

San Antonio Symphony to file for bankruptcy and go out of existence

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The San Antonio Symphony announced last Thursday that it was filing for Chapter 7 bankruptcy, after a strike of its musicians that has been continuing for almost nine months, beginning on September 27 last year. The orchestra members and staff were fighting brutal concession demands. The action of the Board of Directors means the dissolution of the institution, which was founded 83 years ago.

The city, which has nearly doubled in population in the last 40 years to its current total of almost 1.5 million, is presently the 7th largest in the United States (and second largest in the South). It has now become the largest US city without a symphony orchestra.

In its press release the Symphony's board of directors blamed the musicians for its action, claiming they have "made it clear there is no prospect of the resumption of negotiations, absent the Board agreeing to a budget that is millions of dollars in excess of what the Symphony can afford." Hence, the press release explained, the orchestra's assets "now lie in the hands of a Trustee who will liquidate them, pay what creditors remain, and close the doors."

The musicians have remained determined to resist massive concession demands, not only for the sake of their own living standards, but also because the orchestra would no longer be able to attract the talent enabling it to remain a highly regarded ensemble in coming decades.

The crisis worsened sharply during the pandemic, as the Symphony, along with the rest of the performing arts, was forced to shut down. This was not the major contributing factor, however. While the orchestra reported negative net worth of nearly \$1 million as it prepared to file for bankruptcy, it was also running big deficits even before the pandemic. As elsewhere, management seized on the pandemic in order to step up

its demands for cutbacks and concessions.

With no bargaining at all having taken place since last March, most of the 68 musicians and ten administrative staff were not surprised by the board's announcement. They learned that they had lost their jobs, according to a report in the *San Antonio Express-News*, in the same email that went to donors and ticket holders. The three musicians who are members of the board of directors were not told about the meeting at which the vote to dissolve was later announced as a unanimous one.

At least some of the strikers had apparently been hoping that the current board would resign and be replaced by one that was less hardline. Mary Ellen Goree, the former principal second violin in the orchestra, commented, "It is sad and it is completely unnecessary. I very much wish that our leadership had removed themselves without burning down the organization."

The musicians have organized a series of community concerts during the strike, concluding early this month with a weekend of concerts at the First Baptist Church in downtown San Antonio. They have organized the Musicians of the San Antonio Symphony, an independent nonprofit, and hope to continue in the fall.

The Directors' press release, in a combination of ignorance and arrogance, thanked "the noble civic leaders of Bexar County, the City of San Antonio, and the State and federal governments. Private corporations, foundations and endowments from San Antonio and beyond have their support and encouragement for which we are truly grateful."

This turns reality on its head. It is the state and federal governments, and the corporate and financial elite whose interests they faithfully represent, who are above all responsible for the growing crisis facing the

performing arts, above all the field of classical music. The billionaires continue to amass wealth that would have been unthinkable until recently, while the government spends virtually unlimited billions on the military, most recently on the war against Russia in Ukraine.

This state of affairs is sacrosanct, taken for granted on all sides. San Antonio mayor Ron Nirenberg was quoted as stating that “a major city like San Antonio deserves a full-size, world-class symphony orchestra. In order to do that, it needs to have a sustainable financial foundation. And frankly, the parties’ inability to reach an agreement, even with federal mediation, speaks to the deficiencies of the old model.” Nirenberg, part of the capitalist two-party set-up, is responsible for the unlimited subsidies and rescues for big business, but not a penny more for “world-class” culture, as he puts it.

The League of American Orchestras indicts the current situation, but also has nothing to say about solutions. “When you have a major American city which is not able to support an orchestra, it loses its history and tremendous inspiration which has been brought to the community,” said Simon Woods, its president and chief executive. “It’s just incredibly sad.”

The San Antonio Symphony has a rich history. It was founded in 1939 by Max Reiter, the son of a Jewish father and an Italian mother, a refugee from Nazism who had just come to the US and had been urged to settle in Texas as a fertile field for the cultivation of a musical audience. For a while the San Antonio Symphony was the only major orchestra in Texas, even among bigger cities like Houston and Dallas.

The struggle in San Antonio was the latest in a long series of bitter and prolonged orchestra strikes and lockouts in the US in the first two decades of the 21st century. Between 2010 and 2016, on the heels of the 2008 financial crash, there were 14 orchestra strikes or lockouts, including major struggles in Detroit (2010-11), Minneapolis (2012-14) and Pittsburgh (2016). All ended with contracts imposing steep concessions on their musicians, but San Antonio is among those that have shut down entirely. The lockout of the musicians of the Minnesota Orchestra lasted 15 months. The Detroit Symphony strike lasted six months and attracted national and

international attention. For historical reasons, some cities, including Boston, Cleveland and Pittsburgh, continue to host world-class orchestras, although they are less than half the size of San Antonio.

About five years ago, statistics showed that for the first time, orchestras were functioning more as charities than as non-profit enterprises. Orchestra budgets rely more on donations from wealthy patrons than on ticket sales to the broader public. Reducing ticket prices is for the most part not even considered under these circumstances, although the urgent need to attract audiences means that prices have generally not yet increased by large amounts.

Musicians and other professional workers have increasingly been forced to conclude that they face the same problems—concession demands, unemployment, no job security—as other sections of the working class. The drying up of public subsidies and support, combined with the attacks on public education and especially the abandonment of music and arts education, have created the current situation of growing crisis in classical music and in culture as a whole. This raises fundamental political issues. It is the capitalist system of private ownership, with its insatiable demand for maximizing the rate of profit and defending its interests on a global scale, which threatens culture and threatens the very existence of civilization. It must be replaced by socialism if music and all of the arts are to flourish.



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