

San Diego Opera closure announcement meets with widespread opposition

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The recent decision by the board of the San Diego Opera (SDO) Company to shut down this month after 49 seasons has been met with widespread popular revulsion. After the opera board's initial decision—which caught the public and many in the music community completely by surprise—more than 20,000 signatures were gathered within a few days to keep the company open. The closure has now been postponed by only two weeks.

Contrary to right-wing characterizations of working people being completely uninterested in questions of art and culture, comment sections of local newspapers have been flooded by readers, with the vast majority universally praising opera and the SDO as socially vital cultural institutions, while condemning the company's closure along with those responsible.

"To save his [General Director Ian Campbell's] financial future he brazenly convinces an incomplete meeting of the board of directors to close the company. The SD Opera is one of the top regional companies in the country. This simply cannot be allowed to happen," writes reader Martijn Hostelter in the *San Diego Union Tribune*.

Another *Union Tribune* commenter writes, "You do not have to love or even attend opera to understand that it is important to our community that we support institutions like SDO for our own national stature in addition we support them in our role as caretakers of San Diego's assets for future generations."

Writing in the comment section of the *Los Angeles Times*, reader Ryan Luster responds to Campbell's comment that the company's immediate closure was necessary for the sake of "dignity." Luster writes, "DIGNITY?! Denying a city of a cultural institution and denying it its only remaining source of opera is not dignity."

The critically acclaimed company was recently named one of the 10 best in the country by *Opera America*. Its stage has been graced by some of the greatest dramatic singers of the second half of the twentieth century, including Joan Sutherland, Beverly Sills, Samuel Ramey, Sherill Milnes, Hermann Prey and Plácido Domingo, and is well known for nurturing talented young singers who subsequently rose to prominence on the international stage.

"So many artists began their rise to stardom in front of the San Diego audience," *U-T San Diego* quotes renowned lyric tenor Richard Leech. "There is not a single young emerging artist that does not have San Diego Opera on the top of his or her wish list. From the U.S. to Europe and Asia to Australia they know that San Diego Opera is often the first to find and bring an emerging artist to the states, not coincidentally, just before their career takes off."

Renowned Polish tenor Piotr Beczała, who recently performed the lead role of Gustav III, King of Sweden in Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the upcoming closure: "The termination of the San Diego Opera operations came as a shock, unexpected by everybody! It was least expected by the singers, who were always welcomed there with sympathy and professionalism. We always felt that the whole opera company worked as an excellently constructed and well-oiled machine."

Beczała added, "Unfortunately, in American conditions, opera must support itself mainly through sponsors' money and the sales of tickets. I am still hoping that the city of San Diego will not allow the definitive closure of this cultural center famous for such artistic achievements after 49 years of its successes and will find a way to continue its work."

San Diego mayor Kevin Faulconer has categorically ruled out any additional city funding for the opera, however, but said that he's "willing to work" with private philanthropy organizations to secure an additional \$10 million in funds.

Of the company's revenue sources, the least by far comes from public funds. The city of San Diego contributed a grant of \$389,157 to the company this year, while the National Endowment for the Arts, which has seen its funding cut drastically by the Obama administration and Congress, provided an insulting grant of \$45,000 to the company last year.

Under Democratic governor Jerry Brown, state funding for the arts dropped by 7.9 percent, with California spending less per capita on the arts than any other state in the country.

During the past three years alone, the Obama administration has cut \$26 million from the National Endowment of the Arts, while the budget for the California Arts Council has been reduced to \$5.024 million under Brown. Such sums are only a minute fraction of the assets owned by the state's wealthiest residents, or of just the Christmas bonuses doled out each year to the financial criminals of Wall Street.

In addition to highly skilled singers and orchestral musicians in its employ, dozens of skilled set and costume designers, dancers and administrative staff could lose their jobs and livelihoods as a result of the SDO's closure. A small staff of master carpenters and craftsmen produce what are regarded as among the finest set constructions in the world. Scenes from SDO productions have been frequently loaned to opera companies across Europe, Asia and the Americas. Movie and television productions, conventions,

and concert venues in the San Diego area also rely on the company's scenery department to fulfill orders for elaborate and unique constructions requiring fast assembly and disassembly.

