

Touring Russian orchestra forced to busk on streets

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Members of the National Philharmonic Orchestra of Russia are learning bitter lessons about the operation of "market forces", during their extensive European tour. Ticket sales have been much lower than expected and members of the orchestra have been forced to busk [perform for donations] in the streets outside their venues to raise enough money to pay for food and accommodation for themselves and their colleagues.

The orchestra, based in Tomsk in Central Siberia, was established in 1879 and is the oldest professional orchestra in Russia. It gained philharmonic status in 1945 and has 80 players, including a very fine string section. Their programmes include works by Wagner, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, Weber and Prokofiev.

The tour has been organised by Gaston Management of Amsterdam and involves 38 engagements in less than 10 weeks. In addition, the orchestra has had to criss-cross western Europe, beginning in Holland on October 1, then travelling to Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, England, Ireland, back to England, Holland again, then two weeks of travelling round England, Wales and Scotland. The final week of the tour has eight concerts on consecutive nights in five different cities, concluding in the English seaside resort of Bournemouth, on December 8. The punishing schedule has allowed no time for rest and recuperation.

Most members of the orchestra are experienced musicians and are far from young. When they arrived in Halifax on the evening of November 26, they had travelled all day from their previous engagement in Swansea, Wales and had to perform within two hours of arrival. Lack of funds had forced them to busk on the streets of Swansea before they left. As soon as they arrived in Halifax, some of the musicians were again out on the streets before the performance. As well as

being totally exhausted, they were bitter and angry. But despite all their problems, the orchestra made a supreme effort and gave a great performance.

News of their plight has been reported in some of the national papers in Britain, and in the past few days they have received a few donations from business. GTS, a telecommunications provider with interests in Russia, donated £15,000 to provide food and accommodation. But the majority of the donations have come from members of the public, who are shocked at what has happened. People have turned up at the theatres with cheques and audiences have contributed to "bucket collections" at the end of performances. When the orchestra returned to Swansea on December 1, they played to a packed house and received four standing ovations.

After the performance in Halifax on November 26, the orchestra's Artistic Director and Principal Conductor, Boguslaw Dawidow, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"The situation is terrible. The tour has been arranged by Gaston Management of Amsterdam and it has been a complete disaster.

"We have had no accommodation on the tour and have had to sleep in youth hostels. Here in Halifax we have no hotel for tonight, so the tour organisers are saying we will have to get on the coaches straight after the concert and drive up to Aberdeen in Scotland overnight. We have spent the whole day travelling from Swansea in Wales today and arrived in Halifax just a couple of hours before tonight's concert was due to begin.

"The orchestra is totally exhausted. The only reason they are willing to perform is because they love music and want to play for the public. The orchestra is based in Tomsk in the middle of Siberia. It is still financed by

the government, but our wages are not enough to live on. We need to go on tour to earn money to exist.

"We had a contract that laid down wages, conditions, accommodation, transport, hotels, advertising. They are using the fact that we are poor and cannot afford to sue them.

"The orchestra suffers inside Russia and we suffer outside Russia too. Under the old regime our pay was low, but we had a good life. We could afford to eat. In Tomsk, we have a concert hall that holds 2,000 people. We can fill the hall whenever we play, but ticket prices are low because if they were any higher we wouldn't get an audience. No one could afford to come to hear us.

"I have noticed in Britain that not many young people listen to classical music. We have the same problem in Russia. I am sure this is because they don't know the music. We have to give them a chance to hear it and to find what happiness and fulfilment it can provide. I try to organise special concerts for young people whenever I can.

"We have an orchestra of 80 players. I love these people, and I am really crying for this situation. Our wages are just not enough and we have to get through life. We have been travelling all over Europe. The orchestra has been very patient, because they are artists and they want to play and they have given their utmost everywhere.

"We don't want conflict of any kind. We just want to make music and through music to unify people."

The National Philharmonic Orchestra of Russia is scheduled to play at the following venues:

December 6—Victoria Theatre, Halifax

December 7 & 8—Pavilion Theatre, Winter Gardens, Bournemouth



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