

A conversation with violist Caroline Coade

Detroit Symphony striker: “I now realize this is a big fight ... a fight for what’s right”

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The musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) went on strike October 4 against harsh management concessions demands: a 33 percent cut in base pay, a 42 percent cut for new players’ pay, additional cuts in health benefits and other humiliating demands.

As the strike approaches the 80-day mark and seems certain to surpass the longest work stoppage in DSO history (the previous record of 12 weeks was set in 1987), management continues to insist on imposing its savage demands, which would likely mean the demise of the ensemble as a major orchestra.

Acting on behalf of the corporations and banks, and blinded by right-wing ideology, the DSO board is proceeding on a catastrophic course. In this, they are leading the way for orchestra managements, arts institutions and employers generally across the US.

The strike deserves the fullest support of the entire working population. If the DSO players suffer a defeat, it will lead to further concessions demands and attacks on living standards. The musicians should not give up a penny, any more than auto workers or teachers or government workers should. The argument that “there is no money” for the arts has to be rejected with contempt at a time when bankers and the corporate aristocracy are pulling in untold sums.

We urge the musicians to widen their support in the working class by organizing concerts and other events, in Detroit and elsewhere. This can become part of a broader counter-offensive against concessions, budget-cutting and the destruction of jobs.

I recently spoke to violist Caroline Coade, a member of the Detroit Symphony since 1996. I first spoke to Caroline on October 6, outside Orchestra Hall in downtown Detroit, where we had both attended a press conference addressed by DSO president and CEO Anne Parsons. In a conversation, she forcefully impressed on me the level of commitment and skill possessed by the musicians, as well as their determination to defend their conditions. (See “Detroit symphony management pursues hard line”.)

We spoke again last week, about the strike, about music, about the state of the arts in the US. She said some interesting and important things.

David Walsh: What is the present situation? What is your frame of mind?

Caroline Coade: It’s very hard, we’re now ten and a half weeks into the strike, with no end in sight. It’s a difficult time for all of us, for musicians, and for audiences—I think they’re wondering what’s going to happen, is there a future for the orchestra? That’s something we’re all wondering.

And what does that future look like? Is it the future that we want? Is it preserving a great orchestra? Is it giving audiences who have grown so used to us great performances?

DW: There are two different visions at work.

CC: There are very different visions, yes, and I don’t know that was so

apparent to begin with, but it’s become more and more apparent.

I think the musicians are having to remember why we’re in this, because it would be much easier to just give up. Being on strike is very hard. It affects so many other people. It affects families, it affects people who work around Orchestra Hall.

I never imagined I would be in a strike. I wasn’t here when they had their previous strikes. This is the first conflict like this in my life. Yes, it’s eye-opening.

For example, it’s hard to read what is written in the press about the musicians. I take it so personally. I know I shouldn’t, but to be called a ‘bully’ and a ‘thug’ over the [violinist] Sarah Chang incident and to read that we ‘prevented’ the musicians of Bowfire [the Canadian musical group] from crossing the picket line ... There was no ‘preventing,’ it was their free will not to cross the line against their brothers and sisters. But reading that kind of thing in the press, seeing how you are represented to the public, is very difficult.

DW: To step back for a moment, when I spoke to you on October 6, you impressed upon me the degree of commitment and sacrifice involved in this life. Tell me something about your history as a musician.

CC: I started the violin when I was five years old. I’m one of three sisters, and we all played violin at that time. We were six, five and three, all playing violin. I feel incredibly sorry for my parents! Beginning violin is not a pretty sound! We studied in our public school in San Diego. We figured out that we were pretty good at this, it was something we really liked. I switched to the viola when I was 14.

So starting that young there were sacrifices made, including my parents’ financial sacrifices, to get instruments, to pay for lessons. As a kid, practicing on your own, is not easy, then came competitions, conservatory. For me, it was two additional degrees after that. It’s a high level of training for most of us. It’s a huge commitment. Even now, I don’t travel without my viola, because I know to stay at this level requires a daily effort.

DW: If you don’t play for a while, I assume you can tell the difference.

CC: Yes, absolutely. My hands feel like clubs. They feel very thick and very heavy, there is no finesse there.

DW: You came here in 1996. Could you tell me a bit about that process?

CC: I remember it very well. It was a five-day-long audition for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. They initially had 108 people playing, and they got it down to eight for the semi-finals.

