Musicians speak out at Pittsburgh Symphony strike support concert

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Striking Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (PSO) musicians played a free Halloween-themed concert to an overflow audience of 350 at the Kelly Strayhorn theater in Pittsburgh on Saturday, October 29.

Over sixty musicians, more than half the PSO ensemble, played classics such as Camille Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*, Edvard Grieg's *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, and *Funeral March of a Marionette* by Charles Gounod, popularized for a 20th century audience by the television show "Alfred Hitchcock Presents."

The atmosphere was lively, with numerous standing ovations throughout the performance that included an encore of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*, and a Halloween costume concert in the middle.

After the concert, musicians enthusiastically took copies of a WSWS article covering the PSO strike.

Tatjana Chamis, the associate principal viola player, with 23 years at the PSO, explained the importance of support concerts. "We're playing free concerts for the community because we don't want the music to stop because we're on strike.

"We've been pulling these together without managers. It's great to see such rousing support from the audience. I believe in this city. We've had overwhelming support.

"We're fighting to keep this a great orchestra. It's come a long way. It's at the highest level since I got here."

Tatjana expressed her opposition to management demands. "A 15 percent pay cut is huge. We're not going to get new players at the level we want them at. We're here because we want to be at the level of our peers.

"What has always impressed me about Pittsburgh is that arts and culture, the art museums and libraries, are really well-funded. I always felt like this city really values its art, until now.

"Now it's like a restaurant that starts out really good, and they start to use lower-quality ingredients because they think nobody's going to notice. They think the audience will not recognize the difference if the PSO becomes a regional instead of a national orchestra, but they will."

After a WSWS reporter noted cuts to arts programs across the country, including in schools, Tatjana argued, "It's not right to cut music programs in schools. We're really big advocates of music in school.

"For a few years, we've had benefit concerts to fund a bussing for schools that have cut bussing to our free concerts for second, fourth, and sixth graders. That fund also goes to repairing instruments at schools.

"Kids who have instruments can create something.

"When I was a kid, I was mute for awhile. Other kids made fun of me, I had an accent, and I stopped talking. That's the same time I started playing music. That was completely my voice, the violin and then the viola. If I didn't have that form of expression, that would have been terrible. I want to make sure kids have the same opportunities I did.

"When do kids year hear live music anymore? It's all through ear buds now, and it's not the same.

"Pay teachers as much as you pay athletes! People are OK playing athletes millions of dollars."

Noting the effects of cuts to arts programs, Tatjana asserted, "There's a lack of sensitivity. 'Who cares about the homeless, or refugees?' It's a lack of sensitivity. Art opens up channels that would otherwise not be there.

"There's a reason this music has lasted for hundreds of years. It touches something inside people.

"Music is something we really need to make us

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human. It’s what separates us from worker bees (although I love bees). To take that away, especially from the kids, is what I’m so against.”

Tatjana bought then bought a copy of the Mehring Books pamphlet “The Detroit Symphony Strike and the Defense of Culture in the US.” Another musician subsequently bought a copy as well.

Catherine L. Gelblum, an artist and stay-home mother, explained her reasons for attending the Halloween concert.

“I’m here because my very, very good friend is in the PSO, and I don’t want her to move out of Pittsburgh. And it’s looking pretty sad that the management and the board aren’t speaking to them about a fair deal. And I’m here to support my friend.

“I go to every concert in Heinz Hall.”

Catherine expressed gratitude for the WSWS’ coverage of the PSO strike.

In a separate interview, a steelworker at Allegheny Technologies Incorporated (ATI) with more than 25 years, a veteran of the seven-month ATI lockout of 2015-2016, expressed strong support for striking PSO musicians.

“I’m a big symphony supporter, and I’m a big music lover. It’s sad to see what’s happening. It’s happening everywhere in this country. It’s not just people in factories being affected by this. It’s terrible for Pittsburgh to lose a wonderful thing that we have. I totally support the musicians.”

The Musicians of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra have planned two more performances, entitled Bravo for Beethoven, on Sunday, November 6 and 13 at 3pm. Both are at the Carnegie Library Music Hall of Homestead.

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