



## Cambridge orchestra steps it up a notch

By Valerie Hill, Record staff

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CAMBRIDGE — This fall a new era was launched for the Cambridge Symphony Orchestra, one that music director Sabatino Vacca promises will be filled with new ideas and great music.

Formerly known as the Cambridge Community Orchestra, the symphony celebrates its new and improved self on Dec. 16 with Christmas on the Grand, New Year's on the Danube at the Forward Baptist Church.

"It's just been growing and developing," said Vacca, who has led the symphony for five years and lifted it to an impressive level of musicianship.

"It's always been a personal goal to make each concert a little better than the last," he said.

And a new name wasn't the only change.

Violinist Paul Earle, a frequent musician with the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony among other orchestras, was named concert master along with Joy Schuster as associate concert master. As well, each musician in the orchestra had to audition, regardless of prior service. A few didn't make it, but Vacca said they were encouraged to take on other roles within the volunteer organization.

He also said the orchestra has been joined by three highly accomplished musicians: two recently retired from the Toronto Symphony and one from the Beijing Symphony. On a personal note, Vacca moved from Hamilton to Cambridge where he purchased his first home with his partner, soprano Rachel Cleland. He hopes that by living locally, he'll have more visibility in the community.

The orchestra started in 2004 following a suggestion by a local music teacher, Ann Green. She was attending a planning meeting for the second annual Mayor's Night for the Arts. At the inaugural event the previous year, Green was astounded by the large turnout and took it as evidence that the community has a strong interest in supporting the arts.

"I talked to a few people, that a city of our size should have an orchestra," Green recalled. She was immediately put in charge of creating an orchestra which would perform at the 2004 Mayor's Night event, only a few months away. It was a daunting task, but when dozens of calls came in from interested musicians, Green was both relieved and amused.

"A lot of people pulled out their instruments from closets. A few hadn't been part of an orchestra before, this was their dream," Green said. "It was definitely a training orchestra." She doesn't remember turning anyone away, though more than 20 auditioned.

Although she admits to possessing limited conducting experience, Green conducted that nascent orchestra



**Director.** Sabatino Vacca, shown in his new home in Cambridge, is the music director of the newly renamed Cambridge Symphony Orchestra. Peter Lee/Record staff Source: Record staff

for the first three years before gladly handing over the baton when the board hired Vacca.

"I didn't have a vision other than to get the group started," she said. As for Vacca, she added, "I think he's doing a great job."

Vacca came to the orchestra as a young but seasoned musician and director. He is music director of the Etobicoke Philharmonic Orchestra and has conducted orchestras in the Czech Republic as well as several in Ontario. He has served as artistic director for Opera York productions and conducted for Brampton Lyric Opera and Opera Kitchener. He's on staff with Opera Hamilton as well as Wilfrid Laurier University as a vocal coach. He's also called on as concert pianist and accompanist and has completed arrangements for Quartetto Gelato's latest CD. More recently, Vacca was awarded for his contributions to the arts by the National Congress of Italian Canadians.

With five years under his belt leading the Cambridge orchestra, Vacca is pleased with the progress, particularly the string section. This can partly be credited to familiarity — musicians playing together consistently eventually develop a synchronicity. "I do other engagements and it's not quite the same when you have a fluctuating body of performers," he said.

Orchestra members do not pay a membership fee, as in other community orchestras, and instead make a tax-deductible donation. Even admission to the performances is by donation rather than fixed ticket prices.

It's an unusual and unreliable source of income, but Vacca believes more families are able to come and people often make generous donations once they hear the music.

The orchestra's budget for 2011-12 was set at \$60,000, an increase of around \$20,000 over previous years. The City of Cambridge has been asked to increase last year's contribution of \$3,500 and the orchestra has also received financial support from the Galt Cambridge Lions Club and the Bridgeway Foundation. Recently, they applied for Trillium funding which will allow for the hiring of a much needed administrator. With such growth comes more responsibility, but Vacca assures, "It's still a community orchestra."

For example, the Christmas concert will feature excerpts from The Nutcracker performed by young dancers from a Cambridge studio. As well, 10-year-old violinist Emelene Rosen will be conducting a piece of music from The Nutcracker, having won the opportunity in last year's silent auction fundraiser.

"I've worked with her on conducting patterns," said Vacca. "She actually had danced to The Nutcracker when she was four."

The highlight of the evening will be acclaimed baritone James Westman, who lives in Stratford but is in demand around the world.

Such is the nature of this community orchestra under Vacca's baton: a lot of local flavour with a touch of international spice.

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## **Concert**

### **Christmas on the Grand, New Year's on the Danube**

Cambridge Symphony Orchestra

Friday, Dec. 16, 8 p.m.

Forward Baptist Church

455 Myers Rd., Cambridge

Pay as you can

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