A month or six weeks ahead of time, they give you a list of orchestral excerpts to prepare. In the preliminary round you only have some 5 to 6 minutes to make a first impression. You have to get over your nerves like that. Of course, as well, you play behind a screen, it’s anonymous. As young performers we’re trained to play to an audience response, so it’s a different musical skill set. I call it the musical Olympics.

In the semi-final round, it may be 15-20 minutes—they obviously want you to play more than in the first round. The final for me was a 35-minute audition. I remember being very, very, very thirsty at the end of that, and thinking, I can't believe they have no water out here. There were three of us in the final.

I was thrilled, thrilled.

DW: How has the experience been, all in all?

CC: I love the job so much, it's an incredible ensemble. Every day is a different challenge. Some weeks are easier. It's never a piece of cake, put it that way. There's always practicing to be done, and I guess one of the hardest things is reading in the newspaper about how we only work 20 hours a week, that is so ridiculous. That might be the number of hours we put in down at the hall, but it's like saying a professional football players only plays four hours a week.

For us, we change our program every single week. A lot of people don't know that. If it's a classical week, we're learning a brand-new program every week, in a small number of hours as an ensemble. You have to be at an incredibly high level. The pop shows we put together in two and a half hours, it's that level of professionalism. You get in, you put the music together, and it's show time. You cannot be an amateur, there's no way.

DW: Why do you love music? What does music do for you?

CC: I can't stop listening to music. Even now, I'm distracted by the music they're playing in here! For me, it's primarily an emotional experience. I'm not analyzing it, when I'm playing. I'm thinking, 'Where is this piece going?' It creates such a mood for everyone. It also punctuates your life, it's a time and place thing. If you hear a song that you heard years ago, it transports you. Or you feel like moving to it, a dance tune. Or you want to cry.

It may be hard for people who don't go to concerts very often to understand. We do something you can't put in a box, wrap up and take home. It's something that each individual absorbs very personally. You can have a full concert hall and no two people will have the same experience.

DW: There is currently in this country an enormous assault on the arts, on budgets. Management's effort here is now the spearhead of that.

CC: I think we will be an example. I think the reason we've had such a generous outpouring of support from other musicians and orchestras, at all levels, is because they realize that they don't have a chance if we don't fight. That places a great burden on us too.

There are an unprecedented number of music school graduates. I was speaking to my students at the University of Michigan about this. I said, you need to diversify, because there is no guarantee of a job. The students are outraged, they can't believe this 'new model' that management is pushing.

DW: One of the major problems in this country is that the arts are at the mercy of the 'generosity' of the rich, the benevolence of corporations and billionaires. And when they don't feel like forking over any money, everything shuts down. That is an untenable situation. Art should be publicly funded.

CC: I think every musician would agree that there needs to be an updating of the symphony orchestra, even at the simplest level. I remember graduating from Curtis [Institute of Music in Philadelphia] and being told, you're going to have to be very flexible. The days are gone when you could simply plant your rear end in a chair and play. You now have to be a good public speaker, mingle with the donors, and maybe put on a children's concert.

But it was never like this. We never thought we'd face these kinds of demands. In this strike, the musicians are learning skills we never thought we'd need.

DW: I do think the strike and your cause have to be expanded to a bigger audience. If you're in the same boat, objectively speaking, as auto workers, teachers and everyone else, then you have to turn in that

direction, in my opinion. This raises the more complex political and social questions. Because you can't rely on the Democratic politicians, but have to turn to other working people and explain your situation.

CC: I've always thought, during the 14 years I've been here, that our publicity should have been better. We needed to explain about the level of playing, that we're not part-time players. The notion that we only work 20 hours a week is an absolute fallacy. What we do is very worthwhile, so why wasn't that a big part of our marketing and public relations? We need to broaden our base.

DW: There has to be a fight for a higher level of culture. Very backward ideas and moods have been encouraged for the past several decades. The fight for music, sensitive music, is connected to other issues. But it is a fight. To make people more flexible, more humane, more compassionate. Music and art have their role.

I do think the notion of "people's concerts," even free concerts in Detroit, is an important idea.

CC: I already emailed that to our committee. It's time to invite our people and invite new people on board.

DW: Has your own thinking been changed by the strike? Have you thought about problems you hadn't thought about before?

CC: Yes, actually, but it's not a political comment at all. I've thought about what's important in my life. I think about my colleagues too—what is important? I think so many of us ... how do I say this? I worked so hard through school and the end goal at that point was to get a job with a major symphony orchestra, so I got that, and then my entire identity was, 'Hey, I play for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.' A real source of pride.

