

Support for striking Detroit Symphony Orchestra musicians at weekend concert

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Striking Detroit Symphony Orchestra musicians staged a public performance Sunday night before a highly supportive audience of hundreds of friends and supporters at Temple Beth El in the Detroit suburb of Bloomfield Hills. The concert was the first of two scheduled this month by the musicians to build public support for their struggle.

The players struck October 4 after management, citing mounting deficits, imposed draconian concessions, including a 33 percent pay cut, cuts in benefits, changes in work rules and a 42 percent reduction in the starting salary for new players. Management rejected the offer by the player's union, Local 5 of the American Federation of Musicians, of a 22 percent pay cut with partial restoration in the third year of a three-year contract.

Grant Cooper, artistic director and conductor of the West Virginia Symphony Orchestra, donated his time for the performance, as did all the orchestra members and stage hands. The concert included selections from Verdi, Bach and Brahms. A planned performance of Camille Saint-Saëns' Cello Concert No. 1 had to be cancelled due to an injury suffered by the soloist, acclaimed DSO principal cellist Robert deMaine. The audience responded with repeated and prolonged standing ovations, both in response to the masterful performance and as a show of solidarity with the courageous stand taken by the players against management's plans to destroy the DSO as a leading US orchestra.

In a statement distributed to those attending the Sunday concert, musicians said the strike was one "that management wanted in order to downsize the orchestra from a world-class internationally acclaimed ensemble that over the decades attracted musicians from all over the world, to a second-class orchestra, with a small

budget, and with a small vision befitting management's view of metro-Detroit."

Following the concert, the musicians heard the report that world-renowned violinist Sarah Chang had cancelled her planned Monday recital at orchestra hall. DSO management asked Chang to perform the recital after the strike forced cancellation of her season opening appearance with the DSO.

Chang's plan to perform while the DSO's musicians were on strike evoked criticism from musicians across the United States. In announcing her withdrawal, Chang cited large numbers of critical posts on her Facebook page, which DSO management provocatively characterized as "threats."

In a public statement announcing her withdrawal Chang said she wished her "friends and colleagues in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and its management a speedy resolution."

In an open letter issued following Chang's withdrawal, DSO musicians thanked Chang for her "powerful gesture in refusing to play in the replacement concert."

Following the concert the musicians' spokesman, cellist Haden McKay, held a question-and-comment session with supporters. In reply to a question about the DSO's deficit, McKay noted, "In their minds this means the city cannot afford a major orchestra. But, at a time like this it is important to hold on to what we have. We wouldn't like to think that in 100 years that it took to build the symphony it would be just kicked away."

McKay went on to note the general lack of interest in classical music among Detroit's financial elite. "There has never been an extremely wealthy person who loves music in Detroit."

In response to a comment from a WSWs supporter about the shameful dependence of art and culture in

America on private contributions, McKay replied, “Federal and state funding for the DSO is less than one-third of one percent. In Europe it is around 50 percent.” He continued, “We are dependent and at the whim of wealthy individuals.”

Later, in reply to another question, McKay noted the contrast between the response of DSO management to the present economic crisis and in the period of the Great Depression. “In the 1930s there was a depression, but the Detroit Symphony was a great symphony in that period. It was the first to do a radio series. We want to think long term, we don’t want to exempt ourselves from the context we are in, but we have to look to the future.”

The World Socialist Web Site spoke to orchestra members and supporters who attended the concert at Temple Beth El.

Mary Beth Orr, a substitute French horn player with the Detroit Symphony told the WWS, “I played at a number of concerts last season and I have gotten to know the musicians pretty well.

“I am really saddened and upset with the way they are being treated. It seems more of a power play. I can’t see people managing an orchestra who don’t even like their musicians. To see people who started playing their instrument at the age of 4 still having to defend their worth – I am angry as hell.”

She said that attempts had been made to compare what was taking place with the DSO with the restructuring by the auto companies to improve vehicle quality. “The musicians are the product. You don’t go about making an inferior product. The propaganda about the musicians being greedy is not what it is about. Truly, a lot of blogs seem to carry endless propaganda on the management side. “

Helen and Greg Near, who play with the Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra, came to Temple Beth El to show their support for the striking DSO musicians.

Greg told the WWS, “We are here to support the orchestra. What is happening is just the beginning of a trend to redefine the orchestra.”

Helen added, “For these musicians, like all musicians, it is a lifelong endeavor. For management to want to change the job description is unreasonable.

“You can’t afford not to have the DSO. If everything were based on the bottom line, a lot of things wouldn’t make it. It comes down to what kind of country do we

want to live in.”

James Tang, a student at Troy High School said, “I really think the musicians deserve better from management. Personally, I came here to let them know we are there and support them.

“I do not like this situation. Neither side is benefiting from this. I would like to see a speedy recovery.”

Jason Gong, who plays cello in the DSO’s Civic Orchestra, a prestigious pre-professional student orchestra, and is also a student at Troy High School, said, “I hate to see the orchestra torn apart because of the current situation with management and funding. I believe the management is being unreasonable.

“You can’t put a price on the arts. It is part of who we are, as people, who we are as a whole. Without the arts, life would be very bleak.

“I am from China and actually the support of the arts there is in stark contrast to the US. While they take children at young ages and train them, and that may not be always the best, the idea is that in order to keep the arts alive, it is worth it to dedicate your life.”



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