Striking Detroit Symphony bassist: “It is really an eye-opening lesson for us musicians”

Shannon Jones, David Walsh
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The strike by musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, which began October 4 in response to massive concession demands, is now the longest in the history of the orchestra, eclipsing the 12-week-long strike in 1987.

Management is insisting on steep cuts, including a more than 30 percent pay reduction, 42 percent for new orchestra members, cuts in benefits and revisions in work rules that would fundamentally change the character of the DSO. Management, backed by powerful corporate interests, is seeking to offload its financial crisis onto the shoulders of musicians, threatening irreparable damage to one of Detroit’s finest cultural institutions.

In recent weeks, DSO musicians have sought to broaden their support by reaching out to audiences in the city of Detroit. One of the DSO musicians most adamant about the need for this turn has been DSO bassist Rick Robinson.

WSWS reporter Shannon Jones and WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh recently spoke with Robinson, who in addition to his duties with the DSO founded the classical ensemble the CutTime Players, composed of eight DSO musicians. Robinson manages and directs the group, which has performed at more than 100 family and student concerts and workshops. Robinson recently established a Detroit-area chapter of Classical Revolution, which hosts musical events in public places such as coffeehouses, featuring both professional and amateur performers.

Robinson shared his love and enthusiasm for classical music and his determination to bring classical music to wider layers of the population.

David Walsh: Tell us about your history.

Rick Robinson: I grew up in Highland Park in a musical family that goes back several generations on my mother’s side. My dad came from rural Mississippi on a farm. He worked very hard. He was one of five kids. He came up to Kalamazoo on the GI bill after WWII, met my mother, and they got married and moved to Detroit.

He had an education degree, and he began teaching in Romulus. He was eventually asked to become an administrator in charge of recruiting blacks for the University of Michigan, Dearborn, and then for the campus in Ann Arbor, which is where he retired from 20 years ago.

My older brother and sister started playing strings in middle school, and I eventually did when I got there. My folks did not want me going to public high school so they sent me to U of D [University of Detroit] High School and in my freshman year I started going to All-State up in Interlochen, a two-week camp. I asked to go to their academy for high school after I learned that they had some scholarships. So it turned out pretty well.

DW: What kind of music was in your mother’s background?

RR: Classical, she wanted to sing opera, but she went into psychology instead. But she was still playing piano and would sing just about every night. Her mother studied violin at Oberlin College, and her mother composed and played violin and piano and her father was March King of Augusta, Georgia. So it goes back several generations of some pretty proactive people.

There were a number of kids of my brother and sister’s generation playing in the middle school there (Highland Park). They had a really good string orchestra, a really good teacher. Highland Park was an Armenian community, but after the riots a social and demographic change started. I grew up in the ’70s, so I saw things change quite a bit. It became so that if you were carrying books home after school, you ran the risk of getting beat up or harassed by some of the bullies. Some people wanted to hide that in order to fit in, but I was kind of a loner. I struck out on my own, I had very few real friends.

Shannon Jones: How did you become interested in the bass?

RR: I was playing cello for four years, and I wasn’t moving up. I was always last chair cello. All of our bass players graduated, so they needed someone to move over from cello, so I volunteered. And that changed everything about my playing, going from sitting to standing, and I was suddenly progressing very well.

Interlochen Arts Academy was pretty key. I wasn’t thinking about a career in music at first, but by the middle of my junior year I definitely was.

Then I went to the Cleveland Institute of Music, around the great Cleveland Orchestra. I started playing some gigs in summer regional orchestras around there—Canton, Akron symphonies. I went on to Boston and lucked into a position with the freelance Boston Pops Orchestra, it’s called the Esplanade Orchestra. And while I was there, the Boston Symphony organization asked me if I would play at the YMCA for a group of black kids. It was my first experience doing something like that. I wouldn’t have thought to do it on my own, but someone else got me in there and got me over that hump, and I started to be a little bit interested in giving back to the community.

DW: What was that like?

RR: I was trying to find the words to say why I play classical music. Why I like it? What’s different about it? Why would anybody do it? I think I failed, but it got me to thinking years later that I should do that. Once I was hit by the bolt of lightening that brought me back to Detroit, I thought I might as well make the best of it and try to relate.

SJ: When did you decide to make a career in music?

RR: In high school. I was progressing well with my bass lessons into being principal of the academy orchestra, so I was exhibiting and learning some leadership skills. Just trying to be more proactive and figure out how music works. What makes it better? What makes it lousy? Bowing, knowing the other parts, how they fit together, listening, keeping an ear on the section. Who needs help? Learning from the players that did better than me, what they were doing that I wasn’t. The world opened up at Interlochen.

There were very good teachers, and the student-teacher ratio was very

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small. You got a lot of individual attention and mentoring and advice and got to have lunch with the teachers, so it was great.

I got a half ride every year. Tuition was only $6,000 back then, and now it is around $42,000.

DW: What kind of music do you like the most?

RR: Mahler, Beethoven, Schubert, Bach, Mozart. I can't forget Shostakovich, which really drew me into classical music.

