

After Trump's takeover of the Kennedy Center

National Symphony Orchestra faces calamity in Washington D.C.

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The National Symphony Orchestra is the latest—and among the most prominent—of the classical music institutions in the US facing an uncertain and diminished future. According to a report last week in the *Washington Post*, the highly regarded orchestra is dealing with a huge decline in attendance as well as in donor support over the past two years.

The crisis, while it has a somewhat longer history, has drastically accelerated since Donald Trump took control of the orchestra's parent organization, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, in the US capital. Citing anonymous sources and confidential documents, the *Post* reports that since Trump's actions, which he announced barely two weeks after beginning his second term last year, the orchestra has fallen 25 percent short of its fundraising goals. Playing to largely empty halls, its ticket revenues have fallen as much as 50 percent for some concerts. The orchestra's classical concerts have reported audiences of 41 percent paying capacity, down from 72 percent as recently as two years ago.

The crisis of the NSO in turn deepens the financial crisis of the Kennedy Center itself. Under the terms of a 1986 agreement, the Center is obligated to cover the deficits of the orchestra. This has shielded the NSO somewhat in the intervening years, but has done nothing to deal with broader problems of classical music performance, and in fact has only covered them up.

Trump's unprecedented takeover was followed some months later by the decision of his newly installed board to add his name to the building, in defiance of the original action of the US Congress to name the building after John F. Kennedy. This was followed by the withdrawal of many composers and performers from concerts that had been scheduled. Composer Philip Glass was among the more prominent cancellations, announcing the premiere of his 15th symphony, named "Lincoln," would be withdrawn. In a public statement, Glass explained his decision. "Symphony

No. 15 is a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, and the values of the Kennedy Center today are in direct conflict with the message of the Symphony," he said.

It has become obvious in 2026 that the Kennedy Center under Trump's control is facing a de facto boycott by both artists and audiences. Earlier this year, the Washington National Opera announced it was severing its connection to the Center. The audience boycott was indicated when recent performances of the NSO at other venues, including the Wolf Trap performing arts complex, attracted capacity crowds.

The rapidity with which the crisis has worsened was reflected in somewhat farcical fashion last November. Richard Grenell, who was then serving as Trump's hand-picked acting director of the Kennedy Center (after a stint as ambassador to Germany in Trump's first term), led the NSO in a performance of the US national anthem at the beginning of a scheduled concert. Grenell has no musical experience, and the Kennedy Center announced in an official Instagram post that others could do the same in exchange for "a large contribution." This type of auctioning off of conducting duties is rare but not completely without precedent in the current climate of growing crisis in the arena of classical music performance.

Jean Davidson, who recently left her position as executive director of the NSO, was quoted by the *Post* as warning that the crisis was so sharp that the orchestra could cease operations. "What an international embarrassment it would be for the National Symphony Orchestra of the United States to fold—and it's very possible that could happen," she said. "This is an orchestra that has never played as well as it's playing now under Gianandrea Noseda, which just makes it even more tragic."

The NSO was founded almost 100 years ago. Although not usually considered at the same level as its counterparts in such cities as Vienna, Berlin, Chicago and New York, it has enjoyed critical admiration in recent decades under the

leadership of Leonard Slatkin and Mstislav Rostropovich. Italian conductor Nosedà has led the orchestra for the last ten years, and has received critical as well as audience praise during his tenure. His contract was recently extended through 2031.

The future of the orchestra is up in the air, however, not only because of reduced audiences and donations, but also since the Trump-appointed board of the Kennedy Center announced a two-year closure for “renovations.” The closure, itself probably a face-saving effort by the administration in the face of collapsing audiences, was held up by a court ruling, but the board has just reaffirmed it once again, in a decision that will in turn receive further judicial review. There have been no assurances the musicians will be paid during this period if the Kennedy Center is shuttered. Even if they do wind up receiving pay, it is far from clear that the NSO will find suitable alternative venues, and enforced idleness would be devastating for the orchestra and its musicians.

Although the crisis of the National Symphony is closely connected to Trump’s actions, it must also be understood that he represents a US ruling class now moving towards oligarchic dictatorship. In the field of culture as well as in broader arenas, his function has been to spearhead policies that reflect a movement of the oligarchy as a whole.

There are several related elements at the Kennedy Center and the NSO. Firstly, Trump’s hysterical attacks on “woke” and “degenerate” art are attempts to whip up his fascistic base, as he prepares to rig the midterm elections and take other steps towards dictatorial rule. This overlaps with the longer-term crisis of classical music funding in the US, which alone among advanced capitalist nations rejects public funding of the arts, ensuring that such institutions as symphony orchestras are dependent upon the support of wealthy donors and usually make their ticket prices unaffordable except for the comfortably middle class.

Orchestras that have closed include Honolulu, Syracuse, New Mexico, San Antonio, American Youth Symphony and Boston Philharmonic. The Philadelphia Orchestra declared bankruptcy in 2011. Detroit musicians struck for six months and took a 25 percent pay cut. Minnesota locked out its musicians for 16 months. As the ongoing crisis at New York’s Metropolitan Opera shows, the crisis and rot reaches to the very top of classical music in the US.

This in turn reflects the overall trend in culture, that of crass commercialization and moral degeneration. At the same time it presides over unprecedented inequality, when it claims there is no money for housing, education or medical care but unlimited resources for war, when it oversees the destruction of public health and every other advance made through past struggles, the ruling oligarchy has concluded

that culture is disposable.

It is crucial to understand that the Democrats, although they make occasional speeches and complain about some of Trump’s outrages, share full responsibility for the attack on culture. They offer no alternative funding model, no mobilization of popular opposition and no challenge to the oligarchic control of cultural life.

The fight for the NSO is a fight against the same oligarchy attacking autoworkers, teachers, health care workers and federal employees. The crisis of the NSO, the Kennedy Center, and the American orchestra is not a failure of management, a problem of audience demographics, or an accident of political circumstance. It is the logical product of a system that subordinates every human need to private accumulation. American capitalism—which has produced trillion-dollar fortunes while orchestras collapse, which can fund endless war while eliminating the NEA, which builds ballrooms for oligarchs while closing concert halls—is incompatible with culture.

There is only one class whose future is bound up with the defense of culture and the democratization of social and economic life, and that is the working class, of which the NSO musicians are a part. Resistance, as reflected in protests and boycotts, is growing. Only two years ago a strike by the NSO musicians was settled on below-inflation terms for an 18-month agreement. Now they face new attacks, involving their very livelihood itself. As with other sections of the working class, rank and file committees are needed to take the struggle out of the hands of the full-time bureaucrats who have absolutely no answer.

The other missing element, most crucially, is the independent political mobilization of the working class in the struggle for socialism. The NSO musicians, the Kennedy Center staff, the artists who have boycotted, the audiences who have stayed away—all are part of a broader social force that must find its political expression in the fight for a socialist program of the full democratization of social and economic life.



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