

Latest expression of crisis of culture in 21st century capitalism

Dismissal of Boston Symphony Orchestra conductor Andris Nelsons provokes uproar

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2 April 2026

The uproar over the abrupt dismissal of Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) music director Andris Nelsons early last month shows few signs of subsiding. This episode, the subject of big media attention in Boston and among music lovers elsewhere, raises fundamental issues about the state of classical music and culture more broadly in the United States.

The Latvian-born Nelsons, music director and chief conductor in Boston for the last 13 years, has won a devoted following among the BSO musicians as well as the concert-going public. This did not concern the orchestra's Board of Trustees when it fired Nelson via an email announcement sent to the press and to BSO subscribers on March 6. The musicians, without whom the BSO would, of course, not exist, found out about it at the same time.

The email announced that the board, led by president Chad Smith and chair Barbara Hostetter, had taken the decision to make Nelsons a lame duck until the expiration of his contract in 2027 "because, beyond our shared desire to ensure our orchestra continues to perform at the highest levels, the BSO and Andris Nelsons were not aligned on future vision."

Nelsons said the parting of the ways was unexpected and not sought by him. The musicians were angry and, as the initial shock subsided, in a fighting mood. The following night, while Nelsons was still conducting in Vienna, they registered their disquiet by entering the stage en masse, instead of slowly tuning up as usual before the concert. They held an urgent meeting and issued a statement on behalf of the players' committee the next day. "We strongly oppose the decision by the Board of Trustees to end the appointment of Maestro Nelsons," the musicians said, as reported in the *Boston Globe* and elsewhere. "The musicians believe in Andris's vision for the future."

Nelsons received what was called a "hero's welcome" when he returned to conduct the orchestra about two weeks after the announcement that his contract had not been renewed. The general sentiment among the musicians was summed up by one who spoke anonymously: "It felt like we were being asked to invest in something that's been artistically bankrupted without a concrete plan for its recovery. Their explanation for everything was, basically, we're running deficits. ... What they're saying is the first and best way to balance the budget is to get rid of Andris."

A few days earlier, when Nelsons returned to Symphony Hall, 95 orchestra musicians assembled on the steps in wintry weather to

demonstratively display their support. Principal oboist John Ferrillo wrote about the atmosphere, according to the classical music blog Slipped Disc: "Why is the pain of this so deep? Why does the act of last week feel like such a violation? This is OUR house, my family's house, that has been violated."

The public also registered its opposition. A petition organized by a former BSO subscriber, George Whiting, rather modestly appealed to the board to meet with members of the community. "The ones who are impacted the most, in this case the musicians and audience, are being affected by a small group of people who behind closed doors decided they weren't going to renew Andris' contract," he told the *Boston Globe*. "It's pretty obvious how upset people are."

The *Globe*, the voice of the city's economic, political and social establishment, registered its concern in a lengthy editorial. It read, in part:

The orchestra's musicians, and now patrons, have taken every opportunity to show their displeasure with a recent decision by the BSO's Board of Trustees to part ways with conductor Andris Nelsons, who has been at the podium since 2013.

More than blindsiding the distinguished cadre of musicians—who found out about the board's decision to jettison Nelsons only moments before the press release hit patrons and the public—it has been the continuing failure of the board to explain how declining to renew Nelsons' contract is going to fix the orchestra's longstanding fiscal woes.

A candid, public explanation of what the board thinks Nelsons did wrong is the least the community is owed.

Or is it that Nelsons, whose recordings with the orchestra have garnered two Grammy awards this year, is merely collateral damage—a human sacrifice to the gods of change for the sake of change?

And what, by the way, is plan B? What wunderkind will the BSO Board of Trustees find willing to take over a job where the current occupant has been so disrespected?

The *Globe* was reacting to the musicians' outrage. The players' committee had stated that Chad Smith "no longer has the trust or buy-in of the musicians." What especially provoked the concern of the *Globe* editors was that the class struggle had erupted in the hallowed halls of Boston's Symphony Hall. The whole corporate model of multi-millionaire boards of trustees running the musical field was called into question by the arrogance of the board and the furious reaction of the musicians.

