“Music City” without an orchestra as Nashville Symphony suspends its season in face of financial crisis

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On September 28, Nashville Symphony management made the stunning announcement that the orchestra was suspending the remainder of its 2026–27 concert season because of a financial crisis, including a severe lack of cash and a projected $10 million deficit. The decision leaves 77 orchestra musicians and 27 full-time staff members without jobs or paychecks beginning October 18.

Nashville, known internationally as “Music City” because of its long association with country music, will be, at least for next year, without its symphony orchestra. The crisis is another indication of the growing financial pressures facing the arts in the US and internationally.

Classical music is particularly vulnerable in the US because of the limited role of public funding and the heavy reliance of major cultural institutions on wealthy individual donors and foundations.

Recently appointed Nashville Symphony Music Director Leonard Slatkin will lead the orchestra’s final concerts of the season on October 16–17 before the suspension takes effect. Slatkin has said he intends to remain with the organization.

According to the Nashville Symphony’s website, the orchestra is one of the “most recognized American orchestras for contemporary US music and recording projects,” having received 14 Grammy Awards and 27 nominations. Under normal circumstances, it performs nearly 200 concerts annually at Schermerhorn Symphony Center in downtown Nashville and through community programs.

The impact on musicians is immediate and potentially devastating.

Joel Reist, chairman of the Nashville Orchestra Committee, told WPLN, Nashville’s National Public Radio affiliate:

> I have the bass that I won my job with. I have made arrangements to take it to an instrument shop in Cincinnati where I’m going to put it up for consignment. Once it sells and after the 25% consignment fee, I’m going to have enough money from that sale, I hope that’s going to be able to pay my mortgage, keep my utilities on and nourish my family for about four months.

Reist noted the ironic similarity to a scene in Puccini’s opera *La Bohème*, in which the struggling poet Rodolfo burns his manuscript to stay warm.

He also warned of the longer-term consequences: “Folks are going to have to sell their houses and move away and move in with Cousin Bob.”

Before the current crisis, Nashville Symphony musicians earned approximately $72,000 a year—considerably less than musicians at many other major American orchestras and little more than one-third of the salaries at top-tier orchestras such as those in New York, Boston, Cleveland and Chicago. They are hardly in a position to withstand an indefinite period without wages or health benefits.

Ticket holders are being given the option of claiming a tax deductible donation or a future performance credit.

A history of financial instability

Like many orchestras in midsize and smaller American cities, the Nashville Symphony lacks the international reputation and deep donor base enjoyed by institutions such as those in larger urban centers. It has faced serious financial difficulties in the past. The Nashville Symphony filed for bankruptcy in 1988, forcing an early end to its season and the layoff of its musical staff.

The orchestra has been heavily dependent on major individual donors. One of its most important supporters was the late Martha Ingram, billionaire CEO of Ingram Industries and a major Nashville philanthropist. Ingram died in August of this year.

Her support was particularly important to the orchestra’s Schermerhorn Symphony Center. In 2013, when the concert

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hall faced foreclosure by Bank of America, Ingram intervened to help save the institution.

The extent to which Ingram's death has affected the symphony's immediate finances remains a question. Her long-standing financial support illustrates, however, the particular vulnerability of cultural institutions whose operations depend heavily on a small number of major donors.

In a statement addressed to the Nashville Symphony's board of directors, Slatkin appealed to the board to act urgently.

"I ask this board today to recognize the urgency of this moment and to act—not only as stewards of an institution, but as guardians of something that belongs to this entire community," he wrote.

> Think first of our musicians. They are among the finest in the country. If this orchestra disappears for a year, many of them will go elsewhere. We will lose the quality you have all come to expect. It is not possible to replace a season of music-making with a promise that we will return someday with a potentially lesser organization.

Slatkin also appealed to the orchestra's audience, chorus and the wider Nashville community, warning that if the orchestra becomes silent, "all of that is silent."

He concluded by invoking another Nashville cultural icon, Dolly Parton: "If you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain."

Slatkin, age 82, is a highly regarded conductor whose career includes long tenures as music director of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington D.C. and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO). He has received numerous awards, including several Grammy Awards for orchestral recordings. He comes from a prominent musical family; his father, Felix Slatkin, was a violinist, conductor and founder of the Hollywood String Quartet.

Slatkin was music director at the Detroit Symphony during the six-month musicians' strike in 2010–11 that resulted in a 25 percent pay cut. He remained publicly neutral while generally evincing sympathy with the musicians, who were battling to maintain the high artistic quality of the DSO. Following the settlement, he organized a "welcome home" concert for returning musicians.

Slatkin agreed to return to Nashville in 2026 after having served as the orchestra's music adviser roughly two decades earlier. At the time he took the position, he said he hoped that "this three-year term will be the start of a new chapter for the Nashville Symphony." He has indicated that he was not aware of the full extent of the orchestra's precarious financial situation when he accepted the position.

Maintaining a major symphony orchestra is expensive. The costs include a large professional orchestra, rehearsal time, conductors and guest artists, concert facilities, stage crews, administrative staff, health insurance, pensions and other benefits.

The US is the only industrialized country that provides virtually no public support for arts organizations.

The Nashville crisis is particularly striking because it is occurring in a rapidly expanding metropolitan area. Nor are audiences simply abandoning classical music. The Nashville Symphony's ticket sales had recovered substantially following the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2024, ticket sales were close to their pre-pandemic level.

The crisis in Nashville demonstrates the precarious position of culture under capitalism, which subordinates all considerations to the drive for private wealth accumulation. The problem is not one of lack of money, but of social priorities. In 2025 the Nashville Symphony had expenses of $30.35 million and revenues of $28.1 million, a $2.1 million shortfall, nearly what the Pentagon spends every single minute on wars.

The role the Ingram fortune played in underpinning the Nashville Symphony underscores what the WSWS has termed "the artistocratic principle," the reality that the existence of orchestras, museums and operas to a large extent depends on the benevolence of the fabulously rich.

The defense of culture today falls to the working class. In a truly civilized society culture must be widely accessible to everyone. This means not just public support for orchestras, operas, museums and libraries but working people must have the free time to enjoy them. This requires the political organization and mobilization of the working class, including artists and musicians, behind a socialist program based on reorganizing social and economic life on the basis of human need, not profit.

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