“Music is too powerful to be silenced by tyranny”

Chicago symphony musicians host packed concerts as strike reaches turning point

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6 April 2019

Almost a month into their longest-ever strike, Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) musicians continue to host successful free public concerts to full audiences as their struggle reaches a turning point. Performances at the symphony hall have been canceled through April 9 as negotiations resumed on Friday.

The striking musicians at the world-class orchestra have received widespread support from around the world in their fight to defend their pensions, salaries and other benefits. The resistance of the musicians comes amid a mass resurgence of strikes by workers globally to fight against poverty wages and concessions, including by teachers and autoworkers. At stake is nothing less than the right to art and culture more broadly.

As part of their free concert series “From the Heart of the Orchestra,” CSO musicians on strike performed three well-attended concerts this week in the Chicago area to appeal to the public in their struggle. On Monday, the musicians performed at the Benito Juarez Performing Arts Center with a full orchestra and a rapt audience that warmly received them. On Wednesday and Friday, they held two more successful chamber concerts at Lutkin Hall in Northwestern University and at the Chicago Temple.

Entering the fourth week of their strike, the CSO musicians strike is now in the 26th day, the longest ever so far in more than 128 years of the orchestra’s history. In 1982, the musicians went on strike for more than 21 days and in 1991 they were on strike for 17 days. In 2012, the musicians went on strike for two days and ended up taking concessions on health care, paying more out of pocket. The previous contract from 2015 through 2018 also imposed salary increases below the rate of inflation.

In the current contract negotiations, management has threatened drastic changes to the pensions of CSO musicians, which would transform their defined benefit pension plan into a defined contribution plan. Such a change would force more contributions from musicians, putting their future at risk.

Multiemployer pension plans have come under attack globally by major corporations, the unions and the government. Taking a cue from such assaults on the living standards of the working class, Helen Zell—the chair of the CSO board and the wife of billionaire asset stripper Sam Zell (net wealth $5.5 billion)—claims that it is not financially viable to adequately fund and manage the musicians’ pensions. According to the board, pension payments will rise to over $36 million in the coming years.

Stephen Lester, who chairs the musicians negotiating committee, previously told the *Chicago Tribune* that the CSO Board has over $300 million in endowment funds as well as an additional $60 million in their investment fund, indicating that there is plenty of money to fund the pensions of the musicians adequately.

Despite this, the Chicago Federation of Musicians (CFM) which covers the musicians has said that they are willing to make concessions on pension benefits as negotiations resume. Speaking to the *Tribune* earlier this week, Lester said they have made a “compromise proposal” which would “establish a base floor kind of benefit that our members can have.” Also, still unresolved is the issue of salary, according to Lester. The Board is proposing a 5 percent raise over the next three years, a wage cut when adjusted for inflation. The CFM had previously proposed a 12.5 percent increase.

CSO musicians should not be forced to accept any more concessions. The musicians took concessions on health care and salaries in previous contracts, as well as reductions in the number of orchestra musicians from 111 to 106 in the 2004-2007 contract.

The billionaires, wealth managers and bankers who control the CSO board no longer see funding for the arts as necessary and would rather trim costs at the expense of artists, musicians and the wider population. Such changes have broad implications that would further accelerate the assault on art and culture by the financial aristocracy and the ruling class, as ever greater wealth is concentrated in fewer hands at the top.

Museums, orchestras and arts organizations across the globe have seen massive budget cuts since the global financial crisis of 2008-2009. Numerous orchestra musicians around the country make as little as $30,000 a year today, akin to the poverty wages faced by many teachers and workers across the country and internationally.

Arts, culture and education funding have increasingly come under attack by the financial aristocracy along with both Democratic and Republican parties in the US government. Funding for the arts today by the National Endowment for the Arts is at miserly levels of around $152 million, amounting to the cost of a single F-22 raptor fighter jet.

The performances by the musicians this week highlight the immense interest in music and art by workers, students, professionals and people of varied backgrounds. Concerts by the full orchestra of striking musicians this week included complex pieces of music by Mozart and Beethoven, including the defiant Egmont Overture and the magnificent and heroic Seventh Symphony, which they also played last week.

“We bring joy to an audience”

On Wednesday, Yuan-Qing Yu, Blair Milton (violins), Wei-Ting Kuo (viola), Ken Olsen (cello) and J. Lawrie Bloom (clarinet) presented a smaller chamber concert at Lutkin Hall on the campus of Northwestern University. The musicians carried themselves with levity at times, laughing at each other and with the audience, and yet with an appropriate degree of seriousness and gravity with regards to the situation they

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confront.

They performed Jean-Marie Leclair's Sonata No. 3 for Two Violins, Op. 6, in C Major, Beethoven's String Trio, Op. 9, No. 1 in G Major and Carl Maria von Weber's Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet in B Flat Major, Op. 34. The sold-out crowd stood at its feet at the end of the stirring performance.

Musicians, students and workers spoke to the WSWS about the strike of CSO musicians and their reasons for attending after the concert.

Clarinetist J. Lawrie Bloom said, "One of the things you can't help feeling during a strike is that your abilities are being questioned, your value is being rated. You are being told you're not worth what you've been promised. This to a group of musicians who have dedicated themselves for a lifetime to attaining the level of artistry that makes it possible for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to be generally recognized as one of the greatest orchestras on the face of the earth, and a cultural jewel in the city of Chicago."

