Minnesota Orchestra president resigns in aftermath of bitter musicians' lockout

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Minnesota Orchestra CEO and president Michael Henson announced his resignation last week, 2 months after a bitter 16-month lockout of the world-famous orchestra's musicians ended with the imposition of drastic concessions.

Henson had led the ruthless attack on the musicians. The orchestra spent more than $50 million on the renovation of Minneapolis's Orchestra Hall, while claiming that it had no money to pay decent salaries to the 95 talented professionals, without whom there would be no world-class music in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota in the first place.

Despite the determined fight of the musicians, the agreement that ended the lockout, one of the longest labor disputes in classical music history, cut wages by 15 percent for 2014, with small increases scheduled for the next two years. It also imposed concessions on health care premiums and cut the number of the full-time members of the orchestra.

Henson and his board had originally demanded pay cuts of up to 40 percent, and settled for about half of those demands. The musicians and most of their audience supporters were under no illusions about these terms. As the classical music critic of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* reported, "There are still people who write letters to the editor who say, 'We'll come and see the players because I like the players but I'm not donating to the orchestra anymore.' "

The Twin Cities corporate and political establishment, which had backed management in its attack, began to turn its attention to the need for "healing" after the fact. In the words of newly elected Minneapolis mayor Betsy Hodges, everyone should "come together and work on rebuilding trust in our community."

No doubt at the urging of the broader circles within the ruling elite, the 77-member board of the orchestra was forced to consider whether the time had come for a cosmetic change, so as to consolidate its successful attack on the musicians while projecting an image of conciliation.

This was done in stages, as is sometimes the case in such "delicate" matters. On February 28, the board voted its support of Henson by a margin of 40 to 8. A few weeks later came the announcement of Henson's departure, by "mutual agreement." The outgoing CEO, after seven years in the post, agreed to stay on through August to help with the transition while the orchestra searches for a new corporate chief. He issued a statement declaring, "It has always been my aim to do what is right for the organization, however great the challenges, and I'm proud of our accomplishments."

The chairman of the orchestra's board, Gordon Sprenger, thanked Henson for his work. "Michael has always supported the orchestra's artistic mission, and when the board asked him to address the serious financial challenges of the organization, he faced this issue directly, reorganizing administrative staff and helping to deliver a musicians' contract agreement that was difficult but necessary," said Sprenger, reiterating the support of the multimillionaire board members for the policy of making the musicians pay for the orchestra's fiscal problems.

The day after the announcement of Henson's departure saw another expression of the bitter class tensions that were so sharply revealed in the long lockout. Henson's hard-core supporters, 8 out of the 77-member board, resigned en masse to protest even the suggestion of a tactical shift in the hard line against the musicians.

The outlook of this layer was clearly expressed in a letter sent by Teri Popp, a local attorney and a member of the board's executive committee, to board chairman Sprenger. "By encouraging a person to resign—one who had tirelessly helped us work toward sustainability—we send the wrong message to future applicants for that position," wrote Popp.

A major focus of the musicians as they have returned to work has been a campaign to bring back music director Osmo Vanska, who resigned in frustration during the lockout last October. The Finnish-born Vanska has been closely associated with the rapid growth in the reputation of the orchestra in recent years. It is no exaggeration to say that it has become one of the most highly regarded symphonic ensembles in the US and even internationally. Only a few

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months ago, the Minnesota musicians won a Grammy award for their recording of the Sibelius First and Fourth Symphonies.

Vanska played an unusually prominent role in the long lockout. He made little effort to hide his sympathy for the musicians, and finally announced that he would resign last October if the lockout had not ended in time for rehearsals for upcoming concerts by the orchestra in New York's Carnegie Hall. Vanska followed through on this, and made it clear when the lockout ended that he would only consider returning to his post if Henson left.

The depth of support for both the musicians and Vanska was shown in the past week, as the maestro made a return for three concerts, including the Sibelius works that had won the orchestra its Grammy award. Before the concert began, there were shouts of "Osmo, come home," accompanied by applause that lasted five minutes.

The return of Vanska is by no means assured, however. Many members of the orchestra board, in addition to the eight who left to protest Henson's departure, are bitter over Vanska's support for the musicians. The orchestra is reportedly in negotiations with Vanska over a possible return to the orchestra in some capacity.

Whether or not Vanska comes back, the issues raised by the Minnesota lockout remain. The concessions forced on these musicians are only the latest in a wave of similar attacks in every corner of the US.

Many cultural institutions, in music, opera, theater and other areas, are under siege. For much of the twentieth century, the American ruling class saw fit—and was able—to provide generous support to classical music institutions. There were also public subsidies available. This sphere of life, however, like every other, has fallen victim to the capitalist crisis today. The subsidies have largely disappeared. Amid the growth of inequality, the plutocrats hold cultural and social policy hostage.

To the extent institutions like the Minnesota Orchestra are allowed to survive, it is increasingly only as the private fiefdoms of the super-rich. The boards of the orchestras consist overwhelmingly of modern-day aristocrats whose hatred of the working class finds open expression in contempt for "their" musicians, calling to mind the difficulties faced by Mozart or Haydn more than two centuries ago.

The divisions on the Minnesota Orchestra board of directors are purely tactical, and are a reflection in the musical world of the differences between Republicans and Democrats everywhere else. While Henson and his fanatical supporters spearheaded the assault, the rest of the board agreed. The musicians were told they had the choice between pay cuts of 15 or 30 percent. They were informed by their liberal "friends" that things could be worse. The liberal establishment in the Twin Cities, represented by the Democratic Farmer-Labor machine and the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, thanked Henson for his ruthlessness and then called on the musicians to let bygones be bygones.

Last December, the Minnesota musicians raised some important issues, in a preliminary fashion, when they announced a series of 10 concerts, cooperatively organized by the musicians themselves, to be held between January and May of this year, and attracting the support of world-class soloists and conductors such as Joshua Bell and Itzhak Perlman.

In a limited way, this demonstrated the parasitic role of the wealthy donors to the Minnesota Orchestra. The institution is non-profit but it is in fact "owned" by its multimillionaire benefactors. The lockout began to raise the possibility, indeed the necessity, of dispensing with the board members who have nothing to do with the music.

Rather than see a successful series of concerts staged by the musicians, the local liberal business establishment undoubtedly leaned on the orchestra board and secured a slight softening in its concession demands. The musicians were also pressured to surrender. Lacking any strategy for broadening their struggle through a turn to the working class as a whole, and having lost more than a year's salary, they accepted the smaller package of cuts.

The outcome of the lockout demonstrates that only a fundamental reorganization of cultural life, as part of economic life as a whole, is required. The arena of music is not separate from that of all other areas of society. The defense of culture in Minnesota and elsewhere is through the fight for a socialist program, based on the principle that the cultural wealth of society, like the wealth of society as a whole, is not the private property of plutocrats but must be democratically controlled by the population as a whole.

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