

Conductor Riccardo Muti expresses solidarity with Metropolitan Opera Orchestra musicians

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Riccardo Muti, one of the world's most renowned conductors, has issued a statement in solidarity with the musicians of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in New York. The orchestra, which achieved world-class status during the lengthy tenure of James Levine, has been furloughed without pay during the pandemic. Muti's statement came in response to an appeal from the musicians, who recently protested the Opera's decision to employ non-Met musicians for the company's annual New Year's concert, held this year in Berlin.

"The closure of the Metropolitan Opera House and the dramatic situation of its wonderful Orchestra embodies a profound grief, not only for the city of New York, but for the entire cultural world," said Muti. "Without music and the musicians who bring it to life, civil society is doomed to spiritual poverty and barbarism. Music is not entertainment, but rather, an essential food for the mind and soul."

He continued, alluding to the growing possibility that the Met could permanently lose many of its key players, "The Met, its Orchestra, along with its artistic team and technical crews are a heritage of humanity. The artistic world is in disbelief that the very existence of a great Orchestra like the Met's could be in danger and even at the risk of disappearing." About one-third of the orchestra's musicians have reportedly been obliged to leave New York to reduce their living expenses.

Muti, who will turn 80 this year, remained active until the coronavirus pandemic forced the cancellation of live opera and orchestral concerts. During his long career, he has also been the principal conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra and at the La Scala opera house in Milan, in addition to frequent guest appearances with such orchestras as the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonic.

Muti, in his statement, presenting himself "as a

musician, as Music Director of the great Chicago Symphony Orchestra and as a citizen of the world," called on the Met Opera, "to give back to the musicians of the Met the dignity which we all deserve and the hope that they can soon return to share with us their art."

The Met musicians' statement on Instagram said the following:

"We have now been unpaid for 10 months and counting. The Metropolitan Opera is an outlier in our industry; every other major orchestra has been compensated since the very beginning of the pandemic. Met management is using the pandemic opportunistically. They are not seeking a short-term crisis-plan to balance out pandemic circumstances. They are seeking permanent cuts. The cuts they seek are so deep that the orchestra would need unrealistic salary gains over the next quarter-century just to get back to current salaries."

A separate earlier statement by the president of the American Federation of Musicians local that represents the Met players had complained that the orchestra had replaced orchestra members with non-union musicians at lower rates of pay for the New Year's Eve gala. "It is artistic malpractice and unacceptable that non-Met musicians are being hired to perform under the banner of the Metropolitan Opera," said Adam Krauthamer of AFM Local 802.

"Let's be clear: hiring non-Met musicians under the banner of the Metropolitan Opera and outsourcing the orchestra's work is an attack on the Met as an artistic institution and an insult to the very artists who work there."

The musicians' union restated its willingness to bargain with management for so-called shared sacrifice during the pandemic. The Met board, however, led by

general manager Peter Gelb, is in no mood to compromise, even if the union is. The opera company has lost an estimated \$154 million through the cancellation of most of the 2020 spring season and all of the 2020-2021 year. It is insisting that the musicians and other staff pay for the crisis, even as its board of trustees and board of directors consists of a roster of multimillionaires whose net worth has skyrocketed in the course of the wild speculative boom of the past 10 months.

Even before the latest boom in stock prices, Ann Ziff, chair of the board of directors, had not exactly been suffering. She is the widow of publishing magnate William Ziff, and her three sons are billionaires. Mercedes Bass, vice-chair of the board, is the former wife of Texas billionaire Sid Bass, from whom she obtained a divorce settlement of \$300 million a decade ago.

Gelb, a millionaire many times over, has hypocritically agreed to forgo his own \$1.5 million salary during the pandemic. He could hardly have done otherwise, while refusing to pay those who make the Met what it is. Last month he took another unprecedented step, locking out the opera's stagehands when they balked at accepting a five-year contract that would have immediately cut their salaries by 30 percent and left them 15 percent behind even after the company's revenues return to pre-pandemic levels. Gelb is threatening to hire non-union construction firms to build the sets for five new productions scheduled for the 2021-2022 season, work that must begin in the next few months.

There is no question but that the opera and music world, like all cultural arenas, has been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the Met may be the only major company that has left its musicians and staff without any pay at all, elsewhere musicians have been forced to accept pay cuts of 25 percent and more. The pandemic has everywhere been seized upon to continue and deepen the attacks on musicians' salaries and benefits, attacks which have led to numerous bitter strikes over the past decade. Riccardo Muti's own ensemble, the Chicago Symphony, was forced to take strike action in 2019 that ended bitterly after about seven weeks with the acceptance of a contract that gave management its most important demand, an end to the musicians' defined benefit pension plan.

The hardline stance of the Met Opera, in the financial capital of the US, testifies to the ruthlessness of Wall Street when it comes to both the issue of "herd immunity" and also the question of which class will pay for the crisis that has been triggered by the pandemic. This is not primarily a question of greed of individuals, but of the insatiable demands for profit of the system as a whole.

Under these conditions, as the WSWS has explained repeatedly, a political struggle against the capitalist system is posed. For workers in the performing arts, the pandemic has meant the interruption or even the possible ending of their careers. They must fight alongside all sections of workers, including those professionally trained, for full income compensation, along with an internationally coordinated scientific struggle to contain and end the coronavirus threat.



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