Actually that was tested about six years ago, because I had a neck injury I was trying to recover from and I couldn't play for five months. So I was out of work for five months. And the whole time, I kept thinking, who am I, if I don't have my viola in my hands? So I already tested that idea of being so wrapped up in my career. I'm a career girl.

I figured out that the viola is a part of me, but not all of me, and that I could still teach and not have a full-time career in an orchestra. Not being able to play again at that level was very much a possibility. I had to work very hard to get back, I had to fight to get back. When I did get back, I had very little strength in my hands and so I played half-concerts for months.

Now, that career is threatened once more, and it's a question of what's meaningful. So I've decided that I'm only going to take on meaningful projects from now on.

This is not fun. I don't want to be on strike. I do not like picketing. I don't like any of that. But we have to fight as a group and I'm fighting for my job and I'm fighting for my colleagues' jobs, and for my students, for future generations. And also what about the fight to retain a great orchestra for this great city? There are a lot of great people here, and we have brought comfort and joy to them, and they have responded in kind.

I have a friend who says that this strike breaks her heart because on 9/11 she almost lost her daughter in the World Trade Center and the first thing she did was to come to hear the Detroit Symphony Orchestra for solace. She said, it just breaks my heart that you're not playing.

That's her solace on weekly basis. She sits in the front row. So how do you answer someone like that? That's the intangible that music brings to people, that's what's special about what we do.

The musicians are soul searching. Ten and a half weeks into this, people are struggling financially, people have mortgages and children. These are good people, taxpaying individuals, people who donate their time, who are good parents and incredible musicians. It's hard to find jobs for 86 people. If the orchestra is no more, then that's 86 more people out of work. Once we start flooding the freelance world, which we're all trying to do right now, we're taking work away from our colleagues.

I don't know the various individuals' financial situations, but I do know there is a fund and people are able to apply for a short-term loan if needed. I believe that's begun to happen. It's difficult to replace that paycheck.

Even harder though was that, as you know, management cut off our insurances. That was such a punitive, mean-spirited move, and it has taken weeks to arrange alternative health insurance. There's also instrument insurance.

That's just mean. Make us pay the premiums, fine, we know we're on strike, but cutting us off shows a total lack of respect. It's going to be very hard to go back to work for such people. Anyway, we showed them, we scrambled and found a solution to the problem.

We want to be working, that's the biggest message I can give you. It's not right, this 'All of you take the cut and we don't do much of anything.' That's not good leadership, that doesn't show that you care.

The audiences at the concerts we've organized have been very emotional, excited. It's been very emotional for us too. It's hard to hold back the urge to cry, because you wonder if you're going to be playing with these people again and in what circumstances. You recognize—because we have very little time to prepare, we have no rehearsal space for such a large group—how fabulous these musicians are.

I can live with fewer dollars, but I do not wish to live with a lower artistic quality. If I wanted to be in a community orchestra, I would have done that 14 and a half years ago, and it would have been a lot easier life, because I have to work very hard to stay at this level. It's a daily work ethic, including 4:30 a.m. wake-up calls so I can practice.

DW: What do you try and communicate to your students, aside from the technical skills?

CC: I try and have them express the music at whatever level they're capable of. That happened today. I was working at Wayne State and I was working with somebody who played technically just fine, but I wanted her to be better than fine, and I said, what's this music all about, what does it say to you? Tell me the story, that's much more important than the actual technique of it, for me. Convey something to the audience.

We had a quick dialogue about what she thought of the piece. She said, I love this music. I said, what do you love about it? She gave me a brief description of what she loved about it. The harmonies, the deep tonalities of the viola, she liked the line. I said, show me some of that. And she did. That's why I teach.

DW: How would you sum things up?

CC: The catch-phrase of the musicians is: this is a strike we did not want. That's very important to say. But now that it has happened, it's an important strike. I think we're fighting for more than just ourselves. I know that we're fighting for the smaller, lesser orchestras as well, who can't fight for themselves. I think that we are fighting to retain the greatness of the American orchestra while accepting that there must be changes.

But what's so concerning is this drastic, sweeping change that is going to decimate the orchestra. Sadly, I don't think this kind of change has been proven to be successful, financially or in any other way.

I'll tell you one thing, I do not want to give up the fight for tenure. I earned that, we all earned that. And to take that away, seniority and these other things, to make sweeping changes in the health care plan, it's an absurdity.

As an artist, as an ensemble player, my life has been about collaboration. I've never experienced this kind of treatment from management, which is supposed to take care of me, or so I thought. My Pollyanna world has been shattered, really. Because now I realize this is a big fight. This is a fight for what's right. They're not right, this is not right.



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