

“It seems to be class warfare”

Chicago Symphony Orchestra clarinetist John Bruce Yeh speaks on musicians strike

By George Marlowe
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Musicians of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) are currently in the sixth week of their longest-ever strike. Last week, they courageously rejected the intransigent “last, best and final” offer of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association (CSOA), which could destroy their pensions and lower the artistic standards of the symphony.

At last week’s free concert at St. James Cathedral, which was one of many widely attended and successful free concerts performed by the musicians, the WSWS spoke with striking CSO musician John Bruce Yeh about the issues at stake in the strike.

Yeh joined the CSO in 1977 at the age of 19 and is the longest-tenured clarinetist in the orchestra’s history. Yeh has been the assistant principal clarinetist and E-flat clarinetist. In 1979, he became the founder and director of the chamber ensemble, Chicago Pro Musica. The first recording of the ensemble of Igor Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du soldat* won the 1985 Grammy award for the best new classical artist. Yeh also taught at DePaul University’s School of Music for more than two decades and joined the faculty of Roosevelt University’s Chicago College of Performing Arts in 2004.

Yeh, a charismatic performer and music educator, spoke about the strike last week and its broader implications. “We’ve been on strike into the fifth week,” he said. “This is unprecedented in the 128 years of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. It is a very serious and dire situation that we have been put into.

“When I joined in 1977, we were clearly the leaders in all aspects of conditions, compensation, pension benefits and, of course, artistic quality. Our music director at the time, Sir Georg Solti, would always come to us and give us a pep talk and say, ‘My dears, we must maintain our standard. And we must raise our standard! This is a very difficult thing, but we must do it!’”

Solti was one of the more influential conductors of the CSO, from 1969 to 1991. He was replaced by world-famous conductor Daniel Barenboim, from 1991 to 2006. The current music director is Ricardo Muti, who directed the CSO musicians after Barenboim’s departure.

“Solti understood the importance of keeping the standard high, both musically and with respect to our conditions that allow us to be musically the greatest,” Yeh noted.

“The two major issues in our strike are our retirement benefits, which we have been guaranteed now for 50 years. We have a

defined-benefit pension plan that our management has been insistent on removing. What we can deduce from that is they don’t really care about the money issue, I believe. It is becoming increasingly clear that this is an ideological agenda of our Board of Trustees. Our arts organization is a cultural jewel of the world.”

“It seems to be class warfare,” he added, “and we will not accept that.”

What the musicians confront in the strike is even bigger, in fact, than the issue of pensions and salary, as vital as that is, and bigger than the problem of the individual oligarchs and billionaires who control the CSOA board, such as Helen Zell, the wife of multi-billionaire real estate mogul, Sam Zell.

CSO musicians confront the aristocratic principle in defending not only pensions and salary, but music and art in general. Art, music and culture cannot survive under a society where the financial aristocracy and the ruling class determine what is acceptable, even as three billionaires control more wealth than half of the population in the United States.

Life under capitalism today is characterized by immense global social inequality, endless wars, attacks on democratic rights, police violence, poverty conditions for millions of workers and increasing authoritarianism and the danger of fascism. Funding for arts and education in the US has been decimated, with the support of both parties of big business, the Democrats and the Republicans, and with the complicity of the trade unions and their boosters.

Such conditions make life for millions intolerable and certainly will not allow art and music to flourish, let alone allow the preservation of a good pension for musicians. Most orchestra musicians today make around \$30,000 a year, on par with the poverty wages of teachers, who emerged into mass struggles in the last year in the United States and globally.

“Salaries,” Yeh noted, “have not kept pace with other major orchestras, our peer orchestras. We are trying to maintain and preserve and raise the standard of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.” CSO musicians have had to accept salary increases below inflation in previous contracts and are currently demanding higher raises than the proposals by management, which would continue to be below inflation.

“It is so heartwarming and amazing to see great support worldwide, from Chicago and the public, the teachers, the

construction workers, the stagehands of course,” he added, about the immense support the musicians have received.

