

# Atlanta Symphony locks out its musicians

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Atlanta Symphony Orchestra musicians were locked out for the second time in two years on September 7, as their old contract expired and management refused pleas for last-minute meetings and issued a statement saying the absence of a new agreement “may delay or cancel portions of the scheduled 2014-15 season.”

The lockout underscores the ongoing attacks on orchestra musicians that have seen givebacks imposed in New York, Detroit, Philadelphia and many smaller US cities as well. Management in Atlanta was undoubtedly emboldened by the concession contracts announced by the Metropolitan Opera and its various unions only three weeks ago, after threats of a lockout at the largest and most famous musical institution in the US.

The Atlanta musicians were locked out for most of September 2012 before agreeing to drastic concessions that were supposedly urgently needed to save the symphony. They gave up their 52-week work year, which was reduced to only 42 weeks. Pay cuts of about 15 percent were also imposed, and the size of the orchestra was reduced from 95 to 88.

Now, immediately upon the expiration of the old contract with its draconian attacks, the multimillionaire orchestra board members and their officers are back for more. Management proposed a four-year contract with a pay freeze for the first year, followed by increases of 1 percent for the next two years and 1.5 percent for the final year. As the musicians pointed out, not only did these increases amount to a cut in real pay after inflation, they would also be more than eaten up by additional health-care concessions demanded by the orchestra.

ASO President Sidney Romanstein, who now has the distinction of presiding over two successive lockouts, issued a statement saying, “While we value the art and the artists of the ASO enormously, we believe we must develop a new model that will allow us to balance our

artistic and financial needs. Clearly, that is not the model we have today.” The Orchestra has run deficits in recent years, and its endowment has declined to the current level of \$70 million.

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Players Association (ASOPA) issued a statement accusing management of refusing to enter into serious negotiations. Musicians and their supporters pointed out that despite management’s refusal to use the term, it had locked out the musicians by refusing to accept their proposal that talks continue while they worked under the old contract.

The Atlanta Symphony, while perhaps not as world-renowned as its counterparts in New York, Philadelphia or Chicago, has been highly regarded for many years, especially since the days when it was led by the beloved choral conductor Robert Shaw. Under its current leadership of Robert Spano, it regularly tours to major cities. It appeared in New York’s Carnegie Hall last April, where, as part of the commemoration of the centenary of the birth of Benjamin Britten, it performed that composer’s powerful *War Requiem*.

In the days just before the contract deadline in Atlanta, Spano and the orchestra’s principal guest conductor Donald Runnicles wrote a letter to management, saying, “We ask the board and management to acknowledge the sacrifice the musicians have already made, and to examine other ways and areas to maintain sustainability.”

The action of Spano and Runnicles recalled the stance of Osmo Vanska, the conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra, who signaled his support for the musicians by resigning his post in October 2013, after they had been locked out for one year. At the end of the long and bitter 16-month lockout, the Minnesota board was forced to acknowledge the depth of public anger and accept the resignation of the orchestra’s CEO. It rehired Vanska, who had made it clear that he would

otherwise not consider returning. Nevertheless, the musicians were left with pay cuts of 15 percent.

It will take more than such expressions of sympathy for the musicians, sincere as they may be, to defeat the escalating attacks on musicians and other arts professionals. In Atlanta as elsewhere the wealthy patrons of the arts are demanding that those who actually create and produce the cultural riches pay for the broader crisis in the economy as well as in culture. Their talk of successful “business models” shows that musical professionals are facing attacks that are virtually identical to those faced by every other section of the working class.

The attacks cannot be fended off by persuading the wealthy that there are other ways to balance budgets. The problem is political, and raises the fundamental issue of who controls the economy, including the cultural sphere, and how to reorganize economic life so as to protect and develop these achievements of the past and present, and increase the audience for them today.



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