Classical musicians discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

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As weeks become months following the imposition of economic and cultural lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the resumption of live music performance remains an increasing question mark.

Capitalist governments everywhere are pushing a back-to-work campaign in industry and other sectors of the economy, even though it will mean an untold number of deaths. In the field of classical music, however, "back to work" comes up against the obvious necessity for large audiences in venues of 1,000, 2,000, 3,000 seats or even more. One does not have to think very long about the reluctance of audiences to turn out for such events, under conditions where there is not yet any treatment or vaccine for COVID-19, or the serious internationally coordinated campaign to get the disease under control.

Amidst the accelerating bipartisan US back-to-work campaign, governments such as that headed by New York State Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo are forced to indirectly acknowledge this reality. In the tentative plan he announced on Monday, Cuomo suggested four stages of reopening, beginning with manufacturing and certain retail stores on May 15. Cinemas, theaters and large musical venues would be in the final stage, weeks later, assuming the state figures for coronavirus infection continue to decline.

This proposal ignores the obvious reality that COVID-19 cases in New York are flattening rather than sharply falling, and that New York is not insulated from the rapid growth of infection rates in other parts of the country. Equally if not more important, the return to work and economic activity before the disease has been controlled will inevitably lead—as medical sources warn and as the political representatives of the ruling class are well aware—to a continuing and even more devastating wave of illness and death.

To say that the resumption of live performance is uncertain under these conditions would be a great understatement. This highlights the plight of musicians everywhere.

There are ten or 15 very well-known symphony orchestras in the United States—based in Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Seattle, Houston, New York and other cultural centers. They have of course been forced to cancel their seasons and have no clear idea of whether they will be able to proceed in the fall.

There are about 1,200 other symphony orchestras in the United States, however, located in mid-sized and even small towns, and at colleges and universities. The tens of thousands of musicians in these smaller orchestras, not to mention the large number who have freelance careers, face threats to their careers and livelihoods even greater than their counterparts at the well-known institutions.

The WSWS spoke to a number of classical musicians, in both Europe and the US, on their own work as well as the fundamental issues raised by the pandemic.

Christian, a baritone based in Berlin who specializes in music of the Baroque period, explained how his career had been interrupted:

"I am not allowed to give any concerts until the end of August. I have lost almost 12,000 euros [$US 13,011] in income thus far. Four concert engagements were canceled. I received a compensation from the Berlin Senate that covered less than half of these losses.

"The federal funds can only be used to cover operating expenses and commercial expenses, but freelance artists don't have any such expenses. You are not allowed to use these funds to cover living expenses and compensate for lost income. So basically, we don't get anything from it. Only [the states of] Berlin, North Rhine-Westphalia and Bremen have given artists something, but if you don't live in any of those regions, you're really out of luck.

"I expect to lose another 4,000 or 5,000 euros in income in the coming months. If concerts resume in the fall, many of them will take place at a later date, but we don't know what's going to happen. If concerts do not resume, I will have to file for unemployment benefits starting in August."

Christian explained that the Initiative of Cultural Workers in Germany had issued an open letter appealing for an immediate relief program for those affected by pandemic cancellations and closures, asking for a guaranteed monthly income of 1,180 euros for all.

"You cannot earn any money from streaming music. If people had a basic income of say 1,100 euros—even though that is not a lot—maybe you could ask everyone to donate before they access the stream. Right now, musicians who put on their work online earn nothing.

"I did a 'ghost concert' in an empty church, but we only gathered perhaps 30-40 percent of what we usually would make because we don't get any money from tickets. Even a sold-out concert at the Berlin Philharmonic does not cover costs. These concerts always have to be supported by the state. The worst thing though is that I horribly miss it [singing at concerts].

"Capitalism is demonstrating that it cannot handle this crisis—or, rather, it can handle it, but only at the cost of enormous sacrifices. Those who were doing poorly before are doing even worse now,

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while the bosses of Amazon and similar companies will emerge only strengthened."

