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The DSO Strike: What it Means Professional Standards are a Collective Concern

Steve Babson, *Editor*

Like most professionals, academics usually dwell on the individual striving that accounts for their success. After all, we *earned* our degrees. In the glow of this understandable pride, it's easy to forget the other half of the equation: if we don't collectively rally to the defense of professional standards, the very professions we value are at risk.

The current dispute between management and musicians in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) is a case in point. Hopefully, by the time you read this article the strike will have been settled on a basis that rebuilds the battered reputation of this outstanding institution. But whatever the outcome, it is a cautionary tale for faculty and academic staff at Wayne State University.

In so many ways, the issues raised in this dispute resonate with the issues we confront as academics.

Paying the Piper

The draconian salary cuts that DSO management has demanded are not the only point of conflict in this dispute, but they are no small matter. When the contract between the DSO and the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) expired in late August of 2010, management was calling for a 33 percent reduction in pay for the DSO's 85 musicians. Without these massive cuts, management has since argued, the very survival of the symphony is in question.

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No one disputes that the DSO is in dire financial straits. The same economic crisis that jeopardizes state support for WSU has dramatically reduced revenues and contributions to the non-profit DSO, producing \$19 million in accumulated losses since 2008. To address this crisis, the musicians have offered to take a 22 percent reduction in salary that, combined with cuts in pension and healthcare benefits, would save \$9 million over the three-year term of a new contract.

When the strike began in October of 2010, the difference between this proposal and management's final offer amounted to roughly \$4 million. The monetary gap is relatively minor, however, compared to the dramatic differences in strategy and vision that separate the two sides.

As the union sees it, the world-class quality of the DSO cannot be maintained if substantial salary cuts are made permanent. In past recessions, musicians have agreed to reduce their pay to address the immediate crisis, but the union has insisted on “clawback” provisions that made the musicians whole by the end of the contract. In the current conflict, the union's three-year proposal would still leave the musicians 8 percent short of their previous pay, but even this is a far cry from what management has in mind.

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“The current debate is really around what we can afford,” says DSO President Anne Parsons, “not what we deserve.” The DSO cannot afford to restore past pay levels as she sees it, and if Parsons and the DSO’s board members have their way, the far deeper cuts they want to implement will be a permanent feature of the DSO’s future.

Dissonant Views

“The internationally acclaimed Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the fourth-oldest symphony orchestra in the United States, is known for trailblazing performances, visionary maestros and collaborations with the world’s foremost musical artists.” This glowing summary from the DSO web site may be the only thing that management and the union can agree on. For many years, the world-renowned DSO has ranked among the top ten symphonies in the United States.

The question of how-- or whether-- the DSO maintains this world-class reputation is directly tied to the labor market we are familiar with at WSU-- that is, a labor market that is international in scope.

For the union, the issue is not only what musicians “deserve” when it comes to compensation-- though they would argue they are worth their pre-strike base pay of \$105,000. The issue is whether the DSO can continue to attract world-class talent if it pays substandard salaries, and this question becomes all the more pertinent as management cuts entry-level pay for new hires by a whopping 42 percent.

President Parsons insists that the DSO can still attract talent at reduced salaries “given the number of orchestras that haven’t been hiring and the number of musicians coming out of Juilliard, Curtis, New World, China and elsewhere.” Haden McKay, a cellist with the DSO for the past 27 years, believes Parsons is only half right when it comes to hiring musicians straight out of college. “Young musicians might come but they won’t stay. The best players will move on to other cities.”

This debate should be familiar to anyone at WSU who has tried to recruit established professionals and promising graduates to come to Detroit. “We know the city and love it here,” as the musicians’ union states on its web site, “but Detroit’s negative

image is a major hurdle to overcome in bringing in top talent in many fields.... Recruiters know that, far from being able to offer half of the salary [paid] in other major cities, they need to offer a ‘Detroit premium’ to attract people.”

For Karl Pituch, the symphony’s Principal Horn player since 2000, the pay issue is therefore part of a larger dispute over the DSO’s future. If the salary cuts become permanent, he argues, the symphony “will become a stepping-stone orchestra and not a destination orchestra. In the last three years we have lost six musicians to other orchestras.”

They will lose more if management succeeds in implementing the dramatic changes it is proposing in work rules, among them:

- * Reducing the size of the orchestra from 96 to 85 members;
- * Eliminating tenure-like provisions that require a two-thirds vote by a committee of peers before management can dismiss a member of the orchestra;
- * Eliminating the requirement that guest conductors cannot be re-engaged if musicians rate them below average in surveys conducted by the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM);
- * Removing the orchestra’s two librarians from the bargaining unit and cutting their pay 43 percent;
- * Requiring musicians to teach, to perform in small groups or as soloists wherever management might send them, and to perform such non-playing duties as library work, public speaking, or fundraising.

The union believes these work-rule changes will drive away top-flight musicians who expect to play a collegial role in co-managing their professional work. Musicians have always engaged in teaching at universities and coaching/mentoring private students, but they have done so in ways that were consistent with a primary focus on their work as concert musicians, rather than having these secondary aspects of their professional life scheduled as part of the work-week.

Management's pay cuts, by making the DSO more of a transient orchestra, will actually jeopardize the existing links between musicians and local schools, according to the union. "Those relationships that the teachers might have if they are on the faculty at Wayne State or U-of-M, or [they] have a large number of private students, those things are built up over many years," says Haden McKay. "They won't work as well if musicians come to the city for a couple of years and then leave."

