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## Free Spirits

**The Cotati Philharmonic offers recession-busting arts program and a radical approach to business**

by *George Lauer*

**Gabriel Sakakeeny wants to present classical music "without the nose-in-the-air approach."**

Photo by Michael Amsler

For anybody familiar with the city of Cotati, a small wine-country hamlet 50 miles north of San Francisco, the thought of a full-size symphony orchestra squeezing into a tiny city hall across the street from grazing sheep brings a smile to the face. For those who have actually heard the Cotati Philharmonic, the smile grows wider and deeper.

With a population of 6,500 people, dozens of sheep, and a reputation as a hub of mellow counterculture, Sonoma County's smallest city doesn't seem a likely spot to find a full-fledged orchestra offering better-than-respectable renditions of Stravinsky, Copeland, Brahms, and Beethoven.

Returning for their third season, 70 musicians—professionals and amateurs, some commuting hours for rehearsals and performances—offer four concert sets each year. The musicians, soloists, and conductor all are volunteers and all concerts are free (and usually full).

"We think of it as similar to other professionals—lawyers and doctors—who donate their skills . . . sort of a *pro bono publico* orchestra," says Gabriel Sakakeeny, music director, conductor, and driving force behind the Cotati Philharmonic, which is funded with a \$13,000 grant from the city coffers.

"Our mission is to present the beauty of these works for everybody—including ourselves—without the distractions of money and without the nose-in-the-air approach so prevalent in most orchestral communities. We really are doing this for love of the art and for the sake of community. And I think both are richer for it."

Community orchestras are not all that unusual in a nation that churns out thousands of college-trained musicians each year, most with little or no chance of landing a full-time job with a professional orchestra. But the Cotati Philharmonic is not your typical community orchestra. In keeping with the city's reputation for progressive politics, the Cotati Phil (as the symphony is affectionately known) was born in a spirit of democracy and shared decision making, something of a break from the traditional autocratic nature of most orchestras. "There is an effort to do things differently, maybe a little more democratically," violinist Peter Wehausen says. "We share responsibilities and roles and we have committees to work on issues—and sometimes we're more successful than others," he adds.

Wehausen's role as occasional concertmaster is an example of sharing. Evan Craves and Damien Ting also have served as concertmaster in an unusual approach to a post often fraught with competition, conspiracy, and consternation in other orchestras. Wehausen serves on a committee charged with helping to set up guidelines for recruiting new musicians. But struggling with questions pitting the level of musicianship against the inclusive quality of a community orchestra has led to some fallout and at least a few defections.

"This was presented as a bottom-up organization at first," says a former orchestra member who asked to remain anonymous. "A big selling point was that we would all have a say in the direction the orchestra would take. I don't think that's really been the case and that's a big reason some of us left."

As many as a dozen musicians have left over the three years of the orchestra's existence, some for philosophical reasons, some due to scheduling, work, and family conflicts.

"This is a young organization with a very idealistic framework," Wehausen says. "That sort of idealism sometimes has to be tempered in order to make the whole thing really work."

But fractious politics aside, there is a sense of a higher purpose when orchestra members come together for rehearsals and performances. "We're trying to do something bigger than just putting on a few concerts," says Dennis Dorch, violinist by night, Cotati's assistant city manager by day. "There really is a sense of trying to save this as an art form."

Part of the orchestra's existence can be attributed to a void left when two other local classical outlets fizzled—first Sonoma State University's orchestra, in the late '80s, and then the neighboring Rohnert Park Chamber Orchestra in the '90s—leaving the region with only the well-established Santa Rosa Symphony under the baton of acclaimed conductor and pianist Jeffery Kahane.

But the simple absence of relatively affordable classical music doesn't explain how the Cotati Philharmonic came to be. That requires an examination of the orchestra's *raison d'être*: Gabe Sakakeeny.

Sakakeeny, video communications manager for Agilent Technologies, earned a bachelor's degree at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in 1985 and a master's in orchestral conducting from Rice University two years later. An active participant in the music community of Houston before heading to California, Sakakeeny served as principal conductor of Campanile Orchestra and music director of the Houston Youth Symphonies and Ballet Opera. He also has conducted the Colorado Philharmonic, the Auburn Symphony, the San Francisco Youth Symphony, the San Francisco Waltzing Society Orchestra, the Opus One Ensemble, and the Houston Composers' Alliance.

Sakakeeny is keeping his hand in teaching and composing as well as conducting: He recently taught a five-day intensive course at Oberlin Conservatory of Music on dealing with performance anxiety.

Last year, the Cotati Philharmonic played "Romance for Flute, Bassoon, and Orchestra," written for his wife Ilse, an accomplished flutist, and brother George Sakakeeny, a professional bassoonist who teaches at Oberlin. The piece is dedicated to his parents, both of whom have roots in the eastern Mediterranean—his mother is Croatian and his father is Lebanese. His Lebanese grandfather, also named Gabriel Sakakeeny, was new to the United States at the turn of the last century when he invented and patented an edible holder for frozen confections—the ice cream cone.

"That's the kind of legacy I have to live up to," Sakakeeny says with an engaging grin.

The motivation for the long hours and hard work, he adds, is a simple appreciation of something beautiful—making it and sharing it. "I think people are hungry for what we have to offer and I know that we're hungry for the opportunity to perform these pieces of art," Sakakeeny says.

After drawing capacity audiences approaching 1,000 for each of its concerts the first two years, the orchestra has moved recently from a borrowed church to the Spreckels Performing Arts Center in neighboring Rohnert Park. The first offering during the 2001–02 season, "The Power of Goodness," was a response to the September 11 attacks and the new consciousness they spawned in this country. The program included an excerpt from Sir Edward Elgar's "Enigma Variations" written for a friend who died in battle, Beethoven's Violin Concerto with soloist James Potochny, and Stravinsky's "Firebird Suite," a musical battle between good and evil.

Part of the strategy for revitalizing the genre in the community is a conscious effort to make the work relevant for people and to avoid the elitism often associated with classical music. "We're really trying to get away from that image," says violinist Dorch. "If we're ever going to get string programs back into schools, we have to move beyond that environment of elitism. This is truly beautiful stuff and should be available for everyone."

So far, the sheep have not been invited.

### **On a Mission**

What distinguishes the Cotati Philharmonic, aside from the relatively high caliber of performance for such a small town, is a larger goal of revitalizing classical music and perhaps, through a recently created nonprofit business entity, getting classical music back into public schools. The American Philharmonic Association, created this year, is a dual-purpose corporate umbrella for the Cotati Philharmonic. First, it will act as the business representative for the orchestra, allowing the city of Cotati to step away from the potentially high-insurance risk associated with the group. And secondly, it will try to establish an educational component that will give the orchestra a way to recruit talent and get classical music into high schools at the same time.

"The goal is to raise money to hire musicians to go into public high schools and instill classical music programs, and also be our principle players, usually section leaders," Gabriel Sakakeeny says. "There are so many fine musicians out there struggling to make a living, I don't think we'd have a hard time finding people if we offered \$50,000 a year, say, and they were positioned as mentor teachers and tutors in schools."

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