionally, the choir’s enunciation was not clean. The placement of the orchestra in front of the choir on the stage caused balance issues, especially in the “Rex tremendae,” “Sanctus” and “Dies irae.” Unfortunately, it sometimes drowned out the well-rehearsed choir.

The orchestra can be forgiven as their playing was tremendous. Sadler was able to bring out the best from the musicians. The string section sounded prepared, following the score with precision. The winds and brass were consistent, with clean solos and an incredible breadth of sound, especially among the trumpet section.

The final movement, “Libera me,” was as powerful as the opening “Requiem” and “Kyrie,” despite the fact there was no intermission in the hour and a half performance. Carmona was incredibly effective in her solo, portraying the solemn meaning of the text “Lord, deliver my soul.” The choral fugue that ensued maintained this solemnity, leaving the audience with a feeling of the inexorability of death, which, even when it comes late, as it did for Manzoni and Verdi, always seems unjust.

6-3 Bach Elgar Choir makes a case for the timelessness of *Messiah*
December 11, 2004
Christ’s Church Cathedral

There are some pieces you just can’t get enough of – and George Frideric Handel’s *Messiah* is one of them. The Bach Elgar Choir has been presenting the work

every Christmas for nearly a century. The oversold crowd packed like sardines into Christ's Church Cathedral Saturday proved that the work is truly timeless.

The *Messiah* has been immensely popular since its premiere in Dublin, Ireland on April 13, 1742. Handel chose to premiere the work in Ireland because of the controversy his previous oratorio, *Israel in Egypt*, stirred in London. There, a huge debate arose among the public and members of the clergy over whether the presentation of a setting of the Bible texts using popular stage personalities in a theatre was sacrilege.

The *Messiah* was an immediate success in Ireland, but Handel was still reluctant to perform the work in London. Finally, he scheduled a performance for March 23, 1743. The disapproval from the Bishop of London in the press caused it to fail miserably. The work's approval by a new bishop several years later resulted in a triumphant performance in 1750. Handel subsequently presented *Messiah* to great acclaim every year until his death in 1759.

On Saturday, the Bach Elgar Choir gave a performance that Handel would have been proud of. They presented the three parts of the work, omitting only a few movements in Part II and Part III. Although the choir was lacklustre in the first chorus, "And the glory of the Lord," by the next one, "And He shall purify," they were ready and continued to give a solid performance throughout the evening.

The placement of the tenors at the front of the choir, as opposed to standing with the basses in the back, created a more rounded sound. The singers' pronunciation was generally excellent, with clear syllables. Challenging melismas in various movements didn't faze the musicians. Their musicality shone in movements like "For unto us a child

is born.” The choir paid great attention to dynamics and phrasing. Ian Sadler, conductor, took great care with entries, especially in difficult contrapuntal sections. Occasionally, the sopranos disturbed the balance, particularly when they were required to sing higher notes, creating a shrill sound in movements like “Lift up your heads, O ye gates.”

The only substantial problem with the performance was the choir’s stage presence. When singing or sitting, the singers had grim faces, appearing as though they’d rather be somewhere else. The joyful “Hallelujah” failed to bring smiles to their faces.

The soloists, for the most part, were excellent. Tenor Lenard Whiting stunned the audience with his passionate performance. From the first note of his air “Ev’ry valley shall be exalted,” he rendered the crowd silent – not a cough or candy wrapper could be heard. Whiting’s sweet lyric voice and mastery of the text were a phenomenal combination. There was not a note out of place, an unclear pronunciation, or a late or early entry. He was flawless and seemed thrilled to be there.

The meaning of the text was brought out through his performance, as was Handel’s skill at enhancing these words through beautiful affective music. Whiting took the audience through the range of emotions, from joy in “Ev’ry valley shall be exalted” to sadness in “Behold, and see if there is any sorrow.”

Soprano Janet Obermeyer gave a professional and confident performance. Her silvery tones echoed throughout the church hall, enveloping the audience in an aura of sound in movements like “How beautiful are the feet.”

While alto Gaynor Jones was able to sing the notes, she lacked the passion of her counterparts. Her rich alto voice contained no drama, resulting in a rather bland reading.

She missed a few entries, not paying enough attention to the score. Sadler was able to quickly cover her errors through his skillful conducting of the orchestra.