Sour Notes

The quality of the music may well suffer under these circumstances. "It takes years for an orchestra to develop ensemble playing," says Pituch, "playing together, matching intonation, learning the various nuances of our colleagues, making sure our sounds fit with one another. When there is a constant turnover of musicians, ensemble playing suffers."

But if the money to support a first-class symphony isn't there, does the DSO have a choice in the matter? State funding for the orchestra declined from \$4 million a year in the 1980s to a measly \$20,000, and the Big 3's annual contribution of \$1 million has disappeared altogether. Under these circumstances, says Executive Vice President Paul Hogle, "we cannot simply be the Chicago symphony but a little bit smaller. We can't.... This is about survival."

The union argues that these dire straits were exacerbated by mismanagement and that, over the long term, the DSO could restore world-class working conditions and pay under sound leadership. Among other things, the musicians point to the mishandling of the capital fund that was raised for construction of the Max M. Fisher Music Center, the lavish new wing the DSO opened in 2003. Rather than pay for construction with the contributed endowment funds, DSO management decided to borrow money instead and invest the endowment in securities that promised to more than pay for debt service-- leaving a tidy profit. The promised investment income fell short, however, and with the 2008 market crash the endow-

ment's value fell precipitously.

DSO managers, according to the union, had in the meantime allowed the donor base of small contributors to shrink from 25,000 in 1996 to 5,000 in recent years, a slide that may well have been caused by the rapid turnover of fundraisers: eight VPs for Development in little more than a decade, four in the last four years. For a time, donations by large corporations and wealthy supporters carried the budget, but this was not a sustainable solution. DSO President Anne Parsons may have inadvertently acknowledged this when she told a reporter that "until the fall of 2008 we were in our Polyanna phase." (*The Guardian*, 11/20/10)

Polyanna has now given way to scrooge, and the level of vitriol has escalated accordingly. DSO spokespersons publicly castigate the striking musicians for refusing to accept a compensation package "totaling" \$133,000, an amount the union says includes not only pension and healthcare costs, but also the employer portion of payroll taxes, insurance on instruments, the value of a parking space, and "other" benefits. (CEO Anne Parsons, the union also points out, is paid salary and expenses totaling \$415,000.)

Management has announced that musicians only work a 20-hour week, suggesting they are goldbrickers. The union counters by noting that 20 hours is the national standard for on-stage performance in rehearsals and concerts, and does not include personal preparation and practice hours. According to the union, DSO's management told the IRS six months before the strike that the orchestra's musicians worked a 35-hour week.

The press has also chimed in, the *Detroit News* editorializing that work rules protecting tenure in the expired DSO-AFM contract "make it almost impossible to fire a musician whose skills have waned." (11/27/10) Kevin Good, a trumpeter with the DSO for the last 31 years, reports otherwise. Of the four cases where the Music Director brought a proposed dismissal before the elected peer committee on which he served, the musicians agreed to the

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dismissals in all but one case. "It should be obvious," as Good puts it, "that it's not in our interest to have poor players on stage. Ever."

With the elimination of this committee under management's imposed terms, says Good, "the safety check provided by informed peer review, which minimizes the likelihood of a false or politically motivated assessment, has been removed."

Coda

As we go to press, negotiations have resumed under compromise terms proposed by U.S. Senator Carl Levin and then-Governor Jennifer Granholm. The union accepted the compromise when it was first broached in mid-December, but management initially rejected it. The DSO returned to the bargaining table in mid-January, urged on by business and community leaders that included Shirley Stancato, President of New Detroit, and Nancy Schlichting, President and CEO of Henry Ford Hospital.

It remains to be seen whether an economic compromise is within reach, but whatever the outcome, it's worth recalling that money has not been the sole issue in the DSO strike. The very nature of the orchestra and the professional standards that guide its operation have been central to the dispute, including the collectively negotiated procedures of due process that protect these highly skilled professionals.

"It's not in our interest," as DSO striker Kevin Good puts it, "to have management more interested in reviving the master/servant relationship than in doing their job of running a world-class orchestra."

Adopt-a-Family Program a Success

For the second year, the Academic Staff Steering Committee of AAUP-AFT Local 6075 worked with the WSU Library System and the Detroit Public Schools' Edmonson Elementary on a holiday gift and food drive to benefit needy area families. Academic staff and faculty from across the WSU campus generously donated time, money, gifts and food.

Former AAUP-AFT Grievance Coordinator and Librarian Lothar Spang started the project known as the *Adopt-a-Family Program* years ago. Staff at nearby Edmonson Elementary School, located on Canfield, identified the neediest families in the school. These families were "adopted" for the holidays, and through the generosity of the WSU community, provided Thanksgiving and Christmas meals, toys, clothing and food. Although Lothar passed away unexpectedly 18 months ago, we want to make sure this tradition continues.

This year, many people made donations, some anonymously, and we thank all of you for your generosity. We owe a special debt of gratitude to the following individuals for their help in coordinating the program: Alia Allen, Kristen Chinery, Matt Fredericks, Chamu Gowrishankar, Mike Hawthorne, Randie Kruman, Kristen Malecki, Joanne Miyamoto, Juanita Pipkin, Keith Wadley and Kim Walkowiak.

A photo of the family we adopted is on the home page of our web site. Again, **Thank You** for your contributions and for making this year's program such a success!

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