

Detroit Symphony musicians' picket forces concert cancellation

Shannon Jones
13 December 2010

Striking Detroit Symphony Orchestra musicians forced the cancellation Sunday of a concert sponsored by DSO management, featuring the Canadian string group Bowfire, after stagehands and band members refused to cross the orchestra members' picket line.

DSO musicians and supporters gathered early Sunday morning at the Max M. Fisher theatre and were there when trucks bringing the band's equipment arrived. Eventually the trucks turned around without unloading. Later in the day, band members announced they would not perform, forcing DSO management to cancel the concert.

Strikers offered those arriving to attend the Bowfire show free tickets to their own strike support concert in suburban Warren that afternoon, and about 50 took the offer. The support concert was well attended, despite near blizzard conditions, and the audience gave the DSO musicians repeated standing ovations.

Haden McKay, spokesman for the DSO musicians, told the WSWs, "We sent a strong signal today. Management cannot pretend to put on concerts without an orchestra.

Emmanuelle Boisvert, the DSO concertmaster, participated in the picket. She said, "Everything we do is emotional. It might be something we have to do, but it is not something we like to do."

A violist, expressing the feeling of many musicians, commented, "We did it!" She paid tribute to the resolve of orchestra members, speaking highly of the role of Boisvert in particular. The latter had "stood right in front of the snowplow and said, 'No.' And he went home. She has got a lot of guts that girl."

Members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra have been on strike since October 4, resisting management demands for major concessions, including massive pay cuts, a curtailed season and reduced benefits. Many orchestra members see their stand as part of a broader struggle to defend art and culture against a ruling elite that is increasingly hostile and indifferent to these questions.

Musicians report growing national and international support for their struggle. So far the players have received \$150,000 in donations from over 40 orchestras, the largest being \$17,000 from the Montreal Symphony.

The December 12 support concert in Warren featured DSO oboist Donald Baker, who performed Alessandro Marcello's Oboe Concerto in C Minor, and DSO trumpet players Steve Anderson and Kevin Good, who performed Antonio Vivaldi's well-loved Concerto for Two Trumpets in C Major.

The concert also featured selections by Arcangelo Corelli, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Engelbert Humperdinck, Georges Bizet and Johann Pachelbel. Emily Freeman Brown, director of orchestral activities at Bowling Green State University, conducted.

Another support concert is set for December 14 in Rochester Hills, another Detroit suburb.

The WSWs spoke to several performers at the support concert. Hang Su, a DSO violist for four years, told the WSWs, "I know the economic weather is bad, and I don't care myself so much about the question of money, but the cuts are unreasonable. We want to be able to attract musicians who can maintain this as a world-class orchestra."

Hang said he came to the US from China when he was 18. "I went to school in California and played in the San Diego and Long Beach symphonies before I

came here.

“There were strikes in the past, and in most cases, at the end, the musicians compromised. But, we want to fight to get what we deserve at the end of this one.”

Guest conductor Emily Freeman Brown spoke to the WSWS after the concert. She gave high praise to the DSO musicians. “It is a thrilling experience. Without a doubt this is a world-class orchestra playing with all the excellence you expect on an emotional and stylistic level. Today there was a lot of energy and they deserved the support they are receiving.”

She said the possible demise of the DSO “would be a terrible loss to the city of Detroit, the state and the whole nation. It would be a staggering cultural loss of one of the great institutions in this part of the country.”

The WSWS asked Freeman Brown what had motivated her to volunteer to conduct the holiday support concerts. She replied, “It seemed like the right thing to do. There was no question in my mind.

“Without an orchestra a conductor is nothing. If a conductor is lucky, you have an affinity with the musicians and something electric happens, something musical happens.

“It is a great orchestra. I was privileged to be here.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact