

Striking Detroit Symphony musicians hold another well-attended support concert

Shannon Jones
9 November 2010

Striking members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra held a support concert November 7 at Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church in Grosse Pointe Woods, in suburban Detroit, before a near capacity audience of close to 700.

The concert featured guest conductor Gerhardt Zimmermann, director of orchestral activities at the University of Texas. Guest artist, internationally renowned pianist James Tocco, performed Robert Schumann's piano concerto in A minor. The program also included the contemporary work "Rainbow Body" (2000) by Christopher Theofanidis and the "Swan Lake" (Suite) by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

During intermission there was a short ceremony honoring two retiring DSO violinists: Ann Strubler and Lenore Sjoberg.

The concert was the third in a series of highly successful support concerts performed by the striking musicians since the walkout began October 4. The strike is now entering its sixth week.

The musicians face demands by DSO management for a 33 percent pay cut, a reduction in health benefits and pensions, and a 42 percent reduction in pay for new orchestra members. Management also wants to impose changes in work rules that would force musicians to carry out an assortment of non-performance-related duties.

The players' union, Local 5 of the American Federation of Musicians, has responded with its own offer of concessions, a 22 pay cut with partial restoration in the third year. Player representatives say the deep cuts demanded by management would irreparably damage the quality of the orchestra by making it impossible to attract and retain top players. The DSO is currently considered to be in the top tier of US orchestras.

On November 5 DSO management offered to enter into informal talks with the striking players, a cynical ploy as it turned out. As a goodwill gesture, the players' bargaining representatives agreed to cancel a planned picket set for that night of a concert at Orchestra Hall featuring jazz artist Dee Dee Bridgewater. Instead, the musicians passed out leaflets explaining the issues in the strike.

However, management made no counteroffer to the players, merely restating its previous concession demands. Musicians ended the talks after nine hours. One member of the bargaining committee told the WSWs, "We fell into a trap."

There is growing support for the DSO musicians. The attack on the players by DSO management is broadly seen as the spearhead of a corporate assault on art and culture in the United States, as wealthy donors scale back support and meager state aid dries up. The DSO faces a \$9 million operating deficit and is under pressure by its creditors.

On October 24, seventeen members of the Cleveland Orchestra traveled to Detroit to take part in a support concert. The striking players have received financial contributions, several in excess in of \$10,000, from orchestras across the United States, including the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, the Pittsburgh Symphony, the San Francisco Symphony and the Minnesota Orchestra.

The official labor movement is continuing its boycott of the musicians' strike. Since the walkout began the United Auto Workers, the Teamsters and other unions, which together nominally represent tens of thousands of workers in the Detroit area, have not raised a finger to defend the musicians. This only reaffirms that these organizations function as an arm of corporate management and are hostile to any genuine struggle on

behalf of working people.

The WSWs spoke to several striking musicians leafletting the November 5 concert at Orchestra Hall. Ethan Allen, a librarian for the DSO, told the WSWs, “We are covered under the same agreement as the players. We go through a rigorous process to be hired. I am a percussionist and I sometimes substitute in the orchestra.

“Librarians are facing a 42 percent wage cut. When you factor in cuts in health benefits it is more like 50 percent.

“The problem is that arts organizations have to rely on wealthy people for donations. Obviously the economic crisis has affected them, but it has affected the normal working class people more.”

Pat Gurin, the wife of DSO trombonist Nathaniel Gurin, told the WSWs, “I played for the orchestra a few years when I moved here. Now I mostly teach. It is hard to think that the Detroit Symphony will not be here for kids. There is very little music in the schools.

“I think she [DSO President Anne Parsons] just met with the strikers to avoid a picket line—anyone can see that. I played in benefit concerts for five years to save Orchestra Hall when management didn’t want to.

“This is just the first orchestra that this is happening to. We are one of the greatest orchestras in the world and this is one of the greatest halls in the world. There is a lot of international support.

“Its shameful, now there is a sign on the door saying ‘no orchestra members allowed inside’.

“If a great orchestra like this can go, anything can happen. We can’t let this orchestra go. It’s very, very important. The people who are running it want to kill it. The DSO is the musicians, not the management.”

Supporters of the WSWs distributed a leaflet at the Grosse Pointe Woods support concert announcing a public meeting sponsored by the Socialist Equality Party to be held November 15 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The meeting entitled “The Detroit Symphony Strike and the Defense of Culture in the US” will feature a talk by WSWs Arts Editor David Walsh.

The WSWs interviewed musicians and their supporters attending the concert in Grosse Pointe Woods. Linton Bodwin, a DSO bassist, told the WSWs, “There are a lot of different levels to this conflict. There is the whole issue of what compensation

level professional orchestra members deserve, whether it is Detroit or Chicago. You talk about cutting 30-40 percent, that is going to have a negative effect.

“The fact that the musicians have had to struggle against these very, very onerous attempts by the board and management and the fact that it has gone on so long indicates that it involves a far deeper problem than money.”

Janice Tocco, the niece of pianist James Tocco, told the WSWs, “I grew up watching him play piano on the high school stage. We have a real fondness for this symphony and all art.

“It is unconscionable what is happening. I am a teacher. I know what cuts to the arts are all about.”

Walter Maddox, a former DSO violinist, told the WSWs, “I retired from this orchestra after 35 years. The news [of the strike] is spreading all over the country. I have contacts with the Buffalo Symphony and I made sure they heard.

“It is an assault on culture, absolutely. They say they want to have the players do office work. It is a matter of respect.”

Fares Jaghad, a student at Detroit Mercy High School told the WSWs, “The cuts are too much. In my art history class we are really concerned about it. We talk about it a lot. If they cut out art, it means the younger generation is not being educated in history.”

The author also recommends:

The assault on culture and the crisis of American capitalism

[5 October 2010]



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact