

Interview with Detroit Symphony violinist: “We went on strike because we didn’t want the orchestra to be destroyed”

By Shannon Jones
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One year ago, on October 5, 2010, the musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) struck against massive concession demands, including a more than 30 percent pay cut and drastic changes in work rules. The strike ended in April of this year, with musicians forced to accept a large pay cut and other concessions.

On the anniversary of the walkout, this reporter and WSWs Arts Editor David Walsh interviewed DSO violinist Marian Tanau at Orchestra Hall in downtown Detroit. The Romanian-born musician, a member of the negotiating committee for the striking musicians, reflected on the strike and the current situation facing the orchestra.

The DSO strike took place under conditions of a general and ongoing attack on arts funding in the US and internationally. Faced with declining ticket sales and falling private and corporate donations orchestras and opera companies are continuing to impose deep cuts.

Since the end of the DSO strike, the world famous Philadelphia Orchestra has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, and musicians at Colorado Symphony have been forced to accept an effective 14 percent pay cut in the face of a financial crisis at that orchestra. In June, members of the Pittsburgh Symphony agreed to a new three-year contract containing a 9.7 reduction in wages.

Meanwhile, management of the DSO seems determined to pursue the same reckless course that provoked the strike last year. In June, the DSO Board of Directors announced the renewal of the contract of DSO President Anne Parsons for three-years. The management team headed by Parsons spearheaded the attack on musicians. While demanding drastic cuts from the musicians, Parsons received some \$400,000 in pay and expenses in 2009.

David Walsh: The strike began one year ago today. What are your strongest memories of that day?

Marian Tanau: It was a new experience for me, the picketing. It was very nice to see the solidarity, the number of people that showed up.

This year feels kind of empty. You had the strike, then all the weeks we were unemployed. Then most of us were gone for the summer. So you just had a few concerts in the spring and of course we had our musicians’ strike benefit concerts.

We played substantially less than in many other years. Not individually, because all of us involve ourselves in diverse concerts, but I am thinking of symphonic music.

Shannon Jones: What is the situation now?

MT: What is different is that we have a lot of substitutes. We have some substitutes that are here by virtue of an audition. We always use them. It is more than one third of the orchestra, by virtue of the fact that we are supposed to have 81 musicians on stage, the core orchestra so to speak.

We have 29 substitutes this week. We had a bunch of retirements, we had some vacancies from before that were not filled, and a flurry of

departures.

Emmanuelle Boisvert, the concertmaster is gone. Geof Applegate, principal second [violinist] is gone. Phil Dikeman, the principal flute, has gone. So you have a population that is very different right now. I can tell that the quality has gone down a little bit. It is not evident yet because we have not been playing a difficult enough repertoire for one to tell.

SJ: What is it like artistically?

MT: You mean community concerts? Personally, I love community concerts. When we went on strike it wasn’t over the community concerts. We did those before to a certain degree. We went on strike because we didn’t want the orchestra to be destroyed. When you have an orchestra that bases itself on community concerts, which are all over the place, you lose a little bit of your musical integrity because you are used to playing in a hall under certain acoustics, your body responds to certain echoes that you get back. Then you go to all those strange venues.

On the other hand, I think it is really important that we do that. We went to a church in Detroit. We had a very enthusiastic crowd, it wasn’t packed. But it is a place where there are probably people who have never been to a classical concert. So I think it was very important that we were there. I don’t mind those things. But doing a community concert as a season opening is a little sad to me. Others might tell you different things.

I think community concerts are important, but it would be a sad fact to have those instead of playing at Orchestra Hall.

DW: Management’s aim was not about having you do community concerts, that largely was a pretext. Their chief aim was to cut wages and lower costs.

MT: That is correct.

DW: Can you quantify what the cut has been?

MT: I think it is close to 30 percent. There is optional work that is not on the books yet. It will vary to a certain degree. Again, you can be included in that, or if you don’t subscribe to that, you don’t get the money. They will ask on an ad-hoc basis, if they need you. So there are times you won’t be able to play at that particular moment. If you take all that away then I think we are making around \$79,000, when we used to make \$104,000. The benefits went down a little too.

One of the reasons we were on strike was to stop this tide of destroying our livelihoods. We were able to maintain fairly decent health insurance. We kept the pension intact, which was great. They didn’t opt out of the AFM [American Federation of Musicians] plan, which would have cost the corporation a lot of money up front. They felt they were better off putting it in the fund.

DW: But the pay is now for how many weeks?

MT: It is for 36 weeks and 4 vacation weeks, so it is about 40. It is becoming a part-time job. However, they grouped it in such a way you have a season that runs October almost through May without a break. We

have a few weeks in the winter unpaid.

DW: What about the question of artistic quality? I know that is a delicate matter. It is difficult to believe there won't be some deterioration under these conditions.

MT: There is a reason we haven't had a lot of auditions. It used to be there were a lot of people that wanted this job. It was first of all prestige and second it paid a decent salary. So you got the best of the best. And once it becomes less of a job, some of those best people will not be interested. You still will get good people, but there will be a slight deterioration in quality, in my opinion.

DW: We reject the notion of concessions completely. Why should musicians or autoworkers pay for the crisis of their system? The auto executives are making tens of millions of dollars a year. It is the same everywhere. The bankers are being bailed out to the tune of trillions of dollars and they are telling the population 'you pay.'

Orchestras should be funded by society.

MT: It wasn't simply about the cuts. It was about trying to ruin the union, deplete their funding. If you look at the results, they took some things off the table that they could have taken off the table at the beginning. We would have never had the strike. They wanted the strike for whatever the reason.

DW: What were the negotiations like?

