

Musicians speak out at concert to support Pittsburgh Symphony strike

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Striking Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (PSO) musicians played a support concert to an audience of hundreds Sunday, joined by musicians from the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Symphony, National Symphony Orchestra, and Dallas Symphony, as well as the Brass Roots youth ensemble, composed of students of PSO members.

The strike of PSO musicians is now in its fourth week, after musicians took a stand against management demands for a 15 percent pay cut, job cuts, and the abolition of defined-benefit pensions. The Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra is also currently on strike to recoup losses ceded several years ago.

There have been no negotiations between PSO musicians and management since the strike began, although the musicians' negotiating team had agreed to meet with federal mediators late next week, while a financial expert jointly funded by the musicians and management reviews the PSO's finances.

PSO musicians have received enthusiastic support from workers, young people, professionals, and fellow musicians across the country. While on strike, PSO musicians have played numerous free concerts to crowds of hundreds, in one case holding two simultaneous concerts to accommodate an overflow crowd.

At the beginning of the concert, held at Pittsburgh's East Liberty Presbyterian Church, PSO tuba player Craig Knox stated, "We are taking a stand to preserve the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, as not just an orchestra in Pittsburgh, but as the world-famous PSO that you love. And we are so happy and so honored to have musicians from four other world-renowned orchestras come here to stand beside us. Make no mistake, they are not just here to support us. They are

here to support Pittsburgh, and all of you, and your Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra."

The concert consisted of skillful renditions of brass and percussion arrangements spanning five centuries, including pieces by the sixteenth-century Italian composer Giovanni Gabrieli; Richard Wagner and Edvard Grieg from the nineteenth century; and twentieth-century American composer Aaron Copland.

The concert was attended by hundreds of people, filling the cathedral seats, together with an even larger online audience via Facebook livestream. As of this writing, the livestream of the first half has been viewed more than 21,500 times, with nearly 1,000 likes or responses, 400 shares, and 239 comments from across the country and worldwide.

This powerful response demonstrates that striking PSO musicians are standing up not just for themselves, but for the right of all people to access the heights of human culture.

Anthony Prisk, a trumpet player from the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, explained why he drove five hours across the state to play in this support concert. "This is a really important art form, and it's up to us to defend it," he said.

Symphony musicians in Philadelphia struck on September 30, the same day the PSO struck, but were called back to work several days later after a contract agreement was announced. "We went on strike because we wanted to maintain a world-class orchestra in Philadelphia," Prisk said. "If you want to have that, you need to pay musicians a little more. We don't get paid like doctors and lawyers even though we have as much training."

Prisk explained the financial hardships musicians face. "A lot of musicians have \$1 million or \$600,000 instruments," he noted. "How are you supposed to pay

for that on \$50,000 a year? People take out second mortgages now. The best symphonies are the ones with the best instruments. The symphony might have a few instruments on hand, but they are almost all owned by the musicians.”

Zachary Smith, PSO French horn player, commented on the importance of support concerts. “This is what we do. We bring music to people. Even though we’re on strike, we’ve got a need to perform.”

Speaking of the concert’s enthusiastic reception, Smith continued, “It’s a confirmation of how important what we do is. We can’t do it without them [the audience], and they can’t do it without us. You could hear the applause reach out from the audience. When I stood up today, I had trouble controlling my emotions.”

William Hammer, a second-year tuba Master’s student at Carnegie Mellon University and member of the Brass Roots ensemble, explained why he attended and performed at the concert: “I came here to hear great brass musicians do their thing. Obviously, it’s for a great cause.

“The skill level will drop down if they take the cuts they [management] want. Some of the musicians are already leaving for other orchestras.

“It’s scary to see because I would always hear the phrase, ‘There’s always room at the top.’ Now, all these great orchestras are going on strike. Obviously, it’s scary for them too.”

After a WSWS reporter noted that the US spent \$6 trillion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while the budget of the National Endowment of the Arts has shrunk by two-thirds since the seventies, Hammer responded, “When the economy does bad, the first thing to go is the arts. It’s easier to cut arts than the military budget.”

The struggle of PSO musicians is of immense importance to workers and youth across the country and internationally. However, if the strike is to succeed, musicians must draw the lessons of previous symphony strikes over the past decade. From the Detroit Symphony Orchestra strike of 2010 to the Minneapolis Orchestra lockout of 2012-2013 and many others, musicians have shown resolve and willingness to fight, and gained strong public support, but nonetheless gave major concessions in the end.

A key lesson of these struggles is that nothing can be won through appeals to the wealthy and their

foundations. What is given can just as easily be taken away. The struggle to defend the arts, and public access to the arts, is fundamentally a political struggle.

Both big-business political parties are preparing major military escalations abroad, and will pay for these with savage attacks on the arts, as part of a broader offensive against the working class. Musicians have powerful allies in the working class.

In opposition to the war drive of the imperialist vandals, the Socialist Equality Party is building an international anti-war movement of the working class. We call on PSO musicians to study the program of the Socialist Equality Party and make the decision to attend our international anti-war conference in Detroit, Michigan, on November 5.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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