The closure of this department will force previous customers to fulfill similar orders as far away as Los Angeles, and various small vendors will most likely be forced to close as well. John David Peters, the company's lead carpenter, who started work in 1969, lamented the loss of the opera and the scenic studio. "The ripple effect," he said, "will be incalculable."

General Director Ian Campbell had initially cited overall decreases in revenue as motivating the board's initial decision. "Over the last several years," he said, "we lost a number of prominent contributors, frequently because of death, but especially during the recent economic downturn." The company, despite falling revenues, has no debt and no operating deficit, however, prompting many to question the true motivation behind the closing.

In 2013, Campbell received more than \$563,895 in yearly income, with his ex-wife Ana also receiving an annual salary of \$282,345 from the company. The highest salary Campbell received with the company was \$695,756 in 2010. Additionally, Campbell is under contract through 2017, which raises the possibility that he could still be paid during the remainder of his contract, even if the company closes, as responsibility for the closure may legally be determined to rest with the board and not with Campbell himself.

Furthermore, the existence of a \$1 million severance package for Campbell was recently publicized, prompting the director to cancel public appearances in which he had promised to further clarify the board's decision to close. Opera staff and board members thus claimed to have been misled by Campbell when the company's closure was initially proposed and voted on.

While the company still had \$15 million in reserve, board members were informed that an immediate cash infusion of \$10 million would be needed to continue the company's operations into 2015. The two-week closure postponement was ostensibly made to successfully appeal for those funds. In its application for grant money from the city of San Diego earlier this season, the company did not divulge any serious financial difficulties, which is a requirement to receive any funds.

David Kleinfeld, who was the only member to vote against the company's closure among the 34 present, released a statement to San Diego 10 news after the initial announcement: "We have a solemn responsibility as the custodians of timeless opera, and to our city, its future generations and the countless families who depend on our company for our livelihoods. The company has terrific employees who give their all, some devoting their entire working lives to San Diego Opera. The manner in which the issue and decision were raised and executed prevented us from giving our best to perform that solemn responsibility."

Regardless of the personal responsibility of Campbell and his close supporters for the company's downfall, which may prove to be quite substantial, the loss of the only opera company in a massive metropolitan area home to millions of people is the result of a calculated policy to deprive the population of this cultural treasure.

The loss of major opera companies during the last five years alone has reached staggering proportions. These include the Cleveland, Baltimore and New York City Operas, as well as the Connecticut Opera, Opera Boston, Opera San Antonio and Opera Pacific of nearby Orange County, California.

While the company may yet survive—massive donations have already been made and ticket sales for the final performance of the 2014 season of Massenet's *Don Quixote* are already selling well above projections—the closure announcement is being seized upon to substantially restructure the company through reductions in labor costs and audience offerings.

The trade unions have eagerly and predictably contributed their services to this effort and were indeed among the first to suggest it.

The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) Local 122 has called on its members and supporters to write petitions to the San Diego City Council. A form letter on the union's web site, which they request supporters send to the council, reads, "There are alternatives [to the San Diego Opera closing]; renegotiate contracts with employees, do fewer productions, cut back expenses, seek new leadership, etc." From the IATSE's point of view, cutting salaries, productions, and community outreach programs is a far more preferable and indeed the only alternative to closing the company.

The American Guild of Music Artists has put in a demand for the company's financials records and bank statements as part of a complaint filed with the notoriously pro-corporate National Labor Relations Board. In spite of a nearly constant stream of orchestra and opera company closures across the country, neither of the unions at SDO seeks to mobilize any meaningful and coordinated strike actions among its membership across the country, as this would put it on an immediate collision course with the Democratic Party.

Neither union has protested the board's decision to use the two-week closure postponement to reduce severance pay for employees from five weeks to three should the San Diego opera eventually shut its doors.



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