

Atlanta Symphony musicians agree to concessions after nine-week lockout

By Fred Mazelis
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In the latest of a series of concession agreements at leading US orchestras, the Atlanta Symphony ended a nine-week lockout following a deal for somewhat smaller givebacks than it had originally demanded from musicians.

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Players Association accepted the proposed four-year contract, ending the second management lockout in two years. The orchestra's season will begin tonight, with conductor Robert Spano leading the orchestra and chorus in a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

In 2012 the players were locked out for one month before accepting major concessions, including a reduction in the length of the season that meant pay cuts of about 15 percent annually, along with decreasing the number of permanent players to 88 from 95.

This time, after the musicians won unusual public support from music director Spano and principal guest conductor Donald Runnicles, management beat a slight tactical retreat. After mediation, however, the players were still forced into another round of givebacks. They will receive pay raises of only 6 percent over four years, which will not come close to making up for the previous cuts. At the same time they will also see their health care premiums double, to \$20 a week.

On the issue of the size of the orchestra, management appeared to back down partially. This is crucial because reliance on substitute musicians for programs that require a full orchestra complement of 90 or more means that players, no matter how good, will not benefit from working together regularly as an ensemble, and the quality of the performances will usually suffer.

Even this provision, however, leaves some room for

doubt on the future of the ASO. The contract provides for only 77 musicians in the first year and only a promise to try to raise this to 81 in the second, before rising to 84 in the third and 88 in the fourth year of the contract.

As in the case of last summer's Metropolitan Opera negotiations in New York, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service was utilized to arrive at the final agreement. FMCS acting director Allison Beck brought the two sides together and announced the tentative contract on November 7, after apparently convincing the musicians to accept the additional concessions.

Many of the Atlanta musicians remain angry over the endless attacks on their conditions of employment by a board of trustees that, as elsewhere, is motivated almost entirely by the financial bottom line. If management agreed to settle, it is because the corporate elite cares about its cultural "image," not about the actual musical legacy and contributions represented by the orchestra.

The feelings of the musicians were hinted at in a statement from a spokesman of their negotiating team, who thanked both Spano and Runnicles for their support.

One orchestra industry observer, Drew McManus, drew attention to sarcastic comments about Spano by the chairman of the governing board of the Woodruff Arts Center, the parent organization of the ASO. Referring to Spano's and Runnicles' public support of the musicians, McManus said, as quoted in an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* blog, "That was unique and very risky. I'm very curious to see what happens to both of them."

The Atlanta settlement follows a recent pattern set in both the record 16-month lockout at the Minnesota Orchestra, which ended earlier this year, and the new contracts agreed to at the Met Opera this past summer.

In Minnesota the CEO and president of the orchestra, Michael Henson, resigned in April after his departure was virtually demanded by music director Osmo Vanska as the condition for his return to lead the musicians. In Atlanta the CEO and president, Sidney Romanstein, announced his departure three weeks into the latest lockout, in what he claimed was an effort to get talks moving.

The fact that these resignations were ultimately considered necessary undoubtedly reflected the growing militancy of the musicians as well as the significant support they won among the concert-going public. At the same time, in the absence of a political movement that challenges the grip of the super-rich on culture and every other sphere of life, the musicians were forced to accept yet another round of attacks. Management in both Minneapolis and Atlanta sacrificed its leading spokesman but secured much of what it sought.

As at the Met, a mediator was brought in because of the fear that tensions would get out of hand and lead to a broader struggle against arts cutbacks and attacks on public services more generally.

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