

“There is widespread interest in classical music.”

Musicians, youth and workers speak in support of Chicago Symphony Orchestra strike

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The symphony hall in Chicago has fallen silent for the last two weeks as Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) musicians have gone on strike demanding better salary and guaranteed pensions. The defiance of the striking musicians has won widespread support, despite efforts by management to cut their benefits.

The WSWS spoke with striking musicians and young people this week.

David Taylor has been part of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for more than 40 years. After graduating from Juilliard, he played for five years with the Cleveland Orchestra before joining the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

“At the moment we have no scheduled meetings with the management,” Taylor said on Monday. “We wanted to meet this past Monday and they declined to meet with us and cancelled all concerts that were to take place last week. Now they have also cancelled this coming week’s concerts, including a visit from the San Francisco Symphony that was scheduled for this evening. They will be here, however, and join us on the picket line tonight.”

“Pensions have been a significant part of our benefits for a long time,” he added. “Pensions play an essential part in our remuneration. The pension is important not only to those who are already in the orchestra, but also contribute to our ability to attract new musicians who are looking to join a great orchestra.”

Taylor noted that the proposed five percent raise by management over three years was essentially a wage cut when inflation was taken into account. He noted that ticket sales are up and believes that there are sufficient funds to support the wage and pension increase demands of the musicians.

When asked about the declining funding for arts and arts education, David responded, “There is widespread interest in classical music. There is great support from the public. But there is no support from the federal government and even less so under Trump. They don’t think it’s their responsibility but

rather that of private companies and benefactors.”

In 1979, the peak federal spending on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) commanded a paltry 0.03 percent of the total budgetary outlay of the US government. Currently, the NEA budget represents an abysmal 0.0037 percent, a ten-fold decline. In the same period, adjusting for inflation, total defense spending when all federal departments are taken into account has climbed from just shy of \$600 billion to nearly \$1.4 trillion.

“We are surely one of the most respected orchestras in the world,” Taylor added. “Whenever we are compared to other orchestras we are always placed near or at the top. I recall visiting Mahler’s composing hut at Lake Attersee in Austria. They were playing in the open air a recording of Mahler’s second symphony, the Resurrection symphony. I asked who was playing it and they told me it was the Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Georg Solti. I was amazed! I was thousands of miles from home, and of all the recordings one could choose they picked ours!”

“Given our international reputation I would hate to see anything negatively impact that. We are in a difficult time. The politics and culture of the nation are very difficult. But we still have the symphony to bring joy and pleasure to thousands in the midst of this.”

“Music binds us together”

On the picket line earlier this week, two other musicians also spoke out about the fight to defend arts and culture. “We can’t exist as a society without valuing the arts,” one musician said. “Music binds us together. It’s the first thing that people reach for in a catastrophe or in a time of enormous difficulty. We were in Lucerne on 9/11 [as part of a Europe tour]. The

audience was mostly Swiss citizens, but they were so moved by our performance. They had such empathy and sympathy for us, and they went out of their way to express that.”

“Music adds to every experience because it’s such a part of life,” added another musician who is a violinist. “I have been playing since the age of four. I don’t think people understand how much you give up as a musician to perfect this craft. Even now, as we are talking about walking back and forth, our hands get cold. We should be home practicing. It takes so much dedication—there’s no day off.”

When asked what they thought about funding for the arts, another musician said, “It seems to me that in Europe the general population values music and arts more than in the US. I think it is related to the cuts to arts education in our public schools. If classical music can be on the rise in Venezuela in the poorest of neighborhoods, then clearly it demonstrates that the training and exposure at an early age has a big effect.

“Years ago, we used to present an event called ‘A Day of Music.’ We used to play free concerts. The line to the building would extend around the entire block, sometimes twice.”

“No culture has managed to exist without music”

CSO cellists Brant Taylor and Ken Olsen also spoke to the WSWS after their Monday full symphony free concert event. “It’s felt really positive being on the picket lines,” Ken said, relating the defiant music to the strike. “It’s the first time I’ve ever been on the pickets. I think it’s ridiculous that the negotiations have come to a halt. Management hasn’t expressed any willingness to even schedule any more meetings yet. I hope that changes in the next few days”

“We’re not crying poverty,” Brant said. “But the CSO is a world-class cultural institution and what does it take to maintain that? The CSO does affect what second and third-tier orchestras can hope for. So, we have led for many decades in that regard and there’s obviously a lot riding in that regard — everybody’s watching what happens here. The San Francisco Orchestra musicians cancelled their performance and they will join us on the pickets.”

Both Brant and Ken have played music since their childhood. They spoke of the formative years of intensive training and the muscle memory needed to learn their skills. Both musicians have had repetitive stress injuries over the years as well.

“Some people are injured by playing and repetitive motion—people get tendonitis, violins and violas especially get neck problems and broken shoulders,” Brant said. “I lifted some things that I shouldn’t have lifted, which gave me a case of tennis elbow, which takes many weeks to heal. The act of playing, however, has specifically aggravated it because of the way I have to move my elbow for the cello. Something about

that stretches the tendons around the elbow and for the time being I have to let them rest before they completely heal. My doctor says I can start to play a little bit in a couple weeks. I haven’t played but I came here to support my colleagues, picket and bring coffee.”

“I have had arm problems with golfer’s elbow,” Ken chimed in. “It’s something I still deal with. It’s not as bad as Brant’s injury. I took a little bit of time off a couple years ago and that made a difference. Also, the older you get, you heal slower and everything hurts. It’s very physical.”

They spoke out about the importance of music in the lives of the population. “Everybody loves music whether or not they love classical music,” Ken observed. “There’s nobody that hates music, right? No culture has managed to exist without music or survived without music. Music is so universal. You can be of any political leaning, or religion, or not religion, or anything ... and it can still speak to you.”

Both musicians spoke about the enormous costs of instruments, education and cost of living in a major city like Chicago. “In our field,” Brant said, “you can’t really choose your city. We have to go where the jobs are. String players have it worse because our instruments tend to be quite old. The cost of instrument can be up to six figures or more. And education is expensive. A lot of new musicians come with student loan debts. I luckily don’t have education or instrument debts anymore. But I remember that phase very well—being a new musician struggling. So, having a respectable salary is important. How can we guarantee new talent a future? That’s what we are fighting for.”

Kyle, a biochemistry student who plays the piano spoke favorably of the free concert Monday, “I liked the Egmont Overture they played and I support their strike. I play mostly jazz myself, but I think we should spend more money on funding for arts. There’s a lot of good things about music that most people don’t realize and it’s really important to have it as a part of your life. It’s made me a better person. It’s hard to replicate the feeling. You have to listen to a lot of music to know how to play it. I’m not very political, but I definitely think the government should be spending more on music and arts.”



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