Bass Robert Hall was the only singer who did not deserve to stand on the same stage with the other soloists. It may have simply been a bad night for Hall, but other problems indicated that he was not the right man for the job. He did not have the stamina to sing Handel's demanding bass lines, frequently running out of breath in the middle of a phrase. His upper range was ineffective, while his lower range was growly and unpleasant.

The orchestra, on the other hand, was superb. Sadler pulled together a group of musicians from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra, helping them sound like they had been playing together for years. While the orchestra was small, consisting of only 14 musicians, their sound was large and consistent.

Supported by an organ and bass duo serving as the basso continuo, the musicians gave the work a Baroque feel with driving rhythms, clean counterpoint, as well as precise ornaments. Sadler demanded precision and the musicians gave it to him. The trumpets offered clean, brilliant tones, likely leaving the audience wishing that Handel had included them in more than four movements of the work.

The audience was clearly uncomfortable in the crowded and hot church, but the marvellous performance made these problems only minor inconveniences. They gave a standing ovation, graciously accepted by the talented Ian Sadler who had worked his magic with the Bach Elgar Choir once again.

Chapter 7 – Canadian Orpheus Male Choir

7-1 Canadian Orpheus Male Choir unique in many ways

When wondering what makes the Canadian Orpheus Male Choir different from other choirs in Hamilton, you simply have to look and listen.

First, the choir is filled only with men. Second, there are a lot of them; 78 to be exact. After hearing the choir, it is also obvious that they are an exceptional group.

“We sing everything from Welsh traditional songs to Broadway hits to opera choruses,” explains David Davis, music director. “We have fun making music, as opposed to just doing straight technique or a certain type of repertoire.”

The choir celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2002, which was the year Davis became music director. Davis has made it his mission to improve the choir’s quality and expand the repertoire. His contagious excitement for performing has caught on; the group has grown from 58 members in 2002 to 78 members in 2004. Singers come from many communities, such as Hamilton, Burlington, London, Niagara Falls, Mississauga, Brampton, Paris and Brantford.

When the choir was founded in 1977, Lyn Harry created a group with a strong Welsh flavour. Born in South Wales, Harry was involved in music from childhood. He founded and conducted the London Welsh Male Choir in the 1960s. When he started the Canadian Orpheus Male Choir, many of the early members were Welsh-Canadians, reinforcing the group’s identity.

The Welsh aspect of the choir remains very important, although the number of Welsh-Canadian members has been declining over the years. Davis ensures there are a

few traditional Welsh songs in every program, such as *Shenandoah* and *My Little Welsh Home*. Davis has expanded the choir's repertoire by including classical songs from various periods in each concert's program.

David Davies, a 70-year-old member of the choir, has been with the group for 22 years. He joined because of his heritage.

"I was at a Christmas party, sitting next to another Welshman who was in the choir and we were singing some Welsh music," Davies said. "We had a good time singing and he told me about the choir. I went with him to rehearsal the next week and I've been here ever since."

Davies had no formal musical training before joining the choir, but says he has learned a lot over the decades.

"Welsh people like to sing, and I'm no exception," he says. "The rehearsals are challenging, but I've learned how to read music."

The average age of the choir is 66, according to Richard Querney, president of the choir's board. He has been with the choir for 16 years and on the board for 11 years. The ever-increasing age of the choir is one challenge the board hopes to overcome.

"We've got to find new members who are younger," he says. "Technology is taking a hold and people are so attuned to the Internet and television for entertainment. People are not prepared to go out there and create their own entertainment."

Davis agrees that lowering the age of the choir is essential to its future.

“As we get the age level down, the musical ability will go up,” he states. “We want to do more marketing to get the word out that the choir is here and worth belonging to.”

Finding youthful members is not the only challenge the choir faces. Like any musical organization, finding funds is also a continual battle. The choir has never had a deficit, but it has become harder to stay in the black.

The group relies on ticket sales to get them through each season. There are two major concerts each year, at Christmas and in the spring. The Christmas concert is held at Hamilton Place, putting great pressure on choir members to sell all 2,000 tickets. Audience attendance has been decreasing over the years, forcing the choir to select smaller venues for its annual spring concert.

The choir also performs 10 more concerts each season, where they are paid a performance fee by another non-profit or charitable organization. Proceeds from ticket sales go to the host.

