

Billionaire heiress intervenes in yearlong Minnesota Orchestra lockout

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One of the world's wealthiest individuals intervened on Thursday in the yearlong lockout of musicians at the Minnesota Orchestra in Minneapolis. Marilyn Carlson Nelson, with a net worth of \$3.9 billion and number 118 on this year's *Forbes* list of America's 400 richest people, in collusion with the Minnesota Orchestra Association (MOA) board and CEO Michael Henson, announced new and regressive terms for the 80-plus remaining players.

The musicians were locked out of Orchestra Hall October 1, 2012 after the artists declined terms of employment involving salary reductions of 30 to 50 percent and dozens of work "adjustments."

Nelson is the recently retired chairman of Carlson Companies, a family-owned international corporation in the travel, hotel and restaurant industries. The company employs some 170,000 persons worldwide and has an annual revenue in the \$38 billion range.

It is hardly a revelation (certainly not to the Minnesota Orchestra musicians and their fans) that the Twin Cities wealthy elite dictates access to culture, including classical music, for a potential metro audience of some three million.

Nelson occupies a "Life Director" (permanent) position on the board of the MOA, the orchestra's management body. The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* reported Friday that about ten days previously, she had assembled a group of Minnesota's wealthy who raised some \$1.68 million. The fund is to be used to offer signing bonuses of \$20,000 for each orchestra player as an inducement to sign a three-year concessions contract that would reduce the average pay by 25 percent over a 36-month period.

Thursday's contract offer was made with a definite air of "take or leave it," which included a noon Monday ultimatum for agreeing to the rotten deal.

Nelson, MOA CEO Michael Henson and the MOA board circumvented the lockout mediator, former Sen. George Mitchell (Democrat from Maine), sending letters directly to the musicians. Mitchell was brought in midsummer 2013 to "bring the musicians around" to accepting reduced standards of living, which the latter have consistently and unanimously rejected, including in a vote in early September.

The signing bonus maneuver is also an obvious attempt to increase the pressure on the musicians, who have had no pay or benefits for an entire year. The MOA board has also threatened the players with the cancellation of another season, which is due to begin October 4.

The locked-out players have witnessed the departure of a number of their colleagues to other orchestras, including Burt Hara, principal clarinetist, to the Los Angeles Philharmonic (after 25 years with the Minnesota Orchestra), David Pharris, second clarinet, to the Houston Symphony, violinist and Acting First Associate Concertmaster Peter McGuire to the Tonhalle Orchester Zürich, principal second violinist Gina DiBello to the Boston Symphony Orchestra and subsequently the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and numerous others. More than two dozen orchestra vacancies have gone unfilled.

Meanwhile, during the year the players managed as they could without pay, the MOA oversaw the renovation of Orchestra Hall for \$50 million. Kevin Watkins, a negotiator hired by the musicians during the lockout, told Minnesota Public Radio earlier this month, "Our members have been locked out, and the lockout to them [the MOA] has been seen as a convenience, in that the hall was under construction. The orchestra was going to lose millions putting on a season [in the downtown Minneapolis Convention

Center] ... and so this was a win-win. Break the musicians and save a lot of money.”

In May of this year, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra musicians, without a contract for months, ratified a three-year agreement that cuts base pay by 18.6 percent for the SPCO’s 32-week season, reduces over-scale pay and reduces full-time players from a total of 32 to 28.

The Minnesota Orchestra board of directors roster is a virtual guide to Twin Cities big business. Its chair is Jon R. Campbell, an Executive Vice President and Director of Government and Community Relations at Wells Fargo Bank. The immediate past MOA chair was Richard K. Davis, CEO of U.S. Bancorp. Both Wells Fargo and U.S. Bancorp own \$14 million in Minnesota “bridge loan” bonds for the MOA. The MOA treasurer is Patrick E. Bowe, a Cargill Corporate Vice President, and the MOA finance director is Emily Backstrom of General Mills. Also on the board is Ben Fowke, Chairman, President and CEO of Xcel Energy, along with Michael Klingensmith, Publisher and CEO of Star Tribune Media.

Needless to say, each of these people could go unpaid for a year and not notice the difference.

The Minnesota Orchestra’s famed conductor Osmo Vanska informed the MOA by letter April 30 that he would resign in September if he had not seen the return of the musicians. Important engagements and studio recordings have been cancelled in the interim. A performance at New York’s Carnegie Hall is scheduled for early November, and Vanska has said that if the musicians are not present for rehearsal by this Monday, September 30, his resignation would be final.

The musicians, who have fought courageously for a year, find themselves isolated in a struggle with the corporate and banking elite.



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