

Greg Sandow

The Orchestra Crisis, 2008 to 2021

Some of the orchestral labor disputes and pay reductions in recent years

2008

During a labor dispute, the Columbus (Ohio) Symphony shuts down for five months. Finally the musicians accept 27% pay cut. A new contract in 2011 raises pay by a small amount, but musicians have to pay more for health insurance and pay level still is less than it was before 2008.

2009

Cincinnati Symphony musicians accept 11% pay cut

2010

Detroit Symphony management proposes pay cuts, musicians go on strike. Strike lasts six months. Musicians accept a 25% pay cut, a reduction from a 52-week season to 40 weeks, and a drop in the number of musicians under contract from 96 to 81.

Baltimore Symphony musicians accept 19% pay cut.

Louisville Orchestra declares bankruptcy.

Honolulu Symphony cancels half its concerts, then declares bankruptcy and goes out of business.

2011

Philadelphia Orchestra, saying it has financial problems, files for bankruptcy, a dramatic move usually made by individuals and corporations that can't pay their bills. Musicians' salaries fall 14%, size of the orchestra is reduced from 106 full-time players to 95, and musicians' retirement benefits are cut.

2012

Atlanta Symphony, running deficits, shortens season from 52 weeks to 42 weeks, Musicians agree to lose 10 weeks of pay. Also agree that number of musicians under contract will be reduced from 95 to 88. This was agreed after a bitter labor dispute, during which the symphony management cancelled one week of the season. Musicians didn't get paid during that time. The technical term for this is a lockout — meaning that the management of an organization stops the organization's operations, along with employees' pay, as a tactic to force employees to accept what management wants.

Minnesota Orchestra management locks out musicians, and cancels entire 2012-2013 season when musicians won't accept proposed cuts. The lockout doesn't end till 2014, when musicians accept a 15% pay cut, and a decrease in the number of paid musicians.

Louisville musicians sign a new contract. They accept a 19% pay cut, reductions in their benefits, reduction in the number of weeks they work from 36 to 30, and reductions in the number of musicians under contract from 71 to 55.

2014

Another bitter labor dispute at the Atlanta Symphony, which has been running deficits for 14 years. Management cancels part of the season again, this time for two months, when musicians won't agree to further cuts. Mediators from the federal government resolve the dispute, and when the season resumes, musicians agree to play with only 77 players under contract.

Met Opera — facing declining box office revenue and rising costs — demands cuts from its unionized employees, including musicians. A bitter labor dispute follows, with ugly public statements from both sides. When the dispute is settled, the employees, including musicians, accept pay cuts, and the company agrees to cut other parts of its budget.

Memphis Symphony musicians accept 38% pay cut, season reduced from 39 weeks to 24 weeks.

Honolulu Symphony comes back to life, renamed as the Hawai'i Symphony, but with fewer musicians, and both the number of concerts and musicians' salaries cut in half.

2016

Minnesota Orchestra appears healthy, with renewed vitality and audience support. But musicians' pay is lower than it was in 2012, and only 76 musicians are employed, even though the contract specifies that there should be 88. Ticket sales are lower than they were in 2011.

Hartford (CT) Symphony musicians accept pay cuts.

Ft. Worth (TX) musicians go on strike, after management asks for pay cuts. Their pay had already been cut in previous years. Strike is settled only when a donor gives \$700,000, allowing the orchestra to avoid pay cuts. Note that donations like this can't be expected in every crisis.

2017

Pittsburgh Symphony musicians go on strike when management asks for cuts in new contract. Six weeks of concerts are cancelled. When the dispute is settled, the musicians accept a 10.5% pay cut, reduced to 7.5% when an anonymous donor gives money to the orchestra. New five-year contract calls for the pay cuts to last only three years, with former pay level restored in the fifth year. (It's fair to ask whether the orchestra will really be able to do this.)

Louisville Orchestra musicians sign a new three-year contract. Negotiations are friendly, and the orchestra is rebounding financially, with a growth in ticket sales, subscriptions, and donations. The new contract raises musicians' pay 5%, increases the number of paid weeks, and adds one new musician to the orchestra. But even so, the musicians' pay is

still lower than it was before the 2010 bankruptcy. A member of the orchestra committee says that “our progress toward a salary that will attract and retain musicians remains slow as the orchestra continues to rebuild.”

2018

Baltimore Symphony management outrages musicians with a harsh demand. Baltimore is as one of the largest US orchestras, has guaranteed musicians a full year’s employment, 52 weeks of pay each year. Now management wants to guarantee only 40 weeks. This of course would mean large pay cuts for musicians. But even more important would be the lowering of the orchestra’s status, removing it — at least in its budget numbers and national profile — from the top rank of American orchestras.

Chicago Lyric Opera musicians go on strike when management asks for pay cuts and reduction in the number of weeks musicians are employed. Dispute is settled when musicians accept reductions in size of the orchestra and in number of weeks they’re employed, in exchange for a higher weekly salary.

2020

Detroit Symphony cuts budget from \$29 million to \$22 million, in part by reducing musicians’ pay. Receives \$8.6 million from the U.S. federal government, a grant given to organizations that suffer financial losses because of Covid. Without these government funds, the orchestra wouldn’t have been able to pay its bills.

2021

San Antonio Symphony management asks musicians to accept a 30% pay cut, and wants to reduce the number of fulltime musicians in the orchestra from 72 to 42. Musicians go on strike. In 2022, management declares bankruptcy, and the orchestra goes out of business. San Antonio becomes the largest U.S. city without a major orchestra.

Now there’s a new orchestra in San Antonio, the San Antonio Philharmonic, made up of former San Antonio Symphony musicians. It starts performing in January, 2023, with a short season of just four classical concerts.