

More US orchestras demand musicians accept pay, job cuts

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Musicians are facing escalating threats of layoffs and pay cuts as orchestras across the United States report sharp falls in donations and soaring deficits, placing the survival of high quality classical music in major urban centers in question.

Some orchestras are already seeking to follow the example of Detroit, where musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra are completing their seventh week on strike, opposing demands for a 33 percent pay cut and other drastic concessions.

Earlier this week management of the Louisville Orchestra in Kentucky told player representatives that this week's paycheck would be their last unless they agreed to the elimination of 16 positions and a 20 percent pay reduction. The players' current five-year contract does not expire until June 2011.

The musicians say the reduction in the size of the orchestra demanded by management, from 71 down to 55 positions, would be crippling. Further, the reduction in pay would leave musicians earning poverty wages, less than \$29,000 annually. Kim Tichenor, the players' chief representative, said, "An orchestra of 55 members is not an orchestra anyone can recognize as the Louisville Orchestra."

In August, the Louisville musicians agreed to some \$100,000 in cuts to offset a reported \$270,000 shortfall that created a cash flow crisis. Since that time the orchestra has increased estimates of its budget deficit to \$2 million.

Members of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra in Texas voted by a narrow margin to accept a reduction in the number of weeks they are compensated during the year, resulting in steep cuts in pay. Under terms of the two-year agreement approved this week, pay for a section player will drop from the current \$60,003

annually to \$51,926. Pay for a principal player will fall from \$75,008 to \$66,354. There will be an additional paid week in the second year.

Management said the cuts were necessary to offset a drop in public funding, cancelled performance contracts and declining ticket revenues.

Meanwhile, the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra is reporting a \$2.3 million deficit for fiscal 2010. The shortfall was due in large part to a 20 percent drop in donations. The orchestra cut some non-musician staff earlier this year.

"Seventy percent of our budget is dependent on our generous contributors in the community, said Don Tyler, Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra interim executive director, pointing to the shameful dependence of the arts in America on private philanthropy. "When those contributors suffer through the economic time we are going through now, we suffer."

Orchestral musicians have taken pay cuts or pay freezes in major cities across the United States. Earlier this year the Philadelphia Orchestra threatened bankruptcy and the New York Philharmonic is carrying over a \$4.5 million deficit from 2009 and expects a similar shortfall this year.

The attack on art and culture in the United States as reflected in the funding crisis of major orchestras is attracting international attention. In a November 19 comment in the British *Guardian*, correspondent Ed Pilkington said the situation in Detroit places in question "the very survival of America's big-city ensembles. It is feared where Detroit goes first, other cash strapped cities may follow."

In Detroit, not only is management seeking a permanent salary reduction, it is attempting to redefine the role of orchestra members, expanding their job description to include all kinds of non-performance

related tasks, even clerical work, for no extra pay. The attack on the orchestra takes place amid an assault on the working population of the city, including the shuttering of scores of schools, cuts in bus service and the closure of fire stations.

Detroit Symphony musicians are planning another support concert November 21 at Temple Beth El in Bloomfield Hills, the fourth since the strike began. The concerts have all attracted near capacity audiences.

This week the players announced that they will perform three holiday concerts in December, including their first performance in Warren, Michigan, a working class suburb of Detroit. The concerts will all feature Maestro Kypros Markou, who has conducted major orchestras in the US and internationally. He is currently director of Orchestra Studies at Wayne State University in Detroit. All the artists and stagehands are donating their time.



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