

Minnesota Orchestra hangs in the balance as management rejects contract offers

Eric London
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The attack on the musicians at the Minnesota Orchestra intensified yesterday as orchestra management rejected two union-proposed concessions contracts after meeting with musician officials earlier in the afternoon. In a devastating blow, the orchestra's famed music director, Osmo Vänskä, issued his resignation this morning. His departure is effective immediately.

The union's first proposal would have slashed musician pay by 6.7 percent over one year. When management indicated that this was not enough, the union made another offer to cut pay 4.7 percent annually for three years, back to 2007 pay levels.

The Minneapolis Orchestra Association (MOA) not only rejected these proposals outright, they also unilaterally canceled the orchestra's two scheduled appearances at Carnegie Hall in New York. Such a move is a slap in the face to musicians for whom performing at such a respected venue is a badge of high honor.

The actions of the orchestra management followed a unanimous rejection by musicians, in a vote of 60-0, of a management proposal that would have slashed annual pay and benefits by a total of 25 percent over three years. The musicians have been locked out for a year, denied pay and health benefits.

Management's refusal of the latest offers, which amount to a major concession to MOA's demands, is a sign of the deep level of hostility with which the financial aristocrats view the cultural rights of the population as a whole.

Typical was the response of orchestra board chair Jon Campbell, who attempted to place the blame on the musicians. "It is clear that this was less a good-faith negotiating effort and more an attempt to blunt criticism over the musicians' inability to come forth

with a substantial solution to our financial challenges," he said.

Campbell, who moonlights as the Executive Vice President of Wells Fargo Minnesota, speaks for a layer of the financial aristocracy whose hostility to popular access to culture is so deep that even a 15 percent offered pay cut is not enough.

Management's efforts to drive the orchestra into the ground threaten the very existence of the orchestra, which remains a point of cultural pride for the people of Minneapolis. The resignation of famed Finnish composer and clarinetist Osmo Vänskä, who had previously announced he would step down if management cancelled the Carnegie concerts, is a milestone in management's dismantling of the orchestra.

"It is a very sad day for me," said Vänskä, who moved to the Twin Cities a decade ago and is credited with making the Minnesota Orchestra a world-renowned ensemble. His departure-- a direct result of management's efforts to attack the orchestra musicians-- marks a new step in the ruling class' attack on the cultural rights of the population.

Vanska is by no means the first orchestra member to depart. After a year long lockout, Vänskä's orchestra has been rocked by departures. Nearly thirty musicians have left the orchestra to seek employment elsewhere.

Despite the departures, the musicians retain broad support from the people of Minneapolis.

One commenter on the musicians' Facebook page responded to the news with indignation: "[The spouse of an orchestra musician] compared the MOA to the Taliban. I agree that they are thugs in the worst way, hiding behind their money, fancy offices, titles, etc. Demanding outrageous cuts in salaries and healthcare and who knows what else. However, they draw many

times the highest of the salary. They all have premium health care. They know little to nothing about what it takes to be a quality, professional musician.”

Another commenter noted that the orchestra bosses are “cultural terrorists,” while a large number of commenters suggested that the musicians form their own orchestra outside of the control of the orchestra management.

The overall top comment: “I urge you to resign en masse and start a new orchestra. The entire community would support you.”



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