

“They look at the arts as a luxury item”

An interview with Greg Near, Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra musician

Shannon Jones
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This reporter and *World Socialist Web Site* arts editor David Walsh recently spoke with Greg Near, a trombonist in the Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra, about the crisis facing cultural institutions in the United States, particularly in the field of classical music, as well as the economic dilemmas of working musicians.

Greg was an active supporter of the strike by musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. The DSO players returned to the concert stage in April after a six-month strike against massive concession demands. They ultimately were forced to accept major cuts, including a 25 percent reduction in pay, changes in work rules and other concessions.

On April 16, six days after DSO musicians ended their strike, the Philadelphia Orchestra declared bankruptcy. Management there is seeking to use the bankruptcy filing to impose concessions on musicians, including a 16 percent pay reduction. The timing of the announcement was likely not accidental, with management emboldened by the DSO strike’s outcome.

In recent months orchestras in Honolulu and Syracuse, New York, have ceased or suspended operations, and the New York City Opera recently put off the announcement of its 2011-12 season due to financial difficulties.

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Shannon Jones: How do you see the general state of art and classical music today?

Greg Near: There is a tremendous amount of pressure now to dismantle union contracts, and managements are using the bad economy as leverage. The League of American Orchestras is telling us that the classical symphony orchestra of today was modeled in the 20th Century. Now we are in the 21st Century, the argument goes, and tastes have changed and people are confronted with so many more technologically different situations, such as live streaming of music online and live opera and symphonic performances fed to movie theaters throughout the world.

This competition for audiences, along with ever increasing ticket prices, has made it difficult to fill the concert halls. I wasn’t really able to pay the ticket price to go hear the Detroit Symphony on a freelance musician’s income.

David Walsh: That is telling. There is also the destruction of music education in the public schools.

GN: Boards of education are cutting the arts from schools because there are limited funds, and the arts are looked upon as a luxury item.

I think from a musician’s perspective, it is further eroding our future audience for music and the love of music. It is going to spell worse times for us in the future. These cuts do not bode well for us.

SJ: What is the situation with the Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT) now?

GN: We are year-to-year with our contract. This is the second year of a wage freeze and we’ve lost one production. We have basically lost 25

percent of our income from that.

We are paid as a per service orchestra. Prior to these past couple of years, we had a minimum guaranteed number of 58 services. Then the economy was such that MOT was being squeezed by the banks to pay back construction loans needed for renovations to the Detroit Opera House in 1996, and the building of the parking garage subsequent to that. They took loans out from local banks, which eventually got swallowed up by larger national banks.

When the economy tanked, the terms regarding the payback of these loans changed and the banks wanted more money, causing a real cash flow problem for the management of Michigan Opera Theatre. Subsequently, they had to cut one of their productions to free up enough money to pay their loans. So we are in this situation where we have this problem with the banks and we have lost a substantial amount of corporate donations as well.

DW: What are the principal sources of donations?

GN: It comes mostly from General Motors, Ford and Chrysler. I know that when the economy tanked we lost probably 80 percent of the corporate donations we were getting.

I read a lot of different blogs and coverage on what is going on in the musical world. The Philadelphia Orchestra has filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy, and the Syracuse and New Mexico symphonies have both filed for chapter 7 bankruptcy.

I was reading a blog by a woman who is an arts consultant and very connected with the League of American Orchestras and the corporate sector. She puts the blame for these bankruptcies on “overly generous” union contracts, pension funds, that kind of thing. She puts forth the notion that corporate leaders are worried about the message they send to their own employees when they give money to bail out arts jobs paying six-figure salaries and benefits.

DW: Yes, if everyone worked for \$8 an hour, the employers would not have a problem anywhere, that’s true. But people would also not be able to eat.

GN: I get no benefits. For a while I worked at the Henry Ford Museum as a full-time employee and was getting benefits. However, after the events of 9/11, attendance to museums and entertainment venues trailed off almost immediately. By January 2002 I was laid off and have been ever since. I worked in the conservation department at the Henry Ford Museum as an assistant to the paper conservator.

I’m now self-employed. I started a printing business I do out of my house in which I print fine art photographs for photographers. This has helped to supplement my income, but it is the health insurance that is just completely draining our bank account. My wife Helen and I are paying, on average, \$10,000 to \$12,000 a year in medical costs, and we are not sick people. It’s \$8,000 to \$9,000 just for the coverage, and when you add

in the deductible and co-pay, it adds up.