Jeremy Epp, a percussionist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), told the WSWS:

"I'm fortunate to have an employer who is able to compensate me at a reduced rate for the next several months, but I anticipate losing several opportunities for supplemental income, and what happens if some measure of social distancing continues beyond the summer is unclear. I've put off a house purchase until I have more certainty about my financial situation, and I know of many freelance colleagues whose circumstances are direr.

"We're likely to get a more complete picture of how our country could have better prepared for the pandemic in time, but it appears that there was an opportunity to learn lessons from countries that faced COVID-19 before we did, and to take steps that would have mitigated its impact here.

"Beyond that, the pandemic raises questions about how underlying conditions affected the virus spread, whether they're about how we deal with poverty and the unemployed, or how our healthcare system compares to those of other countries.

"The DSO has been among the leaders in streaming orchestra concerts, but there's still opportunity for growth and expanded audiences. We know there will be an appetite for live performance again—it's a greatly enhanced experience compared to watching a recording or a live stream—and there's an opportunity for growth with the new audiences our online offerings attract. We've been heartened to see how many people are turning to the arts for comfort and connection."

Gregory Near, a musician in the Detroit area, said:

"I retired in the Spring of 2019 from playing trombone in the Michigan Opera Theatre [MOT] Orchestra, due to a neurological condition known as Musician Focal Dystonia of the Embouchure. The American Federation of Musicians Employee Pension Fund [AFM-EPF] has been underfunded for a number of years, and cuts to our monthly pensions are expected by 2021.

"I'm very concerned that the almost complete stop of live performances, and therefore contributions to the Fund, will put its future in jeopardy. My colleagues at MOT have all been sidelined for the 2020 Spring Season, and the Fall Season appears to be in doubt. These musicians have had to find creative ways to continue working, through online teaching and performances, for which donations are appreciated."

Asked about some of the broader issues raised by COVID-19, he replied:

"The failure to respond quickly with appropriate plans and stockpiles of supplies has resulted in an overwhelming of our already insane health care system. The lack of a national health care system that includes all people has resulted in job losses, followed by health insurance losses and ending in unnecessary deaths. Now we are faced with [mass] unemployment, millions sheltering at home, schools closed, and only 'essential' businesses open. Desperation is leading those unable to absorb their economic burdens to demand a premature opening of the world to resumption of work, which could lead to further spread of the virus and death. This points to a cascading failure of the whole capitalist system, when profits are put before people.

"I watched and listened to the live At-Home Gala put on by the Metropolitan Opera, in which those who sing from the stage, those who make their instruments sing from the pit, and those who make sewing machines sing from the costume department, are sheltering in their homes around the world and performing via the Internet. I don't yet know how this way to reach an audience will develop and change how we move forward from here. But with this pandemic as background, these vignettes of artists performing and sharing their stories from home, desperate to return to work, reveals a side of what it is to be a performing artist that few have seen before. This can only be viewed as life-affirming!"

The experiences of musicians and artists everywhere demonstrate that there can be no return to the *status quo ante* in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The austerity of the period following the 2008 financial crash is only the prelude to what will be coming in the wake of the current economic catastrophe, one that was triggered by COVID-19, but by no means caused by it. The concession demands that led to some bitter struggles at US orchestras in the past decade are nothing compared to what artists will be facing in the very near future.

While classical artists must fight, alongside all sections of the working class, for full compensation for income lost in the current crisis, this must be connected to a broader turn on their part to the working class and to objective social reality. There can be no avoiding the issues that are posed by the calamity that capitalism has produced. There can be no abstention from the enormous struggles that are on the horizon.

These are issues that cannot be confronted on a local or national basis, nor can they be resolved by calls for "shared sacrifice." It is the profit system itself that is leading humanity to disaster, and the only answer must be the unification of every section of the working class, including professional and cultural workers, in the struggle for socialism.

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