

Philadelphia and Pittsburgh orchestra musicians on strike

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The musicians of the world-famous Philadelphia Orchestra went on strike September 30, the night of the orchestra's annual gala. An audience of about 1,000 waited while last-minute negotiations continued backstage. Orchestra president and chief executive officer Allison Vulgamore appeared about 20 minutes after the scheduled start of the music, which was to consist of works by Bernstein, Gershwin, Ravel and Respighi, to announce that the concert was canceled. The musicians emerged several minutes later with picket signs.

On the same day, 300 miles to the west, also in Pennsylvania, members of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra began walking picket lines too. It was possibly the first time ever that two major orchestras in one US state took strike action at the same time. The Pittsburgh ensemble, while perhaps not as well-known as the Philadelphian, is famous in its own right and tours all over the world.

The Philadelphia contract had expired on September 12, and concerts had proceeded while talks continued. Management's first offer had been for a five-year agreement with pay frozen for the first three years, followed by 1 percent raises in each of the last two years. A later offer was only slightly less insulting, including 2 percent increases in each year of a two-year contract. The current strike is the first by the musicians, members of Local 77 of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), since 1996, when they were out for 64 days.

The Philadelphia Orchestra musicians have not yet recovered the concessions granted after the orchestra declared bankruptcy in April 2011. That unprecedented move allowed management to rip up contracts and impose significant givebacks. Although the orchestra emerged from bankruptcy in 2012, it says that it continues to run a \$5 million annual deficit.

In Pittsburgh, the strike is the second in the ensemble's 120-year history. The musicians, members of Local

60-471 of the AFM, earn a base salary of \$107,000, significantly below that in either Boston (about \$152,000) or Philadelphia (\$128,000). Management has demanded a 15 percent pay cut for the first year of the contract, followed by raises of 2 and 3 percent in the second and third years, respectively.

The musicians also face a proposal to institute a defined contribution pension plan, as opposed to a guarantee of defined benefits. And management also demands a reduction in the size of the orchestra from 99 to at least 96, with further vacancies being filled only at management's discretion. The ability to hire short-term substitutes is a means of cutting costs, while weakening the musicians' future bargaining position and having a negative impact on the orchestra's standards.

The Pittsburgh Symphony's board points to a loss of a \$1 million public subsidy, and also cites an \$11 million overall debt and an annual deficit of \$1.5 million.

The Philadelphia and Pittsburgh strikes are evidence that the bitter struggles of musicians in Minneapolis and Detroit in recent years were not exceptional in the present economic and cultural climate. Most arts institutions continue to focus on the interests of their wealthy patrons and a narrow layer of the middle class. In the context of rising ticket prices and declining arts and music education—part of the attacks on education as a whole—this has often meant smaller audiences. The boards of the major orchestras propose to solve the financial problems at the expense of those who create the music.

Where there have been infusions of huge sums from the "philanthropic community," this has been in connection with new construction or the renovation of existing halls, and tied to naming or renaming these venues, as in the case of Disney Hall in Los Angeles and Geffen Hall and the David H. Koch Theater in New York City.

There is an obvious limit to the naming opportunities available to ego-driven billionaires. Hence the paradox of

massive spending on new destinations, alongside the argument that there is no money for the musicians.

The history of classical music in 20th century America is inseparably bound up with both the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh orchestras, founded in 1900 and 1895, respectively. The Philadelphia Orchestra was led from 1936 to 1980 by the legendary Eugene Ormandy, and its LP recordings of the basic repertoire reached many millions around the world. Ormandy was succeeded by Riccardo Muti and other prominent figures. The current conductor is the highly praised, 41-year-old Montreal-born Yannick Nézet-Séguin.

The Pittsburgh Symphony also played a large role in the spread of classical music through its recordings in the post-World War II era. Fritz Reiner's years as its principal conductor were followed by the leadership of William Steinberg, André Previn and Lorin Maazel. Its current conductor is the Austrian-born Manfred Honeck.

While most attention is understandably focused on cities such as Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, they are only among the more prominent examples of concession demands and a crisis that has led to the suspension of entire seasons and the disappearance of some orchestras. The Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra in Texas is also currently on strike.

The arena of classical music has increasingly become hostage to the dictates of the affluent patrons who populate its boards and choose the managements of its institutions. While subsidies for these cultural riches dwindle almost to the vanishing point, the political establishment oversees the spending of trillions of dollars for war. It is clearer than ever that the jobs and conditions of the professional musicians on strike today in both southeastern and southwestern Pennsylvania are completely bound up with a broader struggle against the capitalist system.



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