DW: This is the situation millions face. It's untenable.

SJ: What did you draw from the experience of the DSO strike?

GN: I think that there is a real effort to quash union contracts and get rid of defined benefit pensions. What happened at the DSO was that their management seized on the opportunity to take advantage of the bad economy, particularly in Detroit, to launch an all-out attack.

DW: How can this kind of an attack, which is being repeated everywhere, be repelled?

GN: That is the big question. Obviously the musicians withheld services. Whoever could hold out the longest would prevail, and ultimately the musicians had to concede to some degree what management was attempting to do.

SJ: As painful as these experience are, we have to draw certain conclusions about how these attacks can be opposed. Management had the musicians isolated. The so-called labor movement was working on the other side. They called no mass rallies, no mass pickets, nothing; they didn't even report it on their websites. The Democratic Party was completely behind it. Mayor David Bing wouldn't even cancel his state of the city speech at Orchestra Hall.

GN: I think unions were responsible for building the middle class. There was a period of time when workers had no voice in the work place. With collective bargaining agreements, workers began to see improvements in working conditions and wages. Managements have pushed back, and things are now eroding at an alarming rate.

SJ: The unions have undergone a long process of degeneration.

DW: The policy of the unions in the postwar period was to tie the future of the working class to the profits of the corporations. It has been an absolutely disastrous policy. US capitalism has suffered a disastrous decline.

We think the working class has to look very hard at what it is up against and what is going to have to be done about it. Otherwise, it will be set back 70, 80 years or more. There are not just talking about wiping out the War on Poverty and the New Deal, but going back before the Progressive Era in the early 20th Century.

The consequences, in the end, will be social upheaval.

SJ: What impact do you see the outcome of the DSO strike having on the MOT?

GN: I heard a disturbing comment from DSO President Anne Parsons to the effect that they had too much inventory. She was saying that the orchestra had a 52-week season and they had so many concerts they had to fulfill, and there just wasn't enough work for the musicians to do. So the DSO wants to change the work rules to give them more opportunity to find different kinds of work for the musicians, not just going into the concert hall and playing concerts week after week.

What that was telling me was this: if the musicians are freed up to do other work, the next step might be for the DSO management to go to the management of Michigan Opera Theatre and say, "Hey, we have got this orchestra, we need to find work for these players, if we can collaborate on things, we can share the use of this orchestra." In that case, they would then be using them to put on the operas, and the musicians of the MOT orchestra would be out of work.

In March 2009 an article appeared in the *New York Times* entitled "As Detroit Struggles, Foundations Shift Mission," in which the chairman of the Hudson-Webber Foundation was questioning whether Detroit needed both a world-class symphony, the DSO, and the Michigan Opera Theatre, and whether they could, in fact, share one orchestra.

So it was in my interest to support the DSO musicians any way I could. I walked the line with them each time they were out there.

DW: Can you tell us a bit about your own history?

GN: I grew up in the city of East Detroit, now Eastpointe, until the eighth grade, then my family moved to Grosse Pointe. My father was an

elementary school principal, and my mother was a math teacher. Both communities had great music programs, and I knew early on that I wanted to become a musician.

I began as a euphonium player. Sometimes they call it a tenor tuba or a baritone horn. It is essentially a baritone horn, but the euphonium is slightly larger.

I went to Wayne State University and studied with Joseph Skrzynski, who was a trombonist with the Detroit Symphony. That's when I switched to trombone, because I knew if I wanted to make a living, I had to play an instrument that was used in a traditional symphony orchestra. It was a natural switch in that the trombone has the same mouthpiece and tonal range as the euphonium.

After I graduated from Wayne State, I auditioned and got in a local startup orchestra called Orchestra Detroit. It was a young professional orchestra. I was with them for several years in the mid- to late 1970s. This period was really the golden age for the Detroit Symphony musicians; they had built up their contract to a good point, and were making a substantial living back then.

DW: When was the MOT founded?

GN: It unofficially began as Overture to Opera in the early 1960s when David DiChiera [Founder and General Director of MOT] began presenting portions of operas to the public. Officially, the MOT began as a professional company in 1971.

When I began with them in 1977 they were performing at the Music Hall. That is a small theatre, and they were putting on lighter operatic works. There were then about 24 musicians in the orchestra. Now, we have a core orchestra of 44, which is supplemented with local musicians to bring it up to about 60 to 65 for grand opera.

