Striking Detroit Symphony violinist: “No one ever imagined that we would be fighting to have a first-class orchestra in this town”

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World Socialist Web Site reporter Shannon Jones and arts editor David Walsh recently interviewed Joe Striplin, a violinist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) since 1972.

The 84 DSO musicians have been on strike since October 4 against massive concession demands, including a 33 percent pay cut, 42 percent for new orchestra members and cuts in health, pensions and other benefits. Management wants to impose work-rule changes as well, which would reduce the length of the concert season while forcing musicians to perform various non-performance-related duties.

These changes will inevitably lead to a drastic deterioration of the orchestra, as top players leave and recruitment of new talent becomes harder and harder. The DSO is currently ranked as one of the top 10 US orchestras with its performances heard worldwide through radio and recordings.

Joe Striplin was born and grew up in Detroit, and experienced firsthand the transformation of the city from the automotive capital of the world—with one of the finest public educational systems in the US, offering students a wide range of opportunities, including well-funded art and music programs—into the poorest major urban center in America, its schools, workplaces and neighborhoods ravaged by poverty and neglect.

We first asked Joe him to discuss what it was like growing up in Detroit in the 1950s.

Striplin explained, “Detroit was a first-class city at the time, a world-class city, the fifth largest in the country. My earliest recollections were of the old Detroit, the bustling, prosperous city that it was. I remember walking down Woodward Avenue with my mother and there were so many people brushing against us that I could hardly hold on to her hand.

“I grew up in the inner city—I came from the classic single-parent home. My mother was a domestic worker. I lived in the West Side of Detroit near the old Olympia Stadium.

“I think it was easier for us in many ways than it must be for young people now. When I grew up people had knives, but I never saw a gun. I never knew of any hard drugs, although they were there. Violence in the schools usually meant fist fights.”

What had been his earliest experiences with music?, we wondered.

“I started classical music instruction rather late; in my last year of junior high. At that time, not only every high school had its own orchestra, but every junior high school.

“Then I went to Cass Technical High School, which was a fine institution in 1956. This was before the massive exodus from the city to the suburbs. You had all kinds of resources available in terms of people and money.

“Our orchestra was fantastic. Even before I became a member I heard concerts the orchestra played and I was very inspired by them. It was a big orchestra, maybe 90 people or more. The concertmaster was David Cerone, who became important at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Several Cass Tech graduates played in the Detroit Symphony over the decades.

“Cass Tech was integrated, it was about 30 percent black and 70 percent various ethnic groups and everyone got along. This was when the civil rights movement was just getting going. This pre-dated some of the things that divided the North later: busing, affirmative action, George Wallace.

“I went to Wayne State University in Detroit and it was a fine educational institution, and it had a fine orchestra too. Walter Poole was the conductor of the WSU orchestra. I studied with a member of the first violin section of the Detroit Symphony, Jack Boesen, and he was very important in my own life development.

“After about a year of study at WSU, he voluntarily decided to take me under his wing. He felt I had potential and he volunteered to give me free lessons. He gave me a very good 19th century French instrument, which made a big difference. The most important thing is that he told me that I had a real legitimate shot at becoming a professional player. Even though in my own heart I knew I could do it, to hear someone in his position say that meant a great deal.”

We asked Striplin if he had had trouble supporting himself as a music student. “There was one summer,” he replied, “I wanted to make some extra money while I was a student at Wayne State, and I remember going to the Dodge Stamping Plant and the very next day I was working, making $154 a week and that was a good salary back then.

“I felt I was very lucky to be in Detroit at that time. I came along when the public school system was excellent, when there was genuine racial and ethnic diversity and therefore more resources in school, intellectually, financially and in every way you can think of.

“Even as a teenager I could tell that the situation for me was right. The issue of blacks being denied entry into the professions was being

discussed. If I had come along 20 years before I wouldn't have had a shot at it. If I had come along some decades later, Cass Tech and the public schools wouldn't have been what they had been and I wouldn't have gotten the necessary boost.

"I made up my mind early on that I had to be a professional musician, or my life would be a failure. And luckily for me, I seemed to learn pretty quickly. I found that I had an aptitude for conducting and understanding music in general.

"I played in a few other orchestras before I came to Detroit, including the Metropolitan Opera National Company. That group was important to me. It was a good indicator of how different the times were. The big Met had so much money that not only did it go to many different cities, including Detroit, but it had a second company, which I got into. It toured the whole country, including cities like Davenport, Iowa. We did three operas that year—*La Bohème*, *La Traviata* and *The Marriage of Figaro*."

WSWS: Was there music in your mother's background?

"No," Striplin explained, "There wasn't an instrumental tradition in my family. There were people who sang in church choirs and enjoyed singing religious music, but there were no instrumental traditions.

"I grew up at a time when there was a lot of classical music to hear, even if it wasn't in a concert setting: the *William Tell Overture* by Rossini, Liszt's *Les Preludes*. You turned on the television and all this cool music would come on. There were programs that used classical scores as their themes, so I heard that all the time."

Joe then spoke about his mother's experiences with segregation in the South.

"She came from Alabama and she moved to Detroit in the early 1930s like a lot of people. She came from Florence, Alabama, close to Birmingham, and she talked about what life was like for Southern blacks.

