

Locked out Minnesota Orchestra musicians take independent steps

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As of January 1, the musicians of the Minnesota Orchestra will have been locked out of Orchestra Hall in downtown Minneapolis, a publicly owned facility, for fifteen months. The doors have been shut by what the players on their web site refer to as “outliers,” consisting of the Minnesota Orchestra Association (MOA) management and board.

The term refers to individuals who manage the access (or, in this case, denial of access) to classical music of audiences in the Twin Cities and the upper Midwest in a manner that constitutes a major attack on artists and culture. The handful of wealthy individuals who operate the orchestra has behaved with immense selfishness and irresponsibility. Objectively, their actions threaten the destruction of a 110-year-old, world class symphony.

The Twin Cities mass media has largely aided and abetted the abuse of the musicians, amongst the most accomplished and talented in the world, by referring inaccurately and dishonestly to the “intransigence of both parties” or suggesting that “both sides have dug in their heels against compromise.” The intimation has been that the artists are as responsible as the financial elite of Minnesota for the shutting of Orchestra Hall.

The mass media imply that the “dispute” is one between social and economic equals, though it is publicly acknowledged that the MOA board is a collection of some of the richest people in the US.

In 2009, the musicians agreed to MOA demands for significant cuts in pay and benefits, on the heels of the financial crash the year before. Three years later, with MOA board members raking in massive amounts on the stock market and in corporate profits, the latter demanded a 30-50 percent pay cut from the musicians in negotiations during the spring and summer of 2012.

When the players voted overwhelmingly to reject the

draconian demands, MOA punished the musicians by locking them out of Orchestra Hall and denying them their livelihoods. To their great credit, the players have demonstrated remarkable public resilience and courage in repeatedly and unanimously rejecting one outrageous management proposal after another.

On December 12, the musicians posted at their web site a winter-spring 2014 schedule of ten concerts they will produce themselves. Concerts on March 20 and 21 will feature the return of former, much respected conductor Osmo Vänskä (who resigned in protest October 1, 2013) in performances of Sibelius’ Symphony No. 4 and Symphony No. 1, for recordings of which the orchestra received a Grammy nomination a year ago and then another this month.

Vänskä will also return for two concerts in May. The Grammy-winning violinist Joshua Bell, who has had a partnering arrangement with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, will play with the symphony April 15. Legendary conductor and violinist Itzhak Perlman will play with the musicians in May.

The concerts will be at University of Minnesota and St. Catherine University venues, the schedule of which is available [here](#).

On December 16, Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) posted interviews with several of the musicians, including Kate Nettleman, acting principal bass player for the Orchestra. She came to Minnesota from the Hong Kong Philharmonic in 2009, and told MPR’s Chris Roberts that she has found the lock-out period “the single most challenging thing I’ve gone through in my life.”

Nettleman and her husband Charles Block, a musician with the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra in Madison, noted they have drawn on their savings and been without health benefits for the lockout’s duration.

They have been compelled to buy their own health coverage at high prices on the open market.

To keep financially afloat, Nettleman has earned a fraction of her Minnesota Orchestra salary by freelancing at the Chicago Symphony, the National and St. Louis Symphonies and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.

“But, it’s not why I moved to Minnesota,” she told MPR. “I moved to Minnesota to play in the mighty Minnesota Orchestra. And I left a good job to do that, actually.”

For the Minnesota Orchestra’s principal tuba player, Steve Campbell, and his wife Michelle, a freelance musician, existence without pay for over a year has been very stressful. They have a mortgage to pay and two children to support, the youngest of whom was born after the MOA locked them out. They have been forced to buy much more costly health coverage and depend on their parents for extras for the children. The strain has taken an emotional toll on the couple.

Steve teaches tuba at the University of Minnesota to keep them alive, as well as freelancing in orchestras around the country.

Wendy Williams, a single mother with two children 11 and 13, has been a flutist with the orchestra for 21 years. She is quoted at MPR: “I am earning less than half of what I need to make ends meet each month. I’ve spent all my savings. I’ve sold my backup flute.”

Especially painful for her was a trip to St. Louis on a freelance gig during which her son became ill and required an emergency appendectomy. She came home for the surgery, returned to the job in St. Louis, only to find that the boy had a post-operative complication requiring another surgery.

She said to MPR, “That was the all-time low of the lockout, to be away from my child in the hospital. I’ve limited myself to going away for one week a month because that’s all that I feel like they can bear, and that I can handle.”

The musicians’ taking charge of their own productions is a laudable and progressive step, reflecting their awareness that they are vastly more capable and responsible and committed than the MOA in regard to classical music production and performance in the Twin Cities, or anywhere else. Unquestionably, many classical music fans find the treatment of the artists by MOA appalling.

To anyone paying serious attention to the MOA lockout, it is altogether obvious that management were desirous of Vänskä to depart so they could hire a lesser-paid conductor. And the same goes for the principal chairs. The strategy has been to wait out the most veteran and therefore “expensive” musicians until they find jobs elsewhere.



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