

Detroit symphony management pursues hard line

David Walsh
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On the third day of a strike by Detroit Symphony Orchestra players, DSO management held a press conference at Orchestra Hall Wednesday morning to put forward its case. The DSO is demanding that its 85 active members accept a 33 percent cut in base salary, cuts in health benefits and pensions, and that the pay of starting players be reduced by 42 percent.

The musicians union, the Detroit Federation of Musicians, Local 5 of the American Federation of Musicians, has countered by proposing its own pay cuts, 22 percent in the first year.

On the eve of the walkout and over the course of its first several days, the Detroit and national mainstream media have lost no opportunity in asserting that the city can no longer afford a world-class orchestra, and that the players must face financial reality, i.e., the need to accept a severe lowering of their living standards and conditions.

Stripped of its honeyed phrases about “artistic vision,” “passionate commitment” and such, the message delivered by DSO President and CEO Anne Parsons Wednesday amounted to little more than a repetition of the same arguments.

In her comments, communicated to the public via a webcast, Parsons first noted that this week’s concerts were cancelled, a “sad state of affairs” for the orchestra. She spent some time going over the recent history of the DSO’s financial difficulties, compounded by the general “economic disaster,” as she described it, that hit in the fall of 2008.

Various consultants and experts, including one from the Ford Foundation and others employed by the orchestra’s creditors, various banks, had weighed in on the DSO’s condition. They concluded collectively that the DSO’s financial position was “untenable,” and that a fundamental restructuring was in order. Parsons noted that by 2009 the banks “were dissatisfied...change was not coming fast enough.” The consultants all demanded “drastically reducing orchestral costs.”

It is entirely unsurprising that the banks and other institutions should insist that the DSO’s problems must be

solved at the expense of its staff, whose pay has been cut by 30 percent, and its musicians.

The most grating portion of Parsons’s 25-minute remarks came in her patronizing and repeated insistence that the present strike had been brought about because of the players’ failure to understand the “imperative for change.” The DSO president spoke of the economic crisis and the orchestra’s financial state as though it were a natural disaster, to which everyone needed to adapt.

Asserting that there were “natural obstacles to change,” Parsons enumerated the stages that people supposedly go through before “they are able to embrace change,” including “denial,” “resistance” and “exploration.” This is drivel. The DSO is not engaging in result-neutral “change,” its demands would devastate the conditions and lives of its players, with far-reaching consequences for the orchestra as a whole.

Parsons can repeat all she likes that “I disagree with those who say the changes we’re making will damage the quality of this institution. We are committed to quality and excellence,” but the facts of the situation are obvious. Reckless and shortsighted, under the thumb of the banks and the Detroit corporate elite, the DSO management is proposing to impose conditions that would perhaps irretrievably damage the orchestra.

During the question and answer period, this reporter asked the only question that was posed to Parsons: “How do you think you can maintain the world-class status of the DSO when you’re cutting wages drastically and making other demands that can only encourage the best players to leave and discourage others from coming here?”

After first claiming that, “I don’t think we know what will happen when change takes place,” Parsons pointed to unnamed orchestras and businesses that have undergone “dramatic change” and “are better for it.” She acknowledged that in some cases the change “is too severe and it may contribute to an unsuccessful result.”

Parsons went on to assert that “everyone I speak to in the community has had to undergo change. Change in income, change in benefits.” Everyone? There are more billionaires

in Michigan than ever; the auto companies are reporting millions in profits, based on the slashing of wages, and corporate executives are raking in enormous salaries.

She concluded, “If we decide that change will be negative, then it will be negative. If we believe in the alternative, then I believe we can be more successful.”

Comments from two DSO players

After the press conference, I spoke to two DSO players who had attended the press conference.

Principal trombonist Ken Thompkins has been with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra for 13 years. He insisted that the essential issue for the players was the defense of the quality and traditions of the DSO.

Thompkins said he was well aware of the general economic climate and the hardships people were facing. “I live in a neighborhood where there have been foreclosures. I’ve seen the U-Haul trucks coming in the middle of the night. We know people are suffering.”

I spoke as well to violist Caroline Coade, who agreed that “the fundamental issue is the preservation of the quality of the orchestra, one hundred years of tradition. Most of us have students, and we want to preserve an orchestral tradition for them to grow into, we want them eventually to be our colleagues. We’re all prepared to take concessions, we’ve offered concession, but let’s not destroy this great orchestra.

“I have completed my fourteenth season with the orchestra, I’m hoping for fifteen and up! I love this job, I love it. It’s incredibly challenging, it was hard to get this job. Hard to play at this level, and almost even harder to stay at this level.

“I have three degrees; I have a degree from Oberlin Conservatory, a bachelor in music. I have a degree from the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, an artist’s diploma, a three-year program there, and I have a Master of Music degree from the Julliard School in New York. And it took me three years after those three degrees to prepare the skills necessary to win a job with a major orchestra, such as Detroit.

“The audition process is grueling. For me, in 1996, it was a five-day process. First, I played in the preliminary round with 108 other people, and then we went down to eight people in the semi-final round two days later. Then we got to three people in the final round—for one spot. Highly, highly competitive. There is an audition committee—in my particular case, there was a string audition committee, which

was made up of 12 people. And since that audition, actually I’ve taken a move-up audition to move up within the ranks of the orchestra, and I successfully completed that.

“I think it’s fair to say that this is a world-class orchestra. I travel all over the world and talk to people. I’ve heard the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and I think we’re equally good. I’ve traveled the world with the orchestra, and we can certainly hold our own. We certainly have some absolutely top-notch talent here.

“Many of us have trained at what we do since we were very young. I started at five. All of us have made sacrifices, our parents have made sacrifices. It’s been highly competitive, our whole training. We are trained as highly as the best surgeons, the best lawyers. One thing that concerns me is that a lot of people in the city of Detroit and perhaps the state of Michigan, and perhaps I should cast a wider net than that, do not know that we are full-time. This is what we do full-time.

“There’s been a lot of negativity in the press to the effect that we only work 20 hours a week. That’s 20 hours on stage, that’s not counting the three or four hours practicing each day each one of us does to prepare for what we do. It’s a daily endeavor.”

Ken Thompkins further commented, “It’s been management’s goal to remain silent, other than today, and hope that we’d just go away. That hasn’t happened, we’re not going away, and now they have this big press conference, and they’re streaming it. Ask them, incidentally, how much that streaming cost.

“We decided to come today to the press conference on our own, we just wanted to see what management had to say. We’re always curious. We were escorted into our own building, and escorted out. We didn’t steal anything, I want to add.

“Briefly, I was astonished and amazed at how she [Parsons] characterized everything as ‘change,’ because I think change in this case has to start at the top and in its mentality, in management’s treatment of the workers. We want to see equality of sacrifice. We’re not seeing any sacrifice from the upper management and a plan in place that will work.

“We’ve been willing to negotiate and they haven’t.”



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