

“Everyone should have access to great arts education”

Musicians Emma Gerstein and Max Raimi speak on Chicago Symphony Orchestra strike

Our reporters
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Striking Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) musicians Emma Gerstein, Max Raimi, Karen Basrak and Rong-Yan Tang gave a free, well-attended public performance on April 20. The remarkable strike concert took place before a packed house at the Flatts and Sharpe music store in the Rogers Park neighborhood.

The longest ever strike by CSO musicians has reached a critical juncture with the intervention of outgoing Chicago Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel. While he has remained silent on the strike up to this point, Emanuel has a record of defending the interests of the corporate and financial elite as mayor. The CSO board and management, which is demanding a ruthless overhaul of the musicians’ pensions by imposing a 401(k) style plan, also has close political and financial ties to Emanuel.

On Friday evening Emanuel announced that he had worked out a deal with the musicians and the board. Whatever the nature of the deal, which has not been made public, musicians and workers should be extremely wary. Sam Zell—husband of the chair of the CSO board, Helen Zell—donated over \$300,000 to Emanuel in previous election cycles. Robert Kohl, another member of the board and also a member of Emanuel’s election campaign team, has donated over \$28,000 to the mayor.

Musicians should be prepared to reject any concessions deal brokered by the mayor and fight to expand their struggle by appealing to the broadest sections of workers to break the isolation being imposed by the trade unions, which have not lifted a finger in their support.

World Socialist Web Site writer Jeff Lusanne spoke to flutist Emma Gerstein and violist Max Raimi about the broader issues in the strike last week.

Jeff Lusanne: Tell us about your strike and what the issues are?

Emma Gerstein: The strike began six weeks ago, almost seven weeks ago. The main issues are wages and retirement benefits. The CSO has had a pension benefit for the past 50 years and they are trying to change that to something more like a 401(k).

Max Raimi: We were playing under our old contract since the season began in mid-September. They decided that there’s some people left in the world that have a pension and that’s not the way they feel the world should be.

That’s my take on it, because they’re not saving all that much money with the defined-contribution stuff they want to do. I think it’s ideological. The other issue: we’ve always been one of the preeminent orchestras in the world because we always had this great contract. People would come from other orchestras all over the country and the world. The last couple of negotiations our contract started slipping behind other orchestras, now it’s significantly behind, for example, Los Angeles and San Francisco. A lot of those orchestras still have well-funded pensions.

I try to imagine being on that stage and going ‘Well, we played OK.

Boston would have played a little better. San Francisco would have played a little better.’ It’s inconceivable! But that’s our management’s attitude. No, we can’t provide them with what our counterparts do, but that’s ok, we’re fine with being second rate.

JL: Why is the attack on pensions and salaries important to fight?

EG: There are a few other orchestras with higher wages than us and a defined-benefit pension plan. To remain competitive with those orchestras we have to keep that. Otherwise, the CSO, which used to be a destination orchestra, will become a stepping stone to a better job.

Max Raimi: Their side is a black box. They seem monolithic. It’s possible they are not. I imagine there are people on their side that see what is going on and are not real happy about it. If not, then we’re screwed. If they are really that nihilistic that they don’t care if they destroy the orchestra or not, then we have no leverage.

JL: How did you react to the “last, best and final” offer by management?

EG: I trust our negotiating committee. They are doing an amazing job. They all recommended against voting on it. They find it insulting. I have to put my faith in them and they are looking out for all of us and our best interests.

MR: We do know it’s not acceptable. It’s interesting because I’m fully vested. They can’t take my pension away. Looking at it from a totally self-interested point, I’m nuts! I should just take their offer because there’s no way I’m going to make this money I’ve lost.

I think for a lot of the trustees, money is their lodestar. You see how they conduct business. They are willing to hurt people and destroy families, so they can have \$3 billion instead of \$2 billion. I mean, I don’t understand it. It’s like reading about some Aztec human sacrifice thing. How can people do that?

But there’s people on their side that are that way. It’s incomprehensible to them that (veterans) say, ‘Yes, it’s good for us but it’s not good for our colleagues and people who aren’t in the orchestra yet and it’s not what we envision the CSO to be.’ Even though it’s not in our best financial interest [to be on strike], you’ve got to have something in your life more important than your net worth.

JL: What did you think about the piece by Lawrence Johnson in the *Chicago Classical Review* attacking the CSO musicians?

EG: It made me really upset that someone I considered a lover of music really doesn’t seem to love the musicians. I found that upsetting. The fact that he kept comparing what we do to the business world ... Well, we are not in the business world. We are a not-for-profit. I don’t really feel like you can compare our retirement benefits to someone who works at a bank. It’s just a very different job. The interview process is very different.

For us, we are spending thousands of dollars every time we take an audition. I for one took close to thirty auditions before I won my CSO job.

I don't want to think about how much money I spent just to win my job. This is supposed to be the end-all-be-all of jobs for me. I intend to be here for 35 years and I would like to retire with dignity.

JL: When did you join the CSO and what made you want to join?

EG: I joined more than two years ago in 2017. I grew up in Chicago in Hyde Park. I moved all around. The orchestra job I had prior to this was in Auckland, New Zealand. It was really great, but there was an opening in the CSO. My predecessor had been in the orchestra for, I think, 40 years. These openings don't happen very often. You have to wait for someone to retire, maybe change careers or, in the worst-case scenario, maybe even die for the job to open up. There was an opening and I went for it. And it was one of the best days of my life when I won that job.

MR: I was a freelancer in New York and I realized guys 10-15 years older than me weren't doing any better than I was and a secure life was impossible. I realized that if I wanted to have a secure dignified middle-class life, the institutions that were providing that were the major orchestras.

