University of Lethbridge

News Release

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University led documentary about Lethbridge Symphony Orchestra awarded SSHRC grant

A feature documentary project led by members of the University of Lethbridge community is one step closer to completion thanks to a recently awarded federal grant.

The film, *Prairie Visions,* will celebrate the 65-year history of the Lethbridge Symphony Orchestra (LSO) and explore how classical music has shaped the cultural identity of southern Alberta.

The documentary received a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Connection Grant of $37,430. The project builds on an oral history study of the LSO by Dr. Jenna Bailey, an award-winning filmmaker and adjunct assistant professor in the Department of History and Religion and Dr. Christopher Burton, an associate professor in the Department who has served as Vice President of the LSO.

“I had a rather modest idea of what we could do, I was thinking that I would go and talk to some former musicians or long-serving musicians, maybe some of the conductors, interview them and then put the transcripts in the Galt archive,” says Burton. “So, I ran this past Jenna and I think there was a pause on the other end of the line, and she said, you know, there might be another way of doing this.”

Prairie Visions, directed by Bailey, will bring together interviews, archival elements and new musical performances, including the revival of Dean Blair’s 1978 *The Lethbridge Concerto* and a newly commissioned musical piece by Blackfoot composer and ULethbridge alumnus Sonny-Ray Day Rider (BA ‘20, MMus ‘24).

“Originally, it was the history of the Lethbridge Symphony Orchestra, which we are recording and preserving and will share. But then it became this other story, this circle where the composers have been inspired by their community and their region, and then they are creating music that is inspiring for their community,” says Bailey.

Joining Burton and Bailey behind the scenes is Bryn Hewko, an assistant professor in the Faculty of Fine Arts Department of New Media. Hewko has a background in film and video, primarily in post-production and editing.

“I’ve been thinking about how the final project is going to look and sound. I’m less of a historian, but I’ve been present for a lot of the interviews and it’s been quite enlightening to learn about the history of the region,” says Hewko, who adds new media students will be taking on a large portion of the paid editing work.

In addition to the recent SSHRC Connection Grant another $86,000 has already been raised to cover production costs. That total includes contributions from the Government of Alberta, Historical Society of Alberta and the Give One Legacy Foundation. The project has also received TELUS STORYHIVE funding for a related docuseries. ULethbridge will provide 10 per cent matching funds for the SSHRC grant in addition to previous funding through the Centre for Oral History and Tradition as well as the University of Lethbridge Research Fund.

“This is a University project in so many ways,” says Burton. “Jenna is affiliated with the history department, Bryn is in fine arts, many of the people we’re interviewing have ties to the institution including former faculty, staff and graduates. The University has really enabled this to happen.”

It’s hoped a further $65,000, in honour of the LSO’s 65th anniversary, can be fundraised through donations and sponsorship opportunities.

The goal is to premiere the documentary during the LSO’s 2027/2028 season with the symphony performing the score live during its debut screening.

“It’s just been so fascinating to see what sustains a community orchestra and how much passion goes into it,” adds Bailey. “That passion inspires me, seeing people who are willing to volunteer their time and commit, because these are not paid positions. You can’t help but be excited hearing their stories.”

To view online: https://www.ulethbridge.ca/unews/article/university-led-documentary-about-lethbridge-symphony-orchestra-awarded-sshrc-grant

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Our University’s Blackfoot name is Iniskim, meaning Sacred Buffalo Stone. The University is located in traditional Blackfoot Confederacy territory. We honour the Blackfoot people and their traditional ways of knowing in caring for this land, as well as all Indigenous Peoples who have helped shape and continue to strengthen our University community.