The Boston symphony was founded 145 years ago. With one of the oldest histories in the US, it is among the most renowned orchestras. Boston, along with the orchestras in New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland and Chicago, was long considered one of the "Big Five," the ensembles that set the pace and led the field. While other orchestras—in Los Angeles, Minneapolis, San Francisco and elsewhere—have certainly laid claim to greatness in recent years, the "Big Five" label has not lost all of its historical luster.

To some extent, as the *Globe* suggested, Nelsons is "collateral damage," a scapegoat for the ongoing problems of the symphony. The BSO board has refused to spell out its alleged differences with Nelson, but it has pointed again and again at fiscal problems. BSO president and CEO Smith issued another email in the face of the uproar. In hollow corporate language, the board reaffirmed its decision, acknowledged the musicians' anger, and promised to rebuild trust. The Board of Trustees emphasized the financial crisis facing the orchestra, pointing to a steep decline in the audience for classical music, as well as \$90 million in deferred maintenance costs for Symphony Hall.

Nelsons is not merely a scapegoat, however. As the *Globe* discussed in a subsequent article, the orchestra board and management have been pushing for "change," for what they call modernization of the orchestra. To the extent that they have any program, it is to hollow out the orchestra's offerings and use identity politics to appeal to broader sections of the upper-middle class. They say nothing about the evisceration of federal funding, either agreeing with it or accepting it as inevitable. They are silent on the elimination in the last few decades of public education in music and all of the arts. As far as they are concerned, the orchestra must pay its own way, even if that means minimizing the importance of the classics—not only of the 18th and 19th centuries, but of the 20th as well.

To the extent that their vision for the future is not "aligned" with Nelsons', it is their view that he is dragging his feet on these issues. It is significant that one of the complaints about Nelsons is that when asked, in 2017, whether classical music had a sexual harassment problem, he responded, quite reasonably, "No... many things are artificially exaggerated or made too important." This was just as the MeToo movement was being heavily promoted by the ruling class.

But this is more than an issue of personalities. While the details are of some interest, there is no huge mystery about what is taking place in the field of classical music. As the WSWs explained just two months ago ("Twilight at the Met: Capitalism's Contempt for Culture"), institutions like the Metropolitan Opera (and the BSO) are being transformed by the crisis of decaying capitalism.

We wrote:

New York City—the world capital of financialized capitalism, home to the Wall Street banks and hedge funds that have looted trillions from society and presided over levels of inequality that almost defy comprehension—cannot apparently muster the resources to support its own opera company.

The composition of the ruling class has changed, reflecting the deepening of the crisis of its system. These institutions have always depended upon the wealthy. Today's oligarchy, however, has no way to defend its system except through an orgy of financial speculation and war against the working class at home and all over the world.

Culture is one of the first items to be sacrificed. There is no money for symphony orchestras but there are trillions of dollars for war and to bail out the same elements who inhabit the boards of trustees of such institutions as the BSO.

Trump is the most depraved example of a broader trend. He takes a sledgehammer to culture, whereas the BSO board, undoubtedly including, if not dominated by, supporters of the Democratic Party, has slightly different methods. They are backed by different factions of the same ruling elite—venture capitalists, private equity vultures and tech titans.

The BSO struggle recalls the bitter battles of the Detroit Symphony strike of 2011-12 and of the Minnesota Orchestra several years later. At least for the moment, issues of pay and benefits have not been raised, but the issues are, if anything, posed even more sharply by the crisis at the Met Opera and the Boston Symphony, taking place at a time of developing world war and the dangers of dictatorship.

BSO musicians and all those concerned with the fate of classical music must concern themselves with these political issues. The defense of culture cannot be entrusted to the ruling class. It requires a new perspective—genuine change and not honeyed phrases about change from the alleged "progressives" leading the BSO.

Professionally trained musicians are part of the working class, and their fate is bound up with that of the working class as a whole. They must reach out to other sections of workers and youth. A common struggle against decaying capitalism will bring new audiences and new talents to the field of culture. Only the socialist reorganization of economic life can provide a future for art, music and all the conquests of human civilization.



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