“Usually, we approach a church or vice versa, to put on a concert,” Querney explains. “They may have a building fund, for example, that they are trying to raise money for. We want to sing as much as we can, so we usually approach groups as opposed to them approaching us.”

The group does not have any corporate sponsors, which is something Querney says the board is considering. A businessman himself, Querney knows there is not a lot of extra money available to sponsor a musical organization.

The Trillium Foundation has been a source of revenue for the choir, but accessing funds has not always been easy. In order to receive a grant, a specific project must be cited. In past years, the choir has received money for new uniforms, tours, recordings and special concerts. However, they are running out of projects, but still require outside funds for general operation costs.

Five recordings have been made over the years as fundraising projects. The choir does not have a national distributor, forcing them to sell CDs at concerts, as well as to friends and family. Selling CDs has not been a successful fundraiser.

The choir hired a strategic planner several years ago to develop a funding strategy, which subsequently has been followed. In the 2004–05 season, a financial expert will review the plan and discuss future plans with the board.

There are two people on salary in the organization, Davis and Fred Numan, assistant music director and accompanist. Additional accompanists and guest soloists are paid on a per-concert basis.

Touring is a highlight for many members. The Canadian Orpheus Male Choir has gone on several tours since its inception, including Pennsylvania (1980), Great Britain (1984), Western Canada (1986), Pennsylvania (1986), Wales, England and Scotland (1988), Belgium, Holland, Germany, France (1992), Great Britain (1994), Atlantic Canada (1997), Ireland (2000) and Ottawa (2003).

The group is planning to return to Great Britain a third time in October 2006 to sing at the 1,000 Male Voice Festival at the Royal Albert Hall in London.

“I have been to the Royal Albert Hall once before, and it is quite an experience,” Querney says. “To sing in front of 7,000 people is just amazing.”

Querney is very optimistic about the choir’s future, saying it is “onwards and upwards.” As long as there are people who love to sing, including Welsh-Canadians, he believes the choir will never fold.

“What happens after the older generations move on, I don’t know,” he says. “Our background is based on Welsh choral music. In Wales that never seems to stop. There are always new generations taking over the music, keeping it alive.”

7-2 Choir delights audience with variety

May 8, 2004

Park Bible Church, Burlington

The Canadian Orpheus Male Choir kept their audience's toes tapping and hands clapping with their spring concert on Sunday night. Their program was filled with great music from operas, sacred collections, Broadway musicals and popular music. This variety kept the audience eagerly anticipating each song.

The choir was well prepared for the concert. They rehearse every Monday night, 11 months of the year. Every song was memorized, with careful attention to each syllable of every word. Music director David Davis made certain that each song was sung in the appropriate style. The 72-member choir had a powerful sound, with an even distribution of first and second tenors, baritones and basses. They were predominantly in tune, which is often a challenge for large choirs.

Besides their large sound, their joy of singing was also evident. The members were very expressive when singing and smiled between songs. Their excitement was contagious, encouraging audience participation. Their performance of the Russian folk song *Kalinka* stirred the audience to vigorously clap their hands and tap their toes during the rousing chorus.

How Great Thou Art, a traditional church hymn, had the audience singing along. A medley of hits from the 1960s was also a hit, with people bobbing along to songs like *House of the Rising Sun* and *Seal it With a Kiss*.

There were also more serious songs, such as the traditional tune *My Little Welsh Home*. The song featured 13-year-old Jesse Filice (the only member under the age of 50

in the choir), who charmed the audience with his surprisingly strong baritone voice.

Inscription of Hope was another serious number. Based on a poem written on the wall of a room used by Jews to hide from the Nazis during WWII, it offered beautiful imagery. Moving music enhanced this beautiful prose, with memorable lines like, “I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining; I believe in love, even when there is no one there.”

The performance of the anvil chorus from Giuseppe Verdi’s *Il Trovatore* was entertaining, complete with a guest anvil player “A. J. Hammer” (a woman dressed in a blacksmith’s outfit). It was obvious the Canadian Orpheus Male Choir enjoyed singing the piece as much as the audience enjoyed hearing it.

The variety of the concert was enhanced with performances by guest soloists Chelsey Schill and Jennifer McMahon. Schill, a vocal major at Wilfrid Laurier University, and McMahon, a local singer and teacher, were brilliant. Their performance of the *Cat Duet* by Gioacchino Rossini was especially entertaining. The two strong soprano voices worked well together, as did their “catty” stage presence.

