

Baltimore Business Journal - June 18, 2007

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BALTIMORE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Chamber orchestra playing new tune with sponsors' cash

Baltimore Business Journal - June 15, 2007 by [Julekha Dash](#) Staff

Eight months ago, officials at the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra were staring at an \$80,000 deficit that threatened to bring the music to an end if they did not act quickly.

Today, the 35-musician orchestra has expanded its programming for next season, broadened its venues and pumped up its operating budget by 18 percent.

Orchestra officials credit the turnaround to a renewed effort by its board members to reach out to individual donors and foundations, while redefining their mission to stand apart musically. The board also reached into its own pockets, contributing one-third of the money needed to operate in the black.

With less than \$3,000 left before ending the deficit, the orchestra is holding seven shows next season, one more than last year. It is also expanding from its traditional concert venue at Goucher College in Towson to hold two of its concerts at the Beth Tfiloh Synagogue next year.

"It takes a lot of work to turn an organization around. I think they've made a huge effort to do that," said Ann Boyce, president of the T. Rowe Price Associates Foundation, which has given money to the orchestra.

Boyce said the chamber was once in "crisis mode," due partly to changes in leadership. The group lost some of its following after longtime music director Anne Harrigan, who founded the group in 1983, left in 2004.

Its also lost its executive director in early 2006 and went seven months without this leader until the board hired Lockwood Hoehl, Board Chairman Jeffrey A. Penza said.

Adding a new venue is an important step to attracting new listeners, Boyce said. The Pikesville community historically has supported music programs, she said.

The orchestra is sticking to what it dubs the classical repertoire, with European composers like Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn, Music Director Markand Thakar said.

"We're branding ourselves as Baltimore's classical orchestra with spice," Thakar said.

The "spice" includes an April 2008 concert featuring the veena, an Indian string instrument.

As the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra focuses more on American contemporary musicians and pops programming, the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra is distinguishing itself through its musical lineup, said Anjan Shah, a former marketing executive at the BSO who now works in marketing for Ikea.

Its \$400,000 operating budget for next fiscal year, which begins next month, accounts for two additional part-time staff. The orchestra raised single ticket prices from \$28 to \$35.



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