

Orchestra, opera musicians face severe pay cuts, furloughs, uncertainty in the midst of the pandemic

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The coronavirus pandemic continues to wreak havoc on artistic and cultural life. As the WSWS has repeatedly argued, however, the pandemic acts in many regards as an accelerant or amplifier, speeding up processes already under way. This is also true in the cultural sphere.

In the US, for example, the management of various orchestras, operas, museums and other institutions and cultural organizations are taking full advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to press forward with their demands as part of an offensive for pay and other cuts that has under way for more than a decade.

As long ago as 2010, the WSWS reported that pay cuts had already been “imposed at symphony orchestras in Phoenix, Houston, Cincinnati, Seattle, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Baltimore, Atlanta, Virginia, North Carolina and Utah, among other cities and states.” Orchestras in Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago and elsewhere have since faced major attacks—prior to the coronavirus outbreak.

In the current crisis, musicians and others no doubt hope that with the end of the pandemic what has been given up will be restored. That remains to be seen, but it is certain that nothing will be regained without an enormous struggle, with far-reaching political and social implications. Management may well side with Lady Macbeth, who reasoned that “what’s done cannot be undone.”

The musicians of the San Francisco Symphony are among the most recent to become victims of the combined effect of the pandemic and management action. The *San Francisco Chronicle* recently reported that the musicians would “take a 30 percent pay cut for the remainder of 2020 under the terms of a newly

ratified contract revision” that went into effect October 18.

Management reported November 2 that the symphony had recorded a “cumulative revenue loss of \$40 million by the end of the 2020-21 season as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.” All of the orchestra’s live performances through the end of the calendar year have been canceled.

The *Chronicle* and symphony management take for granted that the musicians should see their living standards slashed. The San Francisco Symphony Board of Governors, however, is not some anonymous institution carrying out unavoidable measures in an impartial, godlike manner. It is composed in large measure of extremely affluent individuals, a good number of whom could afford to make up the revenue loss out of their own pockets, and not notice the difference.

Picking out symphony board members almost at random, one comes across enormous wealth. One of the members, for example, is Gordon P. Getty, of the Getty oil family, among the wealthiest individuals in the US, with a net worth of \$2.1 billion. Another board member is Gregory E. Johnson, of Franklin Resources, perennially on the list of most highly compensated executives, whose total compensation was \$10.4 million in 2019. John D. Goldman, multimillionaire insurance executive and major donor to the Democratic Party, sits on the board as well.

Michael Anders, also on the Board of Governors, is the founder of Iconiq Capital, referred to in the media as the “family office of tech billionaires,” including most prominently Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg. John S. Chen, who was rewarded by BlackBerry in 2018

with a five-year contract including compensation valued at close \$150 million in total, is also on the symphony's board, along with Kausik Rajgopal, a senior partner at McKinsey & Company, the prominent management consulting firm, and Max Levchin, Ukrainian-born American software engineer and businessman, with an estimated worth of \$300 million.

Meanwhile, the financial bloodletting for the artists continues. In September, the members of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra had a 50 percent salary cut imposed on them under the terms of a contract modification. The opera's General Director Matthew Shilvock gushed that the organization was "profoundly grateful to the Orchestra for its partnership in facing this pandemic."

However, according to the *Chronicle*, percussionist Patti Niemi, speaking for the musicians, commented that the latter "faced a grim choice between ratifying the agreement and losing their income and health benefits entirely." Niemi noted that the musicians "had been hoping to collaborate" and come up with an agreement that only covered the period during which they were not performing, "But suddenly there was this pivot to issues like the orchestral vacancies that are unrelated to COVID." She pointed out, furthermore, that management "also objected to a contract provision that would restore the salary cuts if ticket sales rebound in 2022-23."

Dozens of orchestras exacted major pay cuts and furloughs in March and April, including the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Detroit Symphony and many smaller ensembles. Some have come back for more.

The members of the Philadelphia Orchestra approved a deal in mid-October that reduced their compensation to 75 percent of normal pay retroactively to September 12 and through the middle of March 2021.

Members of New York's famed Metropolitan Opera orchestra have been without any income since the onset of the pandemic. On Facebook in mid-October, the musicians asserted they were "the only world-class orchestra in America furloughed with no pay since 1 April."

The Facebook post explains that already some 30 percent "of the orchestra members have been faced with moving outside of the #NewYorkCity area with many more families being forced to make challenging

decisions each day due to the lack of economic compensation from the Metropolitan Opera and the lack of economic support from the Federal Government." The Met musicians point out that the opera company's "global reputation and the cultural landscape of New York City would be devastated by the loss of artists of this calibre. The social, educational, and economic impact these musicians have on their communities is immeasurable."

Met management counters by arguing that the opera "has been paying 100 percent of the cost of health care since the pandemic began and has also offered financial assistance from now until the summer as part of long-term contract proposals."

The third horn of the Met's orchestra, Brad Gemeinhardt, in a Zoom call from Michigan, told NBC News bluntly that "I would call this an enormous crisis in the artistic world in New York."

Met orchestra principal flute Chelsea Knox told Classic FM: "I gave birth during the final performance at The Met on 11 March, 2020. I had only just received tenure for my job in the spring of 2019 and for me the Met Orchestra is my dream job." When the pandemic hit, she explains, Knox and her husband, also a musician, "were suddenly faced with leaving our apartment and moving in with my parents to sort out our plan going forward as a family."

"Emotionally the loss of identity has been as challenging as the loss of income," Knox observes. "I expected new motherhood to be life altering, but being isolated with a baby and with no performances scheduled for the next year it has been hard to find balance. I'm not sure what my future as a musician looks like right now."

This is an increasingly universal experience.



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