

Musicians may strike at New York City Opera

Fred Mazelis
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Management at the New York City Opera has declared an impasse in its ongoing negotiations with the union representing singers and musicians. General Manager George Steel said that the opera company planned to present its proposed abbreviated season of four operas “one way or another.”

The American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA) threatened strike action and called on the public not to buy tickets for the planned performances. “You need to be aware that every dollar that you contribute to City Opera is being wasted,” said AGMA President Alan Gordon in a letter to contributors, as reported in the *Wall Street Journal*.

The musicians and choristers who constitute the backbone of the opera company have essentially been given the option of working for a fraction of the time and pay they have in the past. The orchestra members, previously guaranteed 22 weeks of work per year and approximately \$38,000 for the season, will now be working for a pittance while the whole presence of the opera company itself is reduced to a shadow of its former self.

The union has already filed an unfair labor practices charge with the National Labor Relations Board, alleging that the company’s move from Lincoln Center was decided without bargaining with the union. AGMA is expected to file another charge based on the company’s unilateral change of work rules.

City Opera has implemented contract terms providing no wage increase in the current year, a 1 percent increase in 2012-2013, and a 2 percent raise the following year, but these terms, as onerous as they are, mean next to nothing in light of the abbreviated season.

The current situation is the latest step in the rapid decline of the opera company, founded as the “people’s opera” in 1943. Until recently the company

presented 12 to 16 operas in a season, with up to 130 separate performances, more than half as many as at the Metropolitan Opera, its more famous and wealthy neighbor at New York’s Lincoln Center.

Last season, however, the City Opera presented only 33 performances of 5 operas, and its plans for this season include only 16 performances of 4 separate operas. Last spring, the company, facing millions of dollars in budget deficits, left its home in Lincoln Center and its productions for this year are taking place in various venues around the city.

There is widespread anger over the ultimatum presented to the creative performers and the threatened disappearance of the company itself. Last summer, a group of well-known operatic performers and others issued an open letter decrying the plans to “dismember” the company “piece by piece” and raising accusations of mismanagement at the City Opera.

The crisis at the New York City Opera is the rule, not the exception. The world-famous Philadelphia Orchestra filed for bankruptcy protection last spring, one of its goals being avoidance of its pension obligations to retired musicians under the orchestra’s defined pension plan. The bankruptcy judge’s recent decision to allow the orchestra to transfer its pension plans to the federal Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation will mean a major cut in pension payments to some musicians. It may also force other orchestras to make up a shortfall amounting to millions of dollars in the multi-employer pension plan set up some years ago.



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