

## Supporters resuscitate symphony festival

*PRISMA ensures full spectrum of musical programs continues*

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Powell River will be alive with symphony music next summer, with a new organization stepping forward to ensure the survival of a renowned orchestral program.

In October, the Powell River Academy of Music announced it was suspending the 2013 season of SOAP, the Symphony Orchestra Academy of the Pacific. Founded in 2003, the program prepared advanced students and young professionals for musical careers, through master classes, individual instruction and audition training by a high calibre of professional musicians from around the world. As well as studying, students and instructors formed a symphony orchestra that performed a diverse repertoire of classical music for appreciative audiences.



RENOWNED PROGRAM: Powell River student cellist Eli Schweitzer [middle row, second from end] played with the Symphony Orchestra Academy of the Pacific (SOAP) for the first time last year. Music lovers have launched a Save Our Symphony campaign to keep the program alive.

Even before the official announcement, a working group of devoted music supporters started planning to keep the program alive. In early October, members approached the academy's board of directors with a proposal that would allow SOAP to continue, but the board rejected the plan. Despite the setback, the group moved forward independently and formed the Pacific Region International Summer Music Academy (PRISMA). They established a non-profit society, whose directors include Arthur Arnold, music director, Brian Balfe, president, Pat Gerlach, Mike Robinson, Paul Schachter, John Silver and Kim Stokes.

"I think it's universally thought that the SOAP program that we've had for nine years has been totally, artistically successful," said Schachter. "It's been a great attractor to Powell River. The music has been great. The energy that has been created has been great."

Arnold, who has been involved with SOAP since its beginning, will lead the PRISMA orchestra. In addition, a number of faculty from top orchestras in Canada and the United States have already made commitments to return to Powell River. The festival will take place at Powell River Recreation Complex from June 18 to 28, 2013.

Arnold said when the news about the suspension of SOAP became known, many people expressed their disappointment. Accolades poured in, as well as individual testimonials from students. One student said she would not have had the confidence to audition for an orchestra without the experience and training she received at SOAP. "She said it was an experience she would never forget," Arnold said. "There were many more of those kinds of reactions."

Arnold said he thought about the many future students who would not have that opportunity if the program was discontinued. As well, audiences in Powell River have been enthusiastic and supportive. "The Powell River people deserve the full spectrum of music. They're so educated musically, but they're also so eager and so interested to take it all in."

When he first came to Powell River to work on SOAP, Arnold said, he was impressed by the natural beauty and by people at the academy and in the community. "I think it's such a great and supportive community, where things happen, where people take initiative. You see this initiative again now to jumpstart this program. Again there are people that do it, that take action, that just don't talk, but work and work hard."

While he was disappointed to learn academy representatives felt they could not continue the program, Arnold said he understands their decision. “The academy, with a parting music director and a parting administrator, doesn’t have the resources to do it anymore,” he said. “Every year, SOAP lost some money.”

The group has been working hard over the last five months, to make PRISMA financially viable, Arnold said. “It’s because of this group that we are able to not only continue, but restructure and make it healthy. But, it’s a huge amount of work.”

The group plans on expanding the audience base, in the community as well as on the Lower Sunshine Coast and Campbell River, and to focus on obtaining grants and increasing the number of sponsors.

PRISMA has established a \$500 tuition fee, half of the almost \$1,000 SOAP fee. Scholarships will be available, but they will be funded from outside sources. The society has an active recruitment program, which includes the involvement of faculty as well as visiting music schools. “It’s a viable economic model, if we think that the students will pay \$500, which is not much to study with great musicians, as well as to actually have symphonic performances in your resume,” Schachter said.

Arnold has chosen the repertoire, which he described as a balance between what the students need to learn and what the audiences will appreciate. The society has set up an office, telephone, email and [website](#). It has also kicked off an SOS (Save Our Symphony) campaign, to solicit volunteers as well as individual and corporate sponsorships and immediate donations from the community.

“We are going to be successful, I just see it,” Arnold said. “Everything is ready so the rocket can fire off.”

Both academy and PRISMA representatives said they are supportive of each other’s endeavours.

Don James, founder and music director of both the academy and International Choral Kathaumixw, and Terry Sabine, the academy’s administrator, are retiring in 2014. “We think it’s great that a new group is going to take on the orchestra program and deal with the challenges, mounting such a big event,” said James. “We totally support them.”

The academy has had meetings with PRISMA representatives throughout the fall, James said, to discuss “whether we would partner in doing the orchestra program or whether it was best for them to handle it on their own. We felt that was the best way to go.”

The academy board suspended the SOAP program due to accumulated losses of \$150,000 over the first eight seasons, with a \$50,000 loss in 2012, James said. “As much as we wanted to maintain the program, the funding was just not there, thus threatening the future of the academy and Kathaumixw.”

The academy is continuing with its Spectacular Summer Music program, which includes Kathaumixw every other year. But it is also developing smaller festivals, James said. This summer, it will present a two-week Harp Academy of the Pacific program, from June 15 to 29.

Tobin Stokes, who grew up in Powell River, will be the PRISMA composer in residence, as he was for SOAP. “Like most everyone else, I was so concerned to hear the orchestral program would be cut,” he said. “Even if it were suspended by a year or two, the loss of momentum would have been its demise, as the faculty would have moved on.”

It’s a relief that a group with experience and energy has come together to restructure and propel the school and festival to the next level, Stokes added. “With help from the community, I know the program can flourish alongside everything else that keeps Powell River such a bright pin on the musical world map,” he said. “I’m an academy alumnus, gratefully able to follow my own musical dreams because I was early to adopt DJ’s [Don James] attitude: sure there’ll be hurdles, just go for it.”

To watch a video about the impact of the symphony orchestral program on students and faculty, readers can visit [YouTube](#).

Other websites of interest include [PRISMA](#) and [www.orchestra-academy.ca](#), plus [SOS](#), a YouTube movie.