Baltimore Symphony Orchestra cancels summer program, locks out musicians

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On Thursday, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (BSO) management abruptly announced the cancellation of the orchestra's summer programming. The decision, effective June 16, will cut the BSO's performing season from 52 weeks to 40 and will result in the elimination of the BSO's *New Music Festival* (June 20-22), its July 4th-related celebrations, performances by jazz vocalist Leslie Odom Jr. and other popular events.

The shortening of the performance season will result in a nearly 20 percent loss of pay and shortened vacation time for the orchestra's musicians, who have been working without a contract since January of this year. Many BSO performers had arranged to perform in the orchestra's summer series and now face the prospect of being jobless for the summer.

Citing over $16 million in losses incurred by the orchestra over the last decade, BSO CEO and president Peter Kjome released a press statement, claiming that the "decisions were extremely difficult to make and were not entered into lightly, but they are the right ones if the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra is going to continue to exist as a nationally renowned organization."

Signaling BSO management's intention of imposing the full burden of the losses on the players themselves, Kjome's statement added, "If the BSO is going to survive, our business model needs to change, and that change begins in earnest today … We look forward to working with our musicians as we navigate this change and prepare for a future that is strong and vibrant."

The cancellation occurs just weeks after the BSO announced its summer schedule and began accepting reservations. While the BSO has put pressure on musicians to accept lower pay and reduced vacation benefits, it has seen an increase in ticket sales and donations this year.

In February, the Maryland legislature passed a bill which would have allotted $3.2 million in state funds to the orchestra to sustain it another two years. However, in announcing the new cancellations, the BSO management declared the previously requested amount was now inadequate.

In another comment, Kjome said, "In hindsight, we feel we could have shared more information over the years about the financial problems we've had … We wanted to present a summer season, as we typically do, but the summer season has not proven to be financially viable." He went on to assert that "the proposed move to a 40-week season … would cause us to make great progress toward a sustainable business model that would result in balanced budgets."

On Friday, Baltimore city lawmakers urged Maryland's Republican governor Larry Hogan to release half of the previously agreed upon $3.2 million package to provide short-term financial cushioning. Hogan, for his part, has been reluctant to offer the funds, citing a predicted $961 million state budget deficit in the coming fiscal year. As a result, the current status of the BSO is unlikely to be resolved without significant cuts.

The BSO, founded in 1916 at the time of an upsurge in US manufacturing and Baltimore's booming steel and shipping industry, was once the only major American symphony orchestra established as an arm of the local municipal government. It became a private organization in 1942, but retained close ties to the state and local government. Throughout the 20th century, the BSO was home to world-renowned musicians, with the symphony orchestra hosting numerous premieres. Its music directors have included Gustav Strube, Ernest Schelling, Werner Janssen, Massimo Freccia, David

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The BSO's musicians, many of whom were not consulted by management before the announcement, were appalled. On Friday, representatives of the symphony orchestra's players' committee released a statement Friday, declaring: "The timing of this decision to cut the orchestra by 20% by BSO board and management is the most disturbing aspect of this development … The BSO's president and CEO Peter Kjome and board chair Barbara Bozzuto have done all of this after stating publicly that they would not lock out the musicians. We find this disingenuous, unconscionable and irresponsible."

BSO musicians received a prolonged standing ovation at a concert Friday. Percussionist Brian Pechtl addressed audience members, explaining that "We are stunned and grieved on behalf of our beloved BSO … We will keep making music with passion as long as management keeps the lights on and the doors unlocked." The musicians then proceeded with an unscheduled performance of Edward Elgar's somber "Nimrod" from his *Enigma Variations* (1899), a piece often played at funerals and memorial services.

Comments beneath the most recent entries on the BSO's Facebook page reveal the outrage of the orchestra's supporters at the decision. "Instead of waging war on the people that actually make the music for the symphony perhaps the board should look inward and look at its responsibility to fund raise and hire a ceo that does not run finances into the ground. How much is overhead for the orchestra and how much of that can be directed toward the people who are the heart and lungs of the music that the orchestra makes," reads one commenter.

"[W]hat is this nonsense about your abrupt season cancellation (right after getting money from the state legislature?!?!) Some of the Baltimore Symphony Musicians heard about it only through social media. Ever hear of good faith? Duplicity? Learn anything from the experience of the Minnesota Orchestra?" stated another.

The announcement of plans to cut performances and pay of BSO musicians comes amid similar efforts to attack the well-being of orchestra musicians throughout the US, including recently in Chicago as well as Detroit . Audiences and workers are incessantly told "there is no money" to sustain symphony orchestras, museums, monuments, parks, zoos and other cultural centers or institutions.

In this context, the excuses of Republican governor Larry Hogan that state funding for the BSO will take away from minimally funded social programs should be rejected with contempt. Less than a year ago, the state, with Hogan's blessing, offered Amazon the largest incentive package in the state's history to lure Amazon's "HQ2" headquarters to Maryland's Washington, D.C. suburbs, where the technology corporation would have ease of access to the military-intelligence apparatus.

For their part, the state's Democratic Party politicians, also highly accommodating to the interests of big business, have stated their efforts to approve legislative funding for the BSO are predicated upon the appointment of a task force to assess ways of cutting expenses and making the orchestra "fiscally sustainable."

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