The evening’s songs were successful not only because of the choir and soloists, but also because of accompanist Fred Numan. Numan, who has been the accompanist of the choir for the past 21 years, proved to be an incredibly skilled and dexterous pianist. During moments when Davis let the choir accelerate in tempo, Numan quickly adjusted without missing a note.

The concert was excellent for many reasons, but the most important being the joyful mood of the Canadian Orpheus Male Choir. Undoubtedly, the concert was a huge success simply because these men love to sing.

7-3 A unique Christmas concert recipe

December 17, 2004

Hamilton Place

What do you get when you take a 78-member male choir, add a 100-member children's choir, and throw in a 50-member youth orchestra? A unique evening of music, that's for sure. While this combination may sound strange, it is anything but for Hamiltonians. In fact, the Canadian Orpheus Male Choir Christmas concert, with special guests the Hamilton Children's Choir and the Hamilton Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, has been a major tradition in the city for the past 16 years. The event is so well attended by families and friends of the performers that it is held in the Great Hall of Hamilton Place.

The program of this year's concert was as unique as the ensemble of musicians. While there were the traditional favourites on the program, such as *Little Drummer Boy* and *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, there were many untraditional pieces as well, like *Hope for Resolution* and *Adiemus*.

The Canadian Orpheus Male Choir performed the largest number of selections, which is unsurprising for the host organization. There were no complaints from the crowd, although most had come to see their sons or daughters perform. The performance of several Christmas carols were among the choir's most popular selections of the evening, especially *Little Drummer Boy*, *The Sleigh*, *African Noel* and *Coventry Carol*.

Little Drummer Boy was incredibly tender and effective. Alwin Humphreys arrangement calls for complex harmonies, steady vocal drumbeats, and rolled r's. The

choir mastered all of these elements under the careful direction of David Davis. The work was a perfect selection for the all-male choir.

The Sleigh is a very short a cappella piece with rapid syllables and quick dynamic contrasts. The choir did not shy away from the fast tempo Davis set at the opening. The merry words, audible thanks to the choir's clear diction, combined with the quick tempo to result in a thrilling performance.

The choir also spread joy with *African Noel*, which was arranged by Davis. The work's driving African polyrhythm was consistent. The only drawback was that the performance of Fred Numan. Numan, who is the choir's regular accompanist, overpowered the choir. This was disappointing, as *African Noel* was originally intended to be sung a cappella.

The crowd was thrilled with a selection of the choir's classic songs, like *The Awakening* by Joseph Martin. The singers demonstrated why the male choral tradition still lives today through their powerful, solid performance. The singers' enunciation was crystal clear, ensuring the song's message of peace was clearly conveyed. The powerful basses met their match with the equally strong tenors, creating excellent balance.

The expectations of the popular 1970s Simon and Garfunkel hit *Bridge Over Troubled Water* fell flat. The choir produced an uncharacteristic growly, unrefined sound. The singers failed to take advantage of Alan Simmons' stirring arrangement, missing the mark on his special effects like the huge swells of sound.

While the Canadian Orpheus Male Choir was the focal point of the evening, the two youth music organizations were given plenty of opportunities to strut their stuff. The

Hamilton Children's Choir was absolutely stunning, with a performance that drew a standing ovation in the middle of the concert.

What was so impressive about these young singers was their commanding performance of very challenging pieces. Zimfira Poloz, artistic director, created a program of songs from the 16th and 17th centuries, as well as contemporary songs from Africa. The children performed Henry Purcell's *Alleluia* with a sweet, pure tone and resounding clarity. The Zulu song *Adiemus* was incredibly moving, with the young singers giving a passionate performance of the text.

The Hamilton Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, under the experienced baton of Glenn Mallory, was also enjoyable. The orchestra boasts talented up-and-coming musicians in every section. Mallory included pieces that were both musically interesting and challenging, such as *Around the World at Christmas Time* and *Christmas Fugue*. Their performance of *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, narrated by Richard Gale, was entertaining and the perfect choice for the holiday season.

This annual concert is a great way to showcase some of the best young musicians in the city, while still celebrating the Welsh male choir tradition. The event gives much-deserved exposure to the vast array of talent here in Hamilton.

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