SJ: What is your favorite Shostakovich piece?

RR: The 14th symphony. It's a song cycle. Songs about death. I guess he was feeling his mortality, perhaps. It was after Stalin died, so you would think he had nothing to worry about, but his health was pretty poor when he wrote that. He died in 1976. It contains dancing, a combination of folk music. It's folk meets Beethoven; it has counterpoint. That's something I try to do with my own music. I blend folk with urban and pop elements to try to draw people into it.

The last piece I wrote for Highland Park, "City of Trees," tries to contrast the Highland Park of the '60s when the Dutch Elms were still alive and made a cathedral of just about every street. Dutch Elm disease devastated most of those. The trees were a metaphor for a human life. We want our kids to grow up and be well-rounded, like a beautiful tree or tall and growing in one direction and focused toward a goal. To contrast the hope of yesteryear with the devastation of the more recent past is what this piece does really well.

SJ: Have any of your compositions been performed by the DSO?

RR: Yes, the DSO used to have an African American Composers program sponsored by Unisys, which has since been ended. But this first piece I wrote, starting out with a dream, a kind of an accident, I submitted it. Tom Wilkins [former DSO resident conductor] gave it a reading, and he liked the piece so much he recommended it for the classical roots concert in 2006, so that's when it received its first premiere.

After that I decided that maybe I could do some more of this, so I started to pursue composing more seriously. I am now doing a CD. I won a Kresge Art Fellowship recently, but even without that I would be trying to do this CD. I have the first two of six tracks. "City of Trees" is the first one; it is very popular. Hopefully, that will allow me to raise the rest of the money to finish the CD.

DW: What about jazz bass?

RR: I am not really good at improvising. I never studied improv and the scales that you need to know. My mind doesn't work that fast. I am really good at classical, so I kind of like to be astereotypical; to break the stereotype of the angry black man who plays jazz and can't help himself. I try to bust that model. That is another reason I try to put myself out like this with the classical stuff. There are plenty of white guys who can play great jazz. There are very few black people who play classical.

DW: What do you think is going to happen in the strike?

RR: Management will end up giving us more than they are holding out for, but the orchestra is already broken. There is really no way to recover in the short term. When we do go back to work, it is going to be hell for the longest time while the current board and management are there.

I have been reading a lot about systems theory, about how the system that is the most stable is also the most fragile. By the demands that they have made, we have lost so much trust with that management that many, many players are already leaving or planning to leave or taking auditions. We are going to lose a lot of great players, and it is going to be years recovering.

They want to encourage the "troublemakers" to leave or retire. If we won't leave on our own volition, with these new work rules they could force us out anyway.

It wasn't like this before. This is a total sea change; totally unforeseen. I had no idea.

DW: How has the DSO changed for better or for worse?

RR: I think the orchestra has only gotten better musically and technically. I thought being back in Orchestra Hall these 21 years would make all the difference. But the national and international experts don't seem to have taken notice of what a fantastic hall it is. It's got to be one of the ten best historic halls in the country. I don't know if they ever come out. I know that there are no reviews of Orchestra Hall itself.

Neeme Järvi [DSO music director ,1990-2005], those were some very good years. I think we did some very good things with Günther Herbig, [music director 1984-1990], although my first year was his last year.

The three-and-a-half years, four-and-a-half years without an orchestra director were kind of devastating. Now that we have Leonard [Slatkin], here we are still waiting to find out if the relationship is going to be good.

We pointed out that while 50 percent of the population in Detroit is unemployed, US corporations are awash in trillions of dollars, but they won't give up a penny.

RR: It's amazing. Oakland County is the fourth-richest county in the nation.

DW: I think your fight is very important, very courageous and principled. At the same time, and I think you'd agree, that support has to be expanded into broader layers of the population in Detroit.

RR: Socially, I think we can begin to make a difference, particularly in Detroit with its dwindling population, to make a case for the arts. Put it in simple terms rather than intellectual erudite terms that lose people.

With CutTime Players I introduce all the pieces. I script things out, try and make it witty and engaging. Teach a little bit of a lesson, give behind-the-scenes insight, talk about how the music works, building and releasing tension in a series of waves that climax towards the end of a movement.

DW: What is the reaction like?

RR: I don't know all the time. They love the musical performance. Whether what I say really sinks in, I am not sure. I think it is positive.

SJ: I remember hearing Van Cliburn when I was young, and that had a big impact. It is something that stays with you for the rest of your life.

RR: It is unique and valuable, art and music in general. This is the legacy of humanity to itself. It is timeless, because it is based on psychological principles that we all deal with, emotions that we experience and how we reconcile them. So, just by saying that, touches people. Trying to get support for me going out with my DSO musicians has been a struggle, to say the least. If I were of an older generation, I might say, "Oh! It's racism." But I try not to carry any chips on my shoulder and plug ahead.

I asked myself this question several years ago: What role does this focus on traditionalism play in this orchestra? It does keep the standards high, but it also keeps us separate from the real people who walk by Orchestra Hall and have no idea what goes on inside this hall. And that's who I am about reaching, black, white, blue.

