

Threat of closure held over heads of San Diego Opera musicians, workers

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Despite significant fundraising efforts, the San Diego Opera is threatened with closure by May 19 if it is unable to raise at least \$2.7 million more to meet a \$6.5 million goal and move forward with plans for a 2015 season.

The closure of the San Diego Opera, which employs many music professionals, skilled craftspeople and others, would have a devastating effect on the hundreds of workers immediately involved and their families, as well as on the cultural conditions in the area.

The closure threat is being used first and foremost as a means of transforming the company from a thriving cultural institution into an operation run on profit-making lines.

Toward that end, the opera hosted a town hall meeting in mid-April entitled “San Diego Moves Forward: Alternative Models of Opera in America” with panel discussions that included guest speakers Marc Scorca of Opera America and David Devan of Opera Philadelphia.

Scorca asserted that, despite the difficulties, there was a way forward for the San Diego Opera through a creative “reinvention” program. He pointed at the Dallas Opera as an example of such a reinvention, whereby leadership transition, a reduction in costs, the search for new sponsors and its transformation into a festival opera allowed the Dallas company to “turn the corner.”

In November 2012, Keith Cerny, the Dallas Opera’s general director and CEO, told the *Dallas Observer*: “We have cut back expenses significantly. We had to cut staff, which is never an easy thing to do but we had to do it, and, for now, we’ve cut back programming.” For the last two seasons, the Dallas Opera offered just three opera productions.

David Devan, General Director of Opera

Philadelphia, as well as a Strategy Committee member for Opera America, attempted to sell the “Philadelphia plan” to the audience as a model through which the San Diego Opera could be similarly saved.

He argued that by scaling down production, reducing costs, sharing facilities with local partners and other means, the Philadelphia plan would guarantee profitability, provide “new markets and new consumers” and encourage philanthropy for those who wish to see “a return on their investment,” and transform the company into “venture capital.”

During the question-and-answer session at the April 17 meeting, a member of the San Diego Chorus also proposed that only local talent be hired in place of foreign and world-renowned artists to reduce operation costs. Although the chorus member did not indicate any affiliation with the American Guild of Musical Artists, the bargaining agent for solo singers, chorus singers and stage management personnel at the San Diego Opera, this is, in fact, that union’s publicly stated position.

Moreover, the unions are openly supporting cuts in wages and benefits. A letter that the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees asks its members to send to the San Diego City Council states, “There are alternatives: renegotiate contracts with employees, do fewer productions, cut back expenses, seek new leadership, etc.”

On April 13, WSWS reporters attended the final 2014 performance at the San Diego Opera house. Ferruccio Furlanetto, the lead in Massenet’s *Don Quixote*, stepped out alone onstage after the curtains had fallen. He dropped to his knee, kissed his hand and pressed it to the stage floor. This symbolic gesture was followed by an eruption of applause.

Days earlier, Furlanetto responded to a question

posed by our reporters—who cited the Minnesota Orchestra lockout and the attack on the Detroit Institute of Arts—as to whether he believed the closure in San Diego indicated a deeper illness in society. Before remarking that no matter what, “opera will live in our hearts,” the singer pointed to the fact that, “These things are state funded where I’m from [Italy], unlike here, where the arts rely on private donors.”

After the last performance, a candlelight vigil was held out of doors, sponsored by Save San Diego Opera, led by the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), Local 325 and attended by singers, actors and musicians, as well as community members concerned by the closure.

The WSWS asked one of the vigil’s lead organizers, Andrea Altona, president of AFM Local 325, if she would support pay cuts similar to those imposed on members of the Minnesota Orchestra, and she replied, “Yes, anything to save the opera.”

Save San Diego Opera advances the argument that the opera must be “saved” by any means. The group’s web site reads, “[W]e are looking at every cost-saving option available while presenting great opera ... Our goal is to create a viable plan going forward with the means to pay for it.” The group acts as an arm of the board supporting the restructuring of the opera to lower wages and attack the pensions and job security of the performers.

Also attending the candlelight vigil was John, who has been playing the violin for over 40 years and has been with the San Diego Symphony since 1976. He told us, “They [the San Diego Opera board] are audacious thugs to take a civil institution and try to kill it. This closure is very worrisome for me. I am worried about cuts to my pay, my retirement income, and losing my house.”

In another setback, the San Diego Arts Commission is now urging the City Council to contribute less than half of the \$389,157 the opera had initially expected to receive, suggesting a mere \$160,000, citing instability as the factor.

Keith Fisher, San Diego Opera’s newly appointed chief operating officer, had appealed to the San Diego Arts Commission for support, outlining the board’s proposals for drastic funding cuts which include across-the-board layoffs, moving to cheaper offices, lowering ticket prices and eliminating the pre-performance donor

tent, a wine social for contributors.

Fisher told the Arts Commission that the new board hoped to raise \$6.5 million by May 19, which included a \$1 million crowd-funding campaign, a campaign that has already reached its goal. Funds poured in from donors from over 30 US states and three foreign countries—Italy, Austria and Mexico.

Helen, a longtime patron of the San Diego Opera, noted to the WSWS, “We are always being told there is no money for art or education, but there is always money for war.” The cost of just one F-22 fighter jet is estimated at \$150 million, enough to fund the San Diego Opera for nine years.



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