

New York Metropolitan Opera replaces orchestra members with non-Met performers

Shannon Jones
5 January 2021

In a further escalation of its attacks on its orchestra musicians, the Metropolitan Opera hired outside replacements for its annual New Year's Eve gala, this year held in Berlin.

The Met's New Year's Eve gala is a regular fundraising event where wealthy donors are feted with a selection of operatic arias and ensembles by top performers. This year the Met snubbed its musicians, who have not been paid since March, when the pandemic first hit.

The New Year's Eve gala was the fourth time in 2020 that the Met used outside musicians. At the same time, it is the only top US orchestra that has not paid or given significant financial assistance to its musicians during the pandemic.

The Metropolitan Opera, like many other major cultural institutions, is using the pandemic as a wedge to effect a permanent reduction of compensation to musicians, performers and other support personnel. The case of the Metropolitan Opera is particularly egregious.

As a result, one-third of orchestra members have been forced to relocate out of the New York area due to the high cost of living.

All support personnel at the Met are the targets of attack by management. As of December 14, the Met locked out its stagehands. Management demanded pay cuts of 30 percent in a five-year contract, of which only one half of that will be restored once the Met's box office receipts recover.

The Met is seeking to reopen contracts with orchestra musicians and members of the chorus in order to impose permanent cuts. For its part, the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) has offered to "work together" with management, and has "made a comprehensive proposal that provides substantial

savings." Altogether 1,000 Met employees have been on unpaid furlough since March.

Joel Noyes, assistant principal cello of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, spoke to the *New York Post* about management's hard-line position. "When I came to the Met, it was the most attractive job in the country," Noyes said. "For the last 14 years, we have lost ground to our peers in our industry. With every concession the musicians take, the less world-class talent we are able to attract and retain."

In an interview with the *Financial Times* last month, renowned pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim expressed his dismay at the actions of the Met. "In the United States the situation is horrific. Look at the Metropolitan Opera's wonderful orchestra. It hasn't been paid since March. How can all the rich people who put so much money into new productions not support the musicians who have given so much pleasure over so many years?"

The response of the AFM to these attacks has been impotence, entirely consisting of pleading with wealthy arts donors to take pity at the plight of musicians. In response to the Met's decision to use outside employees at its New Year's Eve gala, the AFM issued a statement declaring:

"It is artistic malpractice and unacceptable that non-Met musicians are being hired to perform under the banner of the Metropolitan Opera at tonight's New Year's Eve Gala. This is the fourth fundraising event where Met management is unethically outsourcing its musicians while, at the same time, attempting to use the pandemic as an opportunity to gut the regular Met musicians' contract through destructive bargaining."

The statement ended with this plea: "Our concern is that the valued donors to the Met Opera—and even the Met board itself—doesn't know the actual truth about

the outsourcing of the Met orchestra during this pandemic. The generous donors who we desperately need to help save the arts should ask themselves if this is the way they want their money to be used to support this organization.”

Such appeals are futile. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the entire world of classical music, and the performing arts more broadly, which in the US are almost entirely dependent on the whims and tastes of wealthy donors for funding. Overall, individual giving to arts organizations fell by 14 percent in 2020 while ticket sales all but disappeared.

In December, the New York Philharmonic imposed a four-year contract including a 25 percent pay cut through August 2023 on its musicians. Pay will be gradually restored but will still end up lower than before the pandemic.

In October, members of the Philadelphia Orchestra agreed to new contract terms that impose a 75 percent pay cut retroactive to September and running through the middle of March 2021. The cuts replace a 20 percent reduction agreed to in April. Further salary levels will depend on the orchestra’s financial situation.

Musicians of the San Francisco Symphony agreed to a 30 percent pay cut through the end of 2020. This followed an across-the-board 25 percent pay cut in April. San Francisco Opera musicians saw a 50 percent pay cut.

Similar pay cuts have been imposed at other major orchestras, including the Chicago Symphony, the Boston Symphony, the Minneapolis Symphony and the Detroit Symphony. Musicians at opera orchestras have taken similar cuts.

A retired Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT) musician told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the pandemic had devastated the arts, and not just performers. “There are so many ancillary people—stagehands, makeup and costumes; it gets into large numbers of people who are out of work. Often operas have dancers and ballet dancers, choruses. ...

“In Detroit, the MOT put on a successful drive-thru performance at the parking garage, but outside of that they were out of work. We do not get paid if we do not perform. Many musicians have other jobs, such as teaching. Others have jobs outside of music altogether.”

He said, “It was very odd” that the Met held its gala in Germany and not New York. “Apparently the concertmaster of the Met Orchestra was cleaning out his locker at the Met and discovered these signs backstage talking about this gala taking place in Germany. None of the Met musicians were hired. It was a small thing, they could have done it in New York. But the stage crew was locked out at the Met.

“They are using the pandemic as a way to turn back the clock on orchestra pay and everything else. A number of Met orchestra members have left New York because they can’t afford to live there. It will take them years to come back from that.”

He spoke on the funding crisis facing the arts. After the 2008 financial crash, the MOT cut its performances 25 percent—“That never came back.”

He added, “There has been some support for music venues, but none for musicians and entertainers.

“I was forced into retirement. But now the pensions are in big trouble too. They are estimating the American Federation of Musicians pension will run out of money by 2025.”

There was no end in sight to the crisis, he said, “They have the vaccines, but the government is fumbling that. They don’t even have enough personnel to get the shots into people’s arms. They were supposed to vaccinate 20 million, and they only did 4 million. The entire capitalist system is being exposed.”

Artists and musicians deserve the widest public support, but the only realistic basis for the defense of the arts as well as all basic social rights is the mobilization of the working class. Workers and young people must insist that access to art and culture is a basic social right and must be made accessible to all. The vast wealth currently being siphoned into the pockets of Wall Street investors through government bailout must be redirected toward meeting critical social needs, including the support of culture, which is vital for a healthy society.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact