

New conductor takes BSO baton; Orchestra member will try to lead it out of dark times

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He's the new face of the Brantford Symphony Orchestra. But Philip Sarabura, hired as the orchestra's first resident conductor since 2004, is already a familiar fixture to audiences, board members and musicians.

The 49-year-old has played violin with the BSO steadily since 2003 and has performed with it on and off for 15 years.

Now, it's time to take up the baton and lead the troubled organization into more harmonious - and profitable - times.

"It's a happy match," Sarabura said in a telephone interview from his home in Alberton.

A longtime choral conductor, Sarabura has begun focusing more on orchestral conducting, leading ensembles including the Hamilton Philharmonic, Orchestra London and the Canada Pops Orchestra. And, in December, he directed the BSO's Christmas concert.

"I guess they liked what I did on the podium. And it's a wonderful orchestra and a great organization," he said. "I knew they needed help and when they asked if I could help in a different way, I said, 'Absolutely.'"

Sarabura can now help rebuild the orchestra and the role of conductor, said Wayne Branchaud, president of the BSO board of directors.

"Overall, he's a great fit for the organization. It's important for him to work well with the board and the musicians and the public - and he just fits the bill very well.

"He can see things from all sides."

The BSO has been using guest conductors for each of its four yearly concerts since former artistic director David Bowser departed at the end of 2004. The move was meant to cut costs and offer more musical flexibility.

But it may have harmed the orchestra, as fans didn't have a clear personality to identify with the BSO.

The idea of hiring a permanent musical director has been kicking around since February, soon after the orchestra went public with its financial crisis: without a cash infusion of up to \$90,000, it would cancel the rest of its season and possibly fold for good.

While declining attendance had plagued the group for years, it reached a crisis after weather and other factors decimated expected revenues from a couple of concerts in 2007.

A public fundraising appeal launched in January has brought in \$66,000. Cutting expenses - including laying off its manager of communications and development and closing its King George Road office - allowed it to keep going, even though the original \$90,000 target was not met.

Hiring Sarabura for a one-year contract at undisclosed wages makes sense on several fronts, said Branchaud.

He'll provide a public identity that will help the orchestra connect with the community, retaining current supporters and attracting new ones, he said. And the presence of a musical director also allows the BSO to apply for certain government grants it wasn't eligible for otherwise.

Feedback from interested parties all pointed to the need for a conductor, said Branchaud. The biggest concern was cost, but the board was able to hire Sarabura for less than the salary of its former communications manager.

Born in Toronto, Sarabura studied both organ and violin as a youth before moving on to study violin at the University of Western Ontario in London and beginning a professional performing career.

After settling in Alberton in the late 1980s, Sarabura became a full-time violinist with the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as organist and music co-ordinator at St. Ann's Church in Ancaster.

He still holds both those posts but, after 16 years, left the job of conductor and music director for the McMaster University Choir. It was time to pursue the challenge of orchestral conducting, said Sarabura, who will continue to take on guest conductor posts in addition to leading the BSO.

Alberton is a convenient midway spot for musical gigs in Hamilton, Brantford and other southern Ontario sites, said Sarabura, who has two sons - Benedict, 12, and Toby, 8 - with wife Angeline Sarabura, who runs a private school in Ancaster for children with communication and learning disabilities.

In Brantford, he's eager to work with the board, musicians, audiences and the wider public to rekindle confidence and interest in the orchestra.

"Having a steady presence on the podium and working behind the scenes will give everybody a lift, knowing that there's someone at the top making day-to-day decisions - and long term decisions - with a lot of enthusiasm and good nature."

In future, as the orchestra continues to rebuild, audiences can expect more collaborations with local cultural groups. A joint April 13 presentation of Haydn's The Creation with the Grand River Chorus was a huge success, nearly filling the Sanderson Centre and bringing in much-needed revenue, said Branchaud.

"That means the public wants to see these kinds of partnerships," he said. "We need to put on less expensive concerts and put more bums in the seats to pay for them."

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