MT: They were frustrating and tedious. There were a lot of times we did not meet with management. We had nothing to say to each other. Our contract expired at the end of August last year. But we had talks before that that went winter through the spring, but they realized they couldn't get us to reopen the contract so they could negotiate year by year.

DW: They wanted a one-year contract?

MT: They were hoping to reopen the old contract and just cut our salary little by little. They wanted to do a reopener. But they had nothing to offer but cuts. Usually you have a promise of recovery or something.

DW: How do you feel about the management now?

MT: It's the same management. I don't know how I feel. The board has chosen to keep the same people in place. They have chosen to keep this direction where you lose the product. I can't judge with the community concerts how much revenue this is going to bring in. You would have to talk to me next year.

SJ: What kind of pressure was brought on you to settle the strike?

MT: We had Andrew Levin, who worked for Governor [Jennifer] Granholm. We had Senator [Carl] Levin who came in. We had a group that included some AFL-CIO people, a teachers' union person. There was a lot of pressure put on us. I think they would have just liked for us to cave in and take everything.

We didn't. It was futile on their part. We know the business a lot better than they do. We have a union that works differently. We are democratic.

DW: How long have you been with the DSO?

MT: Since 1995.

DW: Was it difficult to get in?

MT: Yes, it's very difficult to get in. We were a good batch. Out of over 120 candidates, five of us made the finals, and three of us got jobs, and the fourth one performs regularly as a substitute player.

DW: Until the strike, what changes did you see over those fifteen years, for better or worse?

MT: When I came in, the orchestra was on its way up coming from cuts like we have now. However, it was substantially less painful for the musicians then. I think we had a tremendous executive who did come to the orchestra and cut his own salary, and asked the orchestra to help him out. And the orchestra did help and the organization survived in those conditions. Rather than now, when we were made to cut our livelihood and there is no pain upstairs.

The orchestra went back up. Artistically it grew. The wages were improving little by little and you got better people to come audition.

SJ: What made you decide to come to Detroit?

MT: I was already in the US. I was playing at the Toledo Symphony, it was a convenient audition for me to take. This was the top orchestra of the auditions I played in that period. I knew about this orchestra from Europe. [Former DSO conductor] Antal Dorati was very famous in the part of Romania I come from. You always heard DSO recordings. It had prestige. That was one of the reasons I was hoping to get in.

DW: What was your training in Romania?

MT: I went to a conservatory between 1985 and 1989.

DW: At what age did you begin playing the violin?

MT: I was about five years old. I discovered a violin in a toy store. My dad asked me if I would like something like that for my birthday, and I said yes, and he got me a teacher too.

DW: What were the conditions for music students in Romania then?

MT: The school system was different than it is in the US; it was more specialized early on, and it was merit based. Early on, people who have talent would be nurtured and the ones that don't, who fail their exams, they go to other schools. By the end of high school you know what your profession is going to be. I attended the music school from the first grade through to twelfth grade.

You started with 100 kids, and you ended up with maybe 21. From there, only two of us got into the conservatory. There were very limited numbers who got a degree from a conservatory. In the whole country, they had about ten violin positions. In those days, there were three conservatories and each one had three or four positions. When I got in there were three positions.

They nurtured us if we could do the job, if we had the talent, if we could pass the exam. I got a stipend. I got free housing and free food.

The quality of the teaching was good. They were Romanian teachers. There is a good school there. There are a lot of good musicians that come from Romania.

DW: You graduated in 1989. What was happening in your life when the Ceausescu regime fell?

MT: The way it was, as soon as you graduate they offered you a job. If you are first in the class you get an orchestra job. If you are second or third you get a teaching job in the mountains in a little school. So I got the orchestra job. I was the best in the class. Then I went to Târgu Mureș, and then we went to Russia on a tour right away.

I was from Timișoara where the revolution started. It was right there in the downtown where all the shooting started, and my father worked in the theater, so he is sort of considered a hero. Although he doesn't claim it. He said 'I just went to work as usual.'

I left the country in early 1990 and I stayed in Germany. Then I came here at the end of 1990.

It was very depressing, the musical situation in Romania. People were depressed, they didn't have money to buy tickets, and they just weren't a part of it any more.

I stay in touch with the philharmonic. They managed to survive. They have a thriving audience nowadays. It is becoming more of a prestigious thing to go to. The orchestra is very good and they are touring a lot. Not necessarily for good wages, but they are touring a lot. So they are on the rebound.

SJ: What do you think about the overall situation facing culture and the arts?

MT: If you look right now at the vestiges of the Roman Empire or the Greek Civilization, the first things you encounter are objects of art. They tell you the history of the time. They set trends in the world. You don't see the generals, the armies; you don't see the politics, you see the art. And I think it is a shame to cut that. Any major civilization has invested in art, in music. It is a shame that a country like the US, which is still very wealthy--at least the one percent of the population that doesn't pay the taxes--they would rather not invest heavily in the arts. That's how the

cities go to pieces, when you don't have the institutions there, when you don't have a heartbeat. There are many cities like this.

SJ: What do you think about the political situation?

MT: What can I tell you? I come from a country that was supposed to be democratic, but was a dictatorship. I believe there are a lot of things happening now that don't help democracy. I believe that at some point democracy will come through and the right people will get elected.

DW: The problem is you have two political parties that don't offer an alternative.

MT: Everywhere you go, it is the wealthy portion of the population that is going to have the say.

SJ: You have such a narrowly constricted political system. It is virtually impossible to get on the ballot.

MT: That is true. It is debatable. I do like it here. Not as much as I used to. But I do feel people that have talent can do something. Politics is a complex issue and I don't think I have the ability to judge it properly.

I agree that there are many places you can't get in because you don't have the right amount of money. Some parties are not accepted on the ballot. There are all kinds of rules.

SJ: What about the Wall Street protests?

MT: I love them. It's a start.

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