"My older relatives told us when you go down South don't talk smart to a white person. If you are on the street keep your eyes down. They wanted us to behave. Emmett Till had been killed right around that time [in 1955] and it made a big impression. I was young, but I knew a black kid had been killed for supposedly whistling at a white girl.

"I remember my uncle had to drive us down there on one occasion, and he had to go into a special entrance to get food for us and we ate burgers in the car. That's what I remember of the old South."

Joe spoke about the July 1967 Detroit riot, which lasted for five days and led to the National Guard and the army being called in to quell the violent upheaval.

"My experience," he said, "was that it was not a race riot—it was a property riot. There were some white looters too, even though most were black. But as you are aware it was a turning point in Detroit history and some really powerful people got mad at Detroit's population and decided to punish it. And it hasn't stopped yet. Even the Detroit Symphony, even though we don't look like most of the population ... we're not poor, there are only three of us who are black ... it is still the same idea. 'We are going to get Detroit.'"

Striplin spoke about life as a symphony musician.

"You don't just wind up in the orchestra and your work is done," he pointed out. "There is a certain kind of practicing—in addition to practicing solo literature—for that, mainly scales, arpeggios and specific drills you do, for example, if there are specific types of bowings that bother you.

"Many of us, myself included, do playing outside of what is required in the orchestra. My wife is a pianist. We learn sonatas together. We play with other DSO players sometimes. We play for musical organizations. I conduct the Grosse Pointe Symphony. It takes a certain amount of preparation time to get that season organized, executing it and there are some extra duties. And all this comes together to form your musical life.

"It sounds a lot like what they are asking for in this contract, but there are some big differences. We still play the full orchestral season and do these things, whereas what management wants to do is to take away some of the concerts we do and replace it with these activities. That is the big difference. It is based on a fraudulent assumption—the symphony orchestra is dead, long live the so-called community of musicians: the idea that the regular classical music concert for the public has to be reduced and replaced with non-orchestral performing aspects.

"There is a lack of love for classical music [on the part of management]. And then there is a class war, anti-working class aspect, and in the present situation we have these two elements together."

WSWS: What does music mean to you?

Striplin replied, "For me personally it is a dream come true. It is what I always wanted to do.

"Playing is just one way to experience it. Conducting is another. Listening, another. Of course I love all those aspects of music. My wife and I sometimes will go hear another orchestra play, not just the famous ones, we've also gone to listen to the university orchestra sometimes.

"Music is the most abstract of the fine arts. Abstract beauty and abstract reason are good to pursue because they are a template for other practical manifestations of intellect.

"The composers, as writers of music, as organizers of sound, are geniuses, they are smarter than most people because of what they put together, but we generally don't think of it in those terms, we think of it as just a piece you happen to like.

"With the other arts, there is a product, an object. Even in ballet, the music ends, but you have seen people moving around; with architecture there is a building; with arts and crafts, there is an end product. With music, it is something that happens in your head.

"And with classical music, you are not playing some three-minute thing. It is not something to have in the background while you are talking; it is something you have to sit down and listen to. Of course our culture is going in the opposite direction and has been for a while. The thing about music, it teaches children the ability to concentrate, to contemplate, to stop activities and really pay close attention to something; and that is really being lost. Our culture doesn't really encourage that kind of thing."

The WSWS asked Joe to share his thoughts on the present strike.

He commented, "The DSO management has a great orchestra, but they don't particularly like it. Even back in the 1970s and '80s, when we had eight- and ten-week lockouts, the goal was not to reorganize the orchestra completely, like now. We were demanding that the orchestra do the things

that orchestras do, such as recording and touring.

"Since the days of Paul Paray [French-born composer and conductor, who led the Detroit Symphony from 1951-62] the orchestra had been getting better and better—it was becoming a really fine machine. The orchestra was good back when I came in 1972. It didn't go down. We got our first European tour in 1979, which is ridiculous, but no one ever imagined that we would be fighting in 2010 to have a first-class orchestra in this town. This is new. And it is part of the overall trend.

"Management is still hard-line, there have been no major breakthroughs; for that matter, there have been no minor breakthroughs. What is the answer? We have to keep doing a lot of things that we are doing and I think we need to attack the ideas, the ideological underpinnings of management's actions. We need to talk in detail about what they are, what this so-called new vision of the orchestra they have."

We asked Joe to respond to the proposal for expanding the effort of musicians to reach broader layers of the working class, including the holding of "people's concerts."

"There are several of us who thought such concerts might be great," he said. "There was once a suggestion we play in auto plants, former East German conductor Günther Herbig [music director at the DSO from 1984-90] suggested it. It didn't go anywhere, but I thought it was a great idea; you go to the people.

"We could do it ourselves ... I think that is a way to go, even if we settled tomorrow. I think that is the way to go, to get broader interest in classical music we have to make sure people are exposed to it."

We spoke about the role of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Joe commented, "It is good to see a progressive organization really taking on a field that some people would neglect, or would have written off as a bunch of elitist people who deserve the rough treatment they are receiving. It is good to see an organization of people who know the subject matter and have a philosophic awareness of the unprecedented class warfare being waged against many layers of the population. I have been impressed by how much homework the organization does.

"We see that it is a broader struggle, not just the symphony. It is yet another part of the offensive against the working class and middle class."