Financial crisis deepens at New York City Opera

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21 July 2011

After several years of growing financial problems and abbreviated seasons, the continued existence of the New York City Opera has been placed in doubt. In May the company announced that it was leaving Lincoln Center, less than two years after the auditorium there, its home for more than 40 years, was renovated at a cost of more than $100 million.

On July 12, City Opera artistic director George Steel held a news conference to announce that the company would stage a total of only four productions in the 2011-12 season, to be held at three different venues around the city. There will be a total of 16 staged performances. This compares to more than 20 operas and over 100 performances in years past.

As part of its survival plan, City Opera management has made it clear that musicians and choristers will have to sacrifice most of the employment opportunities they have had in the past. The budget is being cut from $31 million to $13 million. Under the current management proposal, orchestra members would receive $345 per performance and about $62 per rehearsal hour. For choristers the rates would be $230 and $32 per hour.

With only 16 performances planned, this would represent a massive cut for the modestly paid musicians. The City Opera orchestra, represented by Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians, has been guaranteed 22 weeks of work per year, with a base pay of $38,000. Choristers are presently guaranteed 26 weeks of work for about the same pay. Nearly all of the musicians also have other freelance jobs or teach.

Well known opera stars have joined with City Opera musicians to protest what they have called the virtual dismantling of the opera company. An open letter, initiated by former City Opera soprano Catherine Malfitano, has been issued in the name of several hundred “Family and Concerned Friends of the New York City Opera.” (savenyco.org) The signers include Frederica von Stade, Placido Domingo, Samuel Ramey, José Carreras, Sherill Milnes and other world-famous singers who have performed at both the City Opera and the larger and better-known Metropolitan Opera across the plaza at New York’s Lincoln Center. Several City Opera board members have also resigned in protest over the cutbacks, including mezzo-soprano Joyce Castle.

The open letter refers to the signers’ “deep and meaningful connection with the history of New York City Opera,” and goes on to warn that “[w]e are witnessing the dismembering of City Opera, piece by piece, person by person, and if it continues, it can never be undone.” The letter warns that if “City Opera is transformed into a small ad-hoc presenting organization forced to deploy pick-up orchestras, choruses and soloists,” it will lose its identity.

Musicians and their supporters also staged a protest outside of Steel’s July 12 news conference at New York’s Guggenheim Museum. The rally was organized by the orchestra and chorus unions, and also attended by several local Democratic politicians.

The current crisis at New York’s second opera company, founded in 1943 and world-renowned despite its location next to the much wealthier and famous Metropolitan, raises broader questions about the fate of culture in contemporary America and elsewhere.

The musicians’ open letter declares that “all opera companies face deficits every season, every year…. How an opera company meets these challenges is what matters.” The letter goes on to blame mismanagement, and hark back to the legendary fund-raising and public relations abilities of the late soprano and arts

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administrator Beverly Sills, among the most famous names associated with City Opera.

The current crisis is not simply an “ordinary” crisis, however, anymore than the current economic downturn is an “ordinary” recession. The biggest financial collapse in generations has ushered in a period of social upheaval that will inevitably produce, sooner rather than later, immense political struggles that affect the future of culture as well as every other sphere of social life.

Unlike the period of the 1930s, American capitalism is in decline and is demanding a social counterrevolution in which certain reforms that many millions have come to expect are now on the chopping block. This includes culture as well.

Subsidies for the arts have always been extremely unpopular within the American ruling class, but now the word has been virtually banned from public discourse. Musicians and other performers, except for the biggest stars, are expendable, as shown in the ruthless attack on the Detroit Symphony Orchestra musicians during their six-month strike, as well as in the recent bankruptcy filing by the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Under these conditions it is hardly sufficient to comment, as *New York Times* chief music critic Anthony Tommasini does in a recent article on the City Opera crisis in which he compares government support for the arts on both sides of the Atlantic, that “America is not Europe,” and leave it at that.

Cultural institutions are under attack in Europe as well, even if they begin from a higher level of public support. Everywhere the issue that is increasingly raised is the incompatibility of the crisis-ridden profit system with the development of all aspects of social life.

The current crisis has been building over a period of time. Even in the boom years of the housing and financial bubble, the City Opera was running up serious deficits. The cultural mood was affected by the general atmosphere of unrestrained greed and conspicuous consumption. The hypercompetitive climate also meant that the Metropolitan Opera got bigger still, while smaller institutions like the City Opera struggled.

The ruling elite and its representatives on the boards of institutions like the City Opera showed relatively little interest in expanding audiences among youth and working people. The elimination of art and music instruction in the public schools went hand in hand with the view that the gulf between popular and “high” culture was inevitable and of no concern.

These are the circumstances under which orchestras and opera companies are expected to sink or swim. The only criterion for survival is a successful “business model.” This includes reliance on wealthy donors for survival, a situation exemplified in the renaming of the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center, the City Opera’s home for decades, as the David H. Koch Theater, in “honor” of the oil and gas billionaire who sprinkled some of his largess on Lincoln Center even as he was bankrolling the ultra-right Tea Party.

Musicians, singers and other arts professionals would be making a disastrous mistake if they thought that this broader economic and political state of affairs is not their concern. The fate of the City Opera is not isolated from the broader assault on social conditions. The answer to these attacks lies in a political struggle, based on a revival of social consciousness and the emergence of a socialist movement among professional workers and every other section of working people.

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