“If there is a silver lining to this terrible cloud,” he said about the strike, “it has brought the musicians even closer, we have greater solidarity. Because we not only fight for ourselves, for our successors, for our tradition, but for all orchestras throughout the United States. If we give out, if we give in, we will have let everybody down. We don’t intend to do that.”

Daniel Gingrich played the horn at the St. James Cathedral free public concert last Wednesday. Dennis Michel played the bassoon, Mio Nakamura played the piano and William Welter played the oboe. The musicians performed stirring renditions of the Sonata in B Flat Major, HWV 357 by George Frideric Handel, the Sonata in F Minor, Op. 120, No. 1 by Johannes Brahms and the Quintet in E Flat Major, K. 452 by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

“We played music that is very, very dear to our hearts,” Yeh reflected. “I played the Brahms Sonata for clarinet and piano, the first of two sonatas that he wrote.

“They were the last instrumental pieces that Brahms wrote,” he added. “They are both autumnal in their beauty and also very optimistic in their end. That encapsulates the emotions we face today.

“And we played Mozart, which is always happy music. The Mozart quintet we played is reputed to be the favorite piece that he wrote. The Handel oboe sonata was played by one of our newest members, William Welter, a fabulous young oboe player. And I have to give a tip of the hat to our pianist Mio Nakamuro, who has been such a champion to join us in this concert and many concerts throughout the city during this time that we have been out of orchestra hall.”

Continuing to speak on the strike, Yeh noted, “The way we feel that the fight that we carrying on right now is that we are demanding to be valued for what we are and what we do. We really feel that we are being devalued on a constant basis—not enough money. When we have discussions, negotiations, it’s always about them trying to take away from us. In doing so, they take away from our ability to provide society with what we need to nurture and nourish our society. Our traditions need to be examined.”

When asked what he thought about the rise of nationalism, fascism and increasing forms of authoritarianism internationally and the role of the musician, he said, “Music, the arts, all sorts of arts, are food for the soul. We need to nurture and nourish our soul. We need to continue to fight to have the opportunity to do that. If we have massive inequality, poverty and rising authoritarianism, then that is just antithetical to have a society that is raised up, where everybody is raised up with cultural benefits, with music, art, with just joy. Unfortunately our society today is going in the opposite direction.”

“We are committed to fighting for continued growth in the arts and the ability to have music for everybody,” he said about the importance of broad access to arts and culture. “Our music director Maestro Muti is very keen on taking our message all around the world to people who don’t have access to it. We played in prisons, in places where people don’t ordinarily have the chance to hear our music at this level.

“Our very, very good friend, Yo-Yo Ma, is another one who has really used his ability and artistry to draw people towards understanding that art and music is really food for the soul. And we can rise above strife, above poverty, if we use art as a means of communication. It’s a means to connection.”

On Saturday, musician Ma performed Bach’s Suite No. 1 for the cello at the Juarez-Lincoln international bridge at the US-Mexico border to oppose the attacks on immigrants by the Trump administration and the political establishment.

“We have an international orchestra,” Yeh said about the world-class musicians in the CSO. “When I joined the orchestra in 1977, I was the first Asian member of the orchestra, but I was born in America. Now we have about 20 musicians who are immigrants, from South America, from Scandinavia, from all corners of the world. We are an international group of musicians. To devalue anybody because they are not born in America is antithetical to common sense. We reject the notion that immigrants should be devalued in any way. We will continue to stand up for that.”

Speaking about the recent wave of teachers strikes, Yeh added, “What we as musicians, as artists do, is encourage this sort of activity by reaching out and giving strength to the uprising of the working class. I really want to emphasize that. We are with the working class. We are the working people!”

While there is a constant refrain by the CSOA board and the rest of the political establishment that there is no money for pensions and other social programs, trillions of dollars continue to be spent to carry out criminal wars and boost the profits of Wall Street and the super rich. The fortunes of just the Zells (\$5.5 billion) alone could fund a 100-person orchestra making \$150,000 a year for the next 367 years.

The United States is home to 540 billionaires, with immense wealth concentrated in a few hands at the expense of the vast majority. Resources exist, but it poses the question of who controls society—the vast majority of the world’s working class that produce society’s wealth, or a tiny handful of social parasites who control it?

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