So, I looked around and Chicago sounded great. I took a shot in the dark. I won the audition and Georg Solti [director of the CSO from 1969 – 1991] hired me and until recently I thought I had it made.

JL: What was it like playing under Solti?

He was a force of nature. He was this kinetic force. It was kind of rock 'n' roll. The rhythm was driving and relentless. In a way it was easy because you just went. With Daniel Barenboim [CSO music director from 1991 – 2004], it was more the rhythms of speech and more flexible ... It was a lot of adrenalin.

JL: How long have you been playing?

EG: Since I was 8. I'm 32 now. It's like another limb for me at this point.

JL: What is some of your favorite music that you have played?

EG: One of my favorite composers would have to be Mahler. I love the lushness and the big sound he gets from the whole orchestra. I love being surrounded by the big sound of the orchestra. I have always liked being immersed in that sound rather than playing a solo. Playing in this section—I'm second flute—it really suits me. Any of the Mahler symphonies are my favorites. Also Debussy and Ravel—the French impressionists—are really fun to play as well.

MR: I love Sibelius, Mahler. It depends who's conducting. If you have a Nordic guy who understands Sibelius, that's really cool. Or an old Viennese guy who has this pipeline into Schubert and Mahler. I guess, I have no favorites. There are a few composers I don't particularly like, but a whole lot I love.

JL: Why is such music important to you?

EG: It's a connection with history and the past. It's great art that we get to experience now. It's like going to see a Shakespeare play or going to see a really beautiful painting at a museum. There's something about it we really connect with, which is why it has stood the test of all these hundreds of years. It's something people can connect with even if they don't have a musical education. They can feel something you can't express in words.

JL: There's a huge cultural value to music. Yet there's the claim that there isn't money for arts and culture. Do you have any thoughts on that?

EG: Yes, a great example is the fire at Notre Dame. People came to the aid of that situation with billions of dollars. I'm not saying the CSO is a more or less worthy cause. I do think the Notre Dame is an important cultural landmark. When people care about something, they will open up their checkbooks.

JL: I do think in general a large amount of the population cares a lot. But in the case of Notre Dame too, there was the sudden influx of hundreds of millions of dollars. There's the role of the aristocratic principle more and more in funding culture. What do you think?

EG: I had a job in New Zealand where most of the funding came from

the government. The job wasn't as prestigious as the CSO. We didn't really record or tour. But there was still this feeling that the government has got us, there's always going to be funding. Obviously in America, there's a different set-up. We rely heavily on philanthropy, and we're extremely grateful to the people who give. Historically, the board was made up of people who really love music and that's why they give money. I've heard in recent years it's turned more corporate and there's less of a connection with the individuals on the board and the music. Now they do it because it looks good among their friends.

JL: That's an interesting point. Obviously, there's always the risk of censorship or the feelings of the donors involved in terms of what they will fund. Knowing that culture relies on education and youth being exposed to it, did you follow the teachers' strikes in the last year?

EG: A little bit. Definitely, the one in Los Angeles. Both of my parents worked for Chicago Public Schools. They were teachers and administrators both. They're both retired now and they have pensions—which they're extremely grateful for. I've seen how these labor disputes have affected my parents directly and also how coming out of better contracts made their lives better. I have a personal connection with teachers.

JL: Los Angeles is certainly one of those places. Denver, Chicago, previously, West Virginia. There's a real fight against the cutbacks against education and arts education. I recently discovered that CPS outsourced arts education to Ingenuity, a third-party source, who find random groups to teach a program for a session, and that's it.

EG: That's not enough. It's a real shame. Part of the problem is all of these charter schools too. A lot of super-rich people will give money to charter schools, but not to the public schools. Poorer neighborhoods don't get their funding. It's not fair. Everyone should have access to education and great arts education.

JL: In terms of these more frequent fights by teachers and workers to fight back, do you see any connection between these struggles and yours?

EG: If there's a teachers' strike, I plan to be on their picket lines to show my support. We're fighting for similar things. Pushing back against the super-wealthy and we've had enough.

JL: Do you see—this is a little bit of a more complicated question—but we have also the rise of far-right-wing and nationalist movements. Do you see any role in music in combating nationalism, inequality and oppression?

EG: Certain composers who are long dead wrote about these things, Mahler being one of them. Beethoven definitely—kind of just sticking it to the man. The music still resonates today because it speaks to those issues. I don't think we're directly necessarily doing anything, but still continuing to play music is putting good energy out in the world. We have people in the orchestra from lots of different countries and lots of different backgrounds. It's also been neat to meet people on the picket lines from Japan, Mexico and across the world to come to Chicago for one reason, you know?

JL: Does the cultural work of the orchestra resonate in the context of the growth of right-wing movements?

MR: We were naive as artists. We're in this bubble. Surely, we thought, they won't hurt us. But, yes, there's evil in the land. I don't know how else to put it. And it was naive to think that it wasn't going to hit us. The other thing I'll say is, people know they are getting screwed and the politicians incite rage. Trump didn't come out of nowhere. It didn't turn out to be a great solution, but it was people saying screw you.

There is this feeling [among a social layer] that wealth is its own justification. I don't know many of the trustees. I met Helen Zell and, well, enough said. I do think there is a feeling that 'I have wealth and power and I can bend the world to my will.' It really started with Reagan, this idea that paying taxes is punishment. 'We don't want to pay you any more than I have to and I can have a perfectly good orchestra for less

money. And I've got better things to do with my money than spend it on my community.'

Musicians, workers and supporters interested in learning more about the fight to defend art and culture and the CSO musicians strike are encouraged to contact us and receive our email newsletter.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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