

Orchestra musicians accept concessions, as Met Opera plans reopening in September

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The New York Metropolitan Opera has announced an agreement with its musicians, the last of its major employee unions, paving the way for the company to reopen in September, as it had earlier announced. The Met, the largest performing arts organization in the US, claims that vaccination and masking mandates will make indoor performances possible. It plans a performance of Verdi's *Requiem* on September 11, the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. The regular season will open on September 27.

Between August 28 and September 6, the company will hold its regularly scheduled annual summer festival of outdoor HD presentations of previous performances at the Met. This year's operas will open with Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* and close 10 days later with the same composer's *Il Trovatore*. Also, in a departure from usual custom this year, on the weekend of September 4 and 5 there will be free live outdoor performances of Gustav Mahler's 2nd Symphony, "Resurrection," under music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin, and including soprano and mezzo-soprano soloists.

The musicians of the Met Orchestra, whose bargaining agent is Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), have accepted pay cuts of 3.7 percent, the same concession deal earlier agreed to by the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA), which bargains for chorus, soloists and others. At first glance the deal appears far less onerous than the 30 percent cut demanded earlier by Met general manager Peter Gelb. However, it also provides that the number of full-time members of the orchestra will be reduced from 90 to 83.

Since about 10 percent of the ensemble have retired during the 18-month period in which the opera has been

shut down by the pandemic, they will not be replaced. The quality of the orchestra will inevitably suffer, as members are replaced by substitutes on an ad hoc basis. In addition to the issue of the quality and the future of the orchestra, the 3.7 percent reduction in salary is a far greater pay cut when inflation is factored in.

The Met musicians, unlike those at most orchestras and other cultural organizations closed by the pandemic, had gone for almost a year without any pay at all, until they began getting about half of their pre-pandemic salary last March, in exchange for returning to the bargaining table. At that point, up to 40 percent of the musicians had left the city, and many had announced their retirement. Last January, world-famous conductor Riccardo Muti issued a statement of support for the musicians, and warned that "the very existence of a great Orchestra like the Met's could be in danger and even at the risk of disappearing."

Another factor that is virtually ignored in the announcement of the Met reopening is the Delta variant of COVID-19, which has led to a 10-fold increase in the number of infections in the New York metropolitan area over the summer period. While those who have been vaccinated have so far suffered far fewer hospitalizations or deaths, this is by no means guaranteed to continue. The Met plans on full occupancy once it reopens, meaning social distancing will not be possible. Some operagoers may vote with their feet, so to speak, forgoing live performances, or requesting refunds on tickets already purchased.

As in previous examples where reopenings have been prematurely announced, further delays or shutdowns are unfortunately possible. New York's Signature Theatre, a prominent off-Broadway organization, has already announced the postponement of a production scheduled for early October.

This is a consequence of the “mitigationist” policy of “living with COVID-19,” rather than acting to eradicate the virus through an internationally coordinated strategy involving vaccination, strict public health measures, including universal testing and contact tracing, and the shutdown of schools and nonessential workplaces.

As the WWSWS has pointed out on a number of occasions, the defense of classical music and other performing arts cannot be separated from the class struggle and from the deepening of the economic and political crisis that has been triggered by the coronavirus pandemic. The continued astronomical growth of the stock portfolios of the billionaires and multimillionaires, including those who populate the board of trustees of the Met Opera, stands in the starkest contrast to the sacrifices made by the musicians and other staff of the company, not to mention to unprecedented suffering of millions who face unemployment, poverty, eviction, illness and death.

The Met musicians, choristers, stagehands are understandably eager and in some cases desperate to return to their jobs and careers. Their listeners are likewise eager for the return of opera and live performance.

The issues raised sharply by the pandemic cannot be ignored, however. The surrender of all of the unions involved is to be expected, from organizations that accept the capitalist status quo. This is a dangerous blind alley for those who make the Met what it is. The defense of the Met musicians’ jobs and careers cannot be waged on the basis of what the Met claims it can afford. It is bound up with the defense of culture, and is therefore bound up with a political struggle against the capitalist system and its drive for profit, which threatens the destruction of culture and indeed of civilization itself.



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