

Syracuse Symphony suspends remainder of season

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The management of the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra (SSO), a major regional orchestra in central New York state, has announced the suspension of the remainder of its scheduled performance season due to a budgetary crisis. The SSO, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary, had more than 20 concerts remaining, including a guest appearance by renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma. However, a substantial shortfall in revenues has placed the orchestra in a fiscal crisis. An emergency fundraising campaign begun at the start of the year, that raised over \$700,000, has failed to overcome this shortfall.

The SSO's scheduled 34-week season anticipated performances for more than 200,000 spectators with approximately 200 full-orchestra and ensemble concerts in 17 counties throughout New York State. During its half-century existence, the orchestra has performed five concerts at Carnegie Hall and was presented with the NYS Governor's Arts Award in 1999. The SSO is consistently listed among the top 50 orchestras in the United States.

According to the SSO Interim Executive Director Paul Brooks, the decision comes as a result of a "perfect storm" of factors related to the economic crisis. Over the last three years, government support has been reduced by 32 percent, private donations by 24 percent, and ticket sales by 23 percent. The orchestra is currently \$5.5 million in debt and is considering declaring bankruptcy.

In an effort to close the budget gap, the orchestra's management has demanded major financial concessions from the musicians. The players had already agreed to a six-week reduction in the current season, but with the

same number of performances. Management is now demanding \$1.3 million in give-backs for the 2011-2012 season.

According to a report in the *Syracuse Post-Standard*, management "called for cutting 12 core musicians, suspending the SSO's contributions to the musicians' new pension plan, reducing the season by four weeks to 30 weeks and discontinuing healthcare benefits for retired musicians." This would gut the orchestra's ability to attract and hold high-caliber musicians and, thereby, effectively destroy the SSO as a significant orchestra.

The musicians have offered concessions that amount to more than \$900,000. This is in addition to \$720,000 already given back for the 2010-2011 season as well as an offer of a two-year wage freeze. Management has, however, been intransigent in its demands. The base pay of musicians in the orchestra is \$30,000 per season.

The orchestra, which consists of 61 core and 14 contract musicians plus support staff, will be laid off on Monday. Although management is portraying this as a "suspension", musicians' representative Jon Garland says it is in effect a closure. Some of the orchestra members have already decided that they will have to leave Syracuse.

In a statement published in the *Syracuse Post-Standard*, the SSO music director Daniel Hege described how this regional orchestra has made an important contribution to the community, not only directly in concert, but through many outreach activities including two youth orchestras. "These high-level professional musicians provide an enormous

resource to our region, not just musically, or just within the SSO, but in the broader sense of culture, through teaching, playing and serving as role models for young people. They provide a wide range of education, entertainment and culture, and they add a great deal to the fabric of our community.”



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