

## **Professor Helps Launch Chamber Orchestra**

By Joel Banner Baird

Burlington Free Press 9/19/07

Led Zeppelin is history, University of Vermont professor Michael Hopkins said. The bass lines of Rush no longer rattle his windows.

George Frideric Handel now rocks Hopkins' world. And the South Burlington composer, conductor and educator is working hard to bring Handel -- and other giants of orchestral music -- to contemporary ears.

This summer he brought 20 musicians together to form the Burlington Chamber Orchestra. Next month, the string ensemble launches its inaugural season at UVM's Redstone Campus Recital Hall with works by Elgar, Hindemith, Bloch and Handel.

"It's been kind of like putting together a band," he said Monday. "It's a community of people who will get used to playing together and develop rapport. It's a community orchestra that is also a professional orchestra."

The band is made up 10 violins, four violas, three cellos, a string bass, a harpsichord and a conductor.

Hopkins determined the orchestra's size using practical and aesthetic criteria. The BCO will perform in a modest-sized, 300-seat venue; it doesn't need the volume of a full orchestra.

Hopkins also would like to pay the musicians what they're worth.

"Musicians get the shaft sometimes," he said. "There isn't a huge market for this kind of music, and we're a nonprofit corporation. We'll depend on ticket sales, fund raising and grants. So, by staying small, we're hoping we can slowly build our audience and remain economically feasible."

Although he's an accomplished double-bassist, Hopkins will wield the baton for the four-concert series. That role, and that of music director, evolved in part from years of teaching music to schoolchildren.

"A lot of people just don't want to get up in front of a group, but the world does need leaders," he said. "If you can get 90 eighth-graders to focus on a piece of music, working with professionals comes pretty naturally."

Members of the orchestra have received the scores they will play. For practical

reasons, they will rehearse for only five hours, two days before the performance.

"Think about it," Hopkins said. "A rock band can take a very, very long time to put together a four-minute song.

"I'd like to think that I can provide some inspiration and some guidance. Studying the scores is a window of insight into the composers' minds."

In the case of Baroque composers like Handel, the windows can be somewhat cloudy.

During those times (and earlier), composers assumed the players would have a good idea of how a piece should be played, Hopkins said. Musicians routinely improvised.

A modern conductor must assemble a coherent interpretation from bare notes; he or she must steer the ensemble through changes in tempo, dynamics and phrasing.

"Twentieth-century composers," Hopkins said, "tend to micro-manage every detail."

He pulled out a score by Leonard Bernstein. In contrast to the spare staves of Handel, Bernstein's notes specified when a violinist should begin a phrase with an up or down stroke of the bow. He made sure the percussionist knew when to use sticks.

Hopkins hasn't released details about his original composition that will debut with the BCO at the May concert. A certainty: It won't channel Led Zeppelin or Rush licks.

"I actually try not to draw on those influences," Hopkins said. "But you never really forget them. They're lurking back there, somewhere."