DW: What did you think about my talk in Ann Arbor?

RR: I thought it was very good; you were bringing up very good points. Pointing out how they were trying to make servants of us. I had always thought we were kind of in the middle, we are hobnobbing with the rich, but we are also labor. We also do intellectual work, white-collar work, but we all feel pulled together as labor. But this clearly pushes us. I am glad you really point this out. It is really an eye-opening lesson for us musicians.

DW: I thought the video of the concert at the homeless shelter was fabulous.

RR: It was our first time at a homeless shelter. Just getting over that hump of actually doing it, getting DSO musicians in a homeless shelter, my God! I wouldn't have been able to do that myself. But now that we

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are over that hump, I am hoping to turn it into something more regular.

I think when people have enough up-close experience with classical music, at a high level or not, they realize this is something special. We want to go out there and give more of these special experiences to people. That's why I started Classical Revolution here in Detroit.

It's a movement that began in San Francisco with some quartet students. They had a major in chamber music at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. This violist wanted to give a recital, but he couldn't book the recital hall, so he did it at the coffeehouse, the Revolution Café, across the street from the conservatory. People liked it so much they started a regular series. That idea grew into playing in restaurants and bars for free or for a $2-$3 cover as a way to make money as well as to make the music part of the nightlife of the city. So that philosophy has expanded to chapters around the world. Not just here, but in Berlin, Belgrade, Australia.…

A lot of people don't know that quality classical music is available here in Detroit. People have poor conceptions of Detroit. Obviously, to us, going in and enjoying a night on the town is no big deal. We want to show people that there is not only fine culture here, but that tourists can come in and appreciate Detroit.

DW: How did you organize it?

RR: With friends, it is very informal. There are two aspects. There is the event where a prepared chamber ensemble comes in and plays a set—40 minutes, 90 minutes—and when they are all tired out, we open it up into a classical jam session where we just do sight reading. It depends on who shows up. I'll figure out who can play what; be as fair as possible.

It is intended to be a collective. I could take ownership of it because of my mission with CutTime Players. But all of us can own it. All the classical musicians in the city can book a Classical Revolution event, that's how open I want it to be. We can have multiple events going on every week. Maybe even at the same time if they are far enough away from each other.

DW: Where have you played?

RR: We've just had four kickoff events a few weeks ago: Beethoven's Birthday, at the Majestic Café near Orchestra Hall, Cadieux Café and then Caribou Coffee House in Royal Oak. We've done a couple of jams there. We did four or five movements from the Messiah and had people singing along too. I brought in a number of vocal scores and told people on Facebook and Twitter that we are going to have a Messiah sing-along, and told singers to stop on in.

SJ: Are these musicians from local orchestras?

RR: Orchestra members, free-lancers, and students. This one kid is 14 and is a prodigy, a black kid. He not only played "Eine Kleine Natchmusik," but he played other things. He is real outgoing. I want to be an inspiration for kids like that. He plays violin. It's fantastic.

SJ: Tell us about the CutTime Players.

RR: That is the first group I started, and it is a cross-section of the orchestra; two strings, two brass, three woodwinds and percussion. We do my transcriptions of famous orchestral repertoire; Peter and the Wolf, Sorcerer's Apprentice...most anything; some are more convincing than others. By and large, with our 100 transcriptions or so we do pretty well.

Early on, our former DSO education director really embraced us, and she hired us for the whole Tiny Tots Season. That had to be negotiated at a rate that they eventually decided was too expensive, and they started hiring more children's oriented local groups that would not invoke the collective bargaining agreement.

We just did two concerts downtown and the Noel Night at the Detroit Institute of Arts. And we played at the homeless shelter. Hopefully, out of the homeless shelters this will begin a movement to do other chamber music stuff. I am for it. Cleveland Orchestra members also started doing some classical revolution type things in Cleveland, playing at the Happy Dog, and that generated national press. That was in October. I was inspired enough to go to Cleveland and take in one of the Classical Revolution events. It wasn't Cleveland Orchestra players, but they did have a large number of student groups. They have three major conservatories—Oberlin College, Baldwin Wallace and Cleveland Institute of Music. It was fantastic.

We want to be humble and not say we are better than the other musicians. We want to say, this is what we have chosen. Here it is.

DW: It is not snobbism to say this is complicated and challenging music and we take ourselves seriously.

SJ: DSO members embody an incredibly high level of skill and talent that is amazing and unique. That is under attack, it is being destroyed. It can't be easily recreated.

RR: I think if we are going to reach real people, rather than keeping ourselves on a pedestal, we have to go out and play it. Let it speak for itself, even though my colleagues tell me I talk too much and should let the music speak for itself. I think we need to do both.

I script out what I say and I am careful that there are not any big words that would lose people. The elephant in the room is that the people I am trying to reach don't realize this music is fun and personal to us. They think we are going through the motions to be intellectual and be snobby. That is not the point. I am trying to change how we talk about it. Every industry has its language, but there has to be a certain connection.

This is a great equalizer for all of us. We can all bond under our common humanity.

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