In 1977 it was Orchestra Detroit, for whom I played, that was in the pit for Michigan Opera. The very next year they decided to hold auditions for their own orchestra. I auditioned that year, but did not get in. In 1978 Orchestra Detroit folded due to financial problems. Then in 1979 MOT held auditions once again, and I got in and I have been there ever since.

At that time we had no collective bargaining agreement, and every year we had to re-audition for our jobs. That is when the musicians began to organize. I am not sure the exact year, but it may have been about 1981 when we finally got a collective bargaining agreement. That put an end to the yearly audition for our jobs. Since then the growth of wages and services has been painfully slow.

The nature of opera is that it is very expensive to put on, and they just can't come up with full-time employment.

DW: Was the income ever enough to be your sole income?

GN: No, most musicians in the orchestra freelance, teach—privately or in schools—and some have spouses with full-time employment.

SJ: Do you have children?

GN: My wife and I have made music our life's work, and, as such, it has never afforded us enough income to allow us to have children. We both love what we do, but we had to make difficult choices along the way.

SJ: How long have you and your wife been together?

GN: It will be 33 years in September. Helen played flute and piccolo with MOT for eight years until she lost her job. One year they decided to let go of 11 musicians in the orchestra, and our contract at the time was such that we had little input in this decision.

The following year they held auditions for these open positions, and since all our auditions are blind (meaning the identity of the candidate is not known), she auditioned and won her job back. They picked her as the best player, but at that point she was no longer a tenured player, and they just dropped her again. She continues to play occasionally when they need an extra flute or piccolo.

SJ: What is required of a musician in an opera orchestra as opposed to a symphony orchestra?

GN: In an opera the conductor has to coordinate what is going on stage

with what is going on in the orchestra pit, so you really have to keep a close eye on the conductor to keep things together. Additionally, you need to be aware of the storyline in order to know when to emphasize certain passages or color your sound to fit the mood. We really have to react quickly to follow the conductor and listen carefully to what is happening on the stage.

SJ: What are some of your more memorable moments?

GN: We did some concerts with Luciano Pavarotti that were wonderful. The first time he came we played at the Joe Louis Arena, in the late 1980s or early 1990s, and he was really on his form. It was spectacular. He came back when we opened the restored and renovated Detroit Opera House in 1996.

DW: Was that an exciting moment when they reopened the opera house?

GN: Yes, it was, and it started to give us a little more stability. There were times before that when we were at the mercy of the hall we were in.

SJ: Do you know how the hall compares to other opera houses?

GN: It can seat over 2,700 people. They say that the orchestra pit can accommodate up to 100 musicians, although that might be bit tight. It is the only stage in Detroit where you can really put on grand opera. The acoustics are quite good as well. The opera house was opened in 1922 and was designed by C. Howard Crane, who also designed Orchestra Hall. Orchestra Hall is an amazing hall to play in. The sound projects wonderfully in that space.

DW: Do you love opera?

GN: I love opera, but I have to say that prior to joining MOT I had never played an opera before. After playing my first opera, Gounod's *Faust*, I was hooked. I am now completing my 33rd year with the MOT.

SJ: Who is your favorite operatic composer?

GN: I love Puccini's operas, especially *La Bohème*. We have done most of them. His *Turandot* is a big one for brass players. That is great fun to play.

SJ: What about Mozart?

GN: Mozart didn't often write for the trombone, however, we just finished playing *The Magic Flute*, which does make use of it. When Mozart writes for the trombone it is often used with religious overtones. In *Don Giovanni*, for example, when the statue of the Commendatore speaks for the first time, trombones accompany him. Unfortunately for Don Giovanni, this is also when the Commendatore drags him off to hell. Mozart used the trombone very prominently in his *Requiem* as well.

DW: A final point: we feel popular access to culture should be a basic social right.

GN: I agree. Along with health care, it should be a right for everyone. There should be these social safety nets, things that were born out of socialist ideals. Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, these programs are probably the best things this country has established.

At 56 years old, my real concern is getting through the next nine years before I can qualify for Medicare. Until then, paying for my own health insurance threatens to bankrupt me. You see in the news that they want to dismantle Medicare and whatever benefits, if any, the Affordable Care Act is going to provide. At this point, when orchestral musicians are losing many of their hard-won benefits, finding a job that includes health benefits doesn't seem to be likely.



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