

# Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra threatened with closure

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The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra is the latest orchestra in the US threatened with closure by budgetary shortfalls. The MSO announced at the beginning of December that it had to raise \$5 million in the next two months simply to keep the doors open. Since the MSO put out a call for donations two weeks ago, the orchestra has received donations and pledges of approximately \$700,000 from 900 individuals.

Since its first performance in 1959, when it was formed out of the semi-professional Milwaukee Pops Orchestra, the MSO has been an important cultural institution in the city of Milwaukee, as well as the state of Wisconsin. The 2012-2013 season drew more than 200,000 people to the symphony's concerts. The closure of the MSO would have a damaging impact on the cultural life of the entire region.

As well as playing at the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts in downtown Milwaukee, the orchestra has been on a local circuit for more than three decades, performing for audiences throughout Wisconsin and northern Illinois. MSO musicians also perform as the pit orchestra for the Florentine Opera, Milwaukee's main classical opera company. Furthermore, as Milwaukee Public Radio WUWM points out, "If the orchestra shuts down, ripples will be felt beyond the MSO. ... [I]ts members teach lessons around the area, and it fills a majority of the music faculty roster at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee."

Recordings of MSO performances are broadcast on the WFMT Radio Network, reaching an audience of 2.6 million throughout the US, and MSO performances reach millions more in the UK and Europe through broadcasts on BBC Radio.

The MSO has experienced budget shortfalls in three of the last six seasons since the economic crisis of 2008. The orchestra posted a \$1.8 million shortfall for

the 2012-2013 fiscal year, yielding calls for deep cuts to the orchestra's operating budget.

Under the threat of closure, MSO management and the players union, the Milwaukee Musicians' Association, agreed to open the musicians' contract, resulting in significant concessions. This marks the seventh time in 11 years that the union has imposed concessions on its membership. It is expected that these cuts will eliminate a cumulative \$2 million from the annual budget.

The number of weeks the orchestra plays at the Marcus Center will be expanded from 23 in the 2013-2014 seasons to between 27 or 28 weeks in the 2014-2015 seasons. Changes to the musicians' health insurance plans are expected to eliminate \$225,000 from the MSO's annual budget.

Additionally, the number of musicians in the orchestra will be reduced from 79 to somewhere in the mid-60s. The MSO expects to achieve the downsizing through retirements and attrition. The reduced number of musicians will be expected to play 40 weeks in a 44-week period starting in the 2014-2015 season. Each of the musicians will be laid off for four weeks.

In a statement to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, MSO president and executive director Mark Niehaus claimed the latest cuts were necessary to secure the support of large donors: "Many of our closest donors needed to see this hard work done before they were going to commit long term."

Continued operation of the orchestra has been principally reliant on significant support from local philanthropic foundations, including the well-endowed Bradley Foundation and the United Performing Arts Fund. The latter organization, however, which raises funds for Milwaukee-area arts groups, provides the orchestra with \$1 million less than it did a decade ago.

The difficulties facing the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra are part of a national and international trend, amid a broader attack on culture, which has seen the closure of numerous symphony orchestras and significant wage and benefit concessions extracted from musicians. Pay cuts for orchestra musicians have been implemented in cities across the country, from Philadelphia to Seattle.

Substantial pay cuts and other concessions were forced on the musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra after a six-month strike in 2010-2011. That same year, the Philadelphia Symphony filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. This summer the Nashville Symphony narrowly avoided a devastating foreclosure on its recently constructed concert hall.

In Europe, Germany has witnessed the closure 37 of 168 orchestras since 1992, resulting in the loss of more than 2,000 orchestral musician positions.

In the most prominent of the recent attacks in the US, musicians have been locked out by the Minnesota Orchestral Association since October 2012. Orchestra management has demanded more than \$5 million in concessions from the musicians.

On December 14, the Minnesota Orchestra Musicians posted a message of support for the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra musicians on their Save Our Symphony Minnesota (SOSMN) Facebook page. The statement reads in part: “Although SOSMN’s focus has been on saving the world-class Minnesota Orchestra, today we ask you to consider helping the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra (MSO). The musicians, conductor Edo de Waart, and management of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra have supported our Minnesota musicians through the lockout—and now they need help in return.”

*The author recommends:*

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