He added, "So getting back on stage at Lutkin Hall with colleagues was a needed change from the picket line, to reaffirm that the reason the Chicago Symphony Orchestra has attained its place in the orchestral pantheon is because of the level and constant work ethic of its members. In our program our full-house audience heard two fabulous violinists featured in a duo of amazing difficulty, and beauty. The Beethoven Trio was so moving and such a perfectly blended show of three magnificent players working together as a team, something that seems to be a rare thing to find in our politically divided nation."

Bloom also spoke about the reason for performing the difficult Weber piece in the context of the strike. Carl Maria von Weber (1786 – 1823) was a German composer in the Romantic period of music who would go on to influence composers such as Mendelssohn, Debussy, Wagner, Stravinsky and Mahler. Weber was one of the first composers known to borrow from other cultural traditions, including Chinese and other Asian themes.

"I chose the Weber Clarinet Quintet," Bloom said, "first because it is joyous and engaging for an audience. Weber covers human emotions as only a Romantic period composer seems to be able to, from the busy, frenetic opening movement, the lovely, introspective slow movement, the 'dance' of the menuetto, and the sheer fun of the finale."

Bloom's performance of Weber's composition was bright and lively, with reverberant sounds of his clarinet carrying through the hall punctuated by the strings of his colleagues. The piece begins with an energetic first movement, followed by a melancholic and slightly somber adagio changing quickly to a hopeful tune. The gravity of the cello and the strings had an element of storm and stress, followed by a menuetto with dance-like moments. The concluding rondo was jaunty and vibrant, fast and quick-stepped with dramatic turns.

"As a clarinetist," Bloom observed, "it is always a challenge to approach Weber. One of my clarinet colleagues asked me the day before the concert why I had chosen the Weber. I said I love that piece. He remarked that he loved it too, but 'it's hard!' I think that may have been part of wanting to present it during a strike situation. We can still play. We may be often filled with sadness at this impasse, we may feel like we are being undervalued, but we can still play, and bring joy to an audience."

Allison is a student of Bloom's at Northwestern University and she came with students and friends to support the musicians. "I came out here," she said, "to support my mentors and people who I look up to. And to support my ideal of what musicians deserve. These people work so hard. They work so hard to make incredible music. They deserve everything financially in return."

Allison also spoke out against cuts to arts funding. "There definitely needs to be more funding for the arts," she said. "I know professional musicians who have to work multiple jobs just to feed their families and make a living. That's incredibly taxing on them. They don't get a lot of time to spend with their family because they don't have a lot of down time between practices. I try to practice three to five hours a day on top of music classes. I'm sure Laurie practices much more than I do, considering the level that he's at. It definitely does take a lot of work."

"I think the world would be a very, very sad place without music," Allison's friend Thea added about the attack on the arts and culture.

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Violinist Blair Milton, who performed the lively Leclair Sonata and the Weber Quintet on Wednesday, said, "The stress of the CSO strike is being felt by every musician, but we feel the same unity that bonds us onstage as musicians. We are a team and always seek to blend with our fellow musicians, naturally in our art, but also as colleagues in life. Walking the picket line together, we have time to connect in a personal way that isn't available during the concentration of rehearsals and performances."

"All the orchestra members," Milton added, "share a passion for music and a calling to share this gift with our audience. But we also share a commitment to protect this great treasure for future generations. The amount of lifelong sacrifice, blended with the joy we feel filling the world with music, is something all true music lovers appreciate. In giving these concerts, we are connecting with our dedicated supporters and spreading our wings after hours of pounding the pavement in the brutal cold. Music is too powerful to be silenced by tyranny, greed, or indifference."

Angelica, a high school student who traveled more than two hours to see the concert, spoke out in defense of the musicians. "They are world-class musicians. I think changes made to the whole orchestra's pensions without their consent is unreasonable, considering the recognition they have across the globe. Musicians definitely don't always get the recognition they deserve. They go out there and make it look easy. You don't always see the hours of practice, the money they put into their instruments and their craft overall."

She also spoke out in favor of greater funding and access to the arts, noting, "Funding overall in the US is mishandled, including the military. We should reassess how we fund the military and fund programs like the arts instead. Inequality is a big issue. I think those in poverty areas who don't have access to in-school orchestras should get an arts education as well. It will not only help their economic situation but it's good for your soul. I cannot imagine a world without music. It makes you feel something that you don't normally feel."

There is widespread support for the musicians, as evidenced by the numerous successful free concerts they have hosted. However, the trade unions have largely isolated the struggle of the musicians while issuing empty statements of support. Over the last four decades, the unions have imposed concessions and sellout contracts upon thousands of workers, creating conditions of immense poverty and social misery. A society where three billionaires control more than half of the wealth of this country can no longer afford the rich. Art and music, let alone the living conditions of the vast majority, cannot endure under such conditions.

There is an enormous desire to fight back against social inequality by the working class. CSO musicians should appeal to teachers, autoworkers, graduate students and other sections of workers in the fight to defend art, culture and the social rights of the working class. Such a struggle is above all a political struggle that will require the rational reorganization of society on the basis of a socialist program against the capitalist system, which increasingly imperils all of humanity with the dangers of war, fascism and social counterrevolution.

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