

Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony files for bankruptcy days before beginning of 2023-24 season

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The Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony (KWS) announced it was filing for bankruptcy last month and ceasing operations. This will end the 78-year history of the third largest orchestra in Ontario, Canada's most populous province and the country's industrial heartland. Filing for bankruptcy will lead to the dissolution of the symphony and deal a major blow to the cultural landscape in Southern Ontario.

The KWS Board of Directors—which does not include any symphony musicians—issued a terse press release on September 21 announcing the decision to dissolve the symphony, effectively washing their hands of a financial crisis for which they bear considerable responsibility. In a prepared statement, Rachel Smith-Spencer, the chair of the board of directors explained, “In the last three days, we have appealed to all of our major stakeholders and have exhausted all available avenues to secure the \$2 million required immediately to continue operations.”

Previously, the board had made perfunctory appeals to the municipal and federal governments for emergency aid. An appeal for a one-time extension of a meagre emergency grant for \$100,000 addressed to the Region of Waterloo, whose chairperson is the former federal Liberal whip Karen Redman, did not even garner a reply. Similar appeals for federal aid, which occurred over the course of the past year, also fell upon deliberately tone deaf ears.

Members of the 52-piece ensemble were “blindsided” by the board's sudden announcement. With only 48 hours until the start of the 2023-24 season, the September 21 statement disclosed that the entire season would be cancelled, along with special event programming, the youth orchestra, and Bridge to Music, a program that aimed to bring classical music to low income (i.e., working class) youth. There was no prior notice to the musicians that the symphony was in financial distress or that the board was considering dealing a deathblow to the KWS.

The musicians were taken aback by the announcement, especially since a new contract had been ratified this past summer with a pay increase of 3 percent. This is in effect a pay cut, with CPI running at 4.0 percent per annum as of Statistics Canada's most recent report. Due to the nature of the contracts there was no severance pay available for the musicians. All of this comes in the midst of the broader cost-of-living crisis in Canada.

Richard Sandals, the associate director of symphonic services for the Canadian Federation of Musicians, the Canadian branch of the American Federation of Musicians and an affiliate of the AFL-CIO and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), told CP24 that “The situation isn't entirely clear yet ... Even if the musicians are owed

money, it's not entirely clear to us that there's any money to pay them with.”

To date, Central Ontario Musicians Local 226, part of the Canadian Federation of Musicians, which represents the musicians, only issued a cursory statement on their Facebook page on September 21. Since then, no major arts organization has issued any statement clearly condemning the actions of management as an attack on the musicians and culture more broadly.

Kitchener-Waterloo boasts a population of more than 650,000, but, as is increasingly the case in most of the world, there are very few employment opportunities for classical musicians. The symphony was one of the few major arts employers in the region.

Classical music is a field that requires years of specialized training and costly education. Speaking to the *Waterloo Region Record*, KWS concert master Bénédicte Lauzière noted, “The situation affects the musicians most right now ... but the community will very soon feel the effects ... it's terrible in the sense that we stand to lose part of our cultural identity.” A former industrial hub, Kitchener-Waterloo has seen the closure of many factories over the past two decades. One in three manufacturing jobs disappeared between 2005 and 2015, according to data from Statistics Canada.

The general economic malaise and extreme social inequality are expressed in the decline in subscribers for the symphony. Season subscriptions fell from 8,000 to 2,000 over the past few years amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This is just one indication that the pandemic and the deliberate policy of “malign neglect” of all capitalist governments is having a devastating impact on the working class, especially in the performing arts sector.

The Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony orchestra was formed as a semi-professional organization in 1944 by Charles F. Thiele, a New York bandleader transplant, and Gene Kruspse, the conductor of the local philharmonic choir, to accompany the choir in the performances of the major oratorios. Choral singing has a long history in the region going back to mid-19th-century German-Mennonite immigrants from Europe and parts of the US. Singing competitions, including a *sängerfest*, were held in what is now Waterloo Region as early as 1862.

In the decades following its founding, organizations like the KWS and many symphonies outside of the major metropolitan areas in North America remained largely amateur affairs. This changed for the KWS under the leadership of the conductor Raffi Armenian, who oversaw the transition of the orchestra from semi-professional to professional during his 1970-1993 tenure. This period also saw the

symphony move to an actual concert hall, the Centre In The Square, which was built in 1980.

Several interim conductors followed Armenian, including Martin Fischer-Dieskau, the son of the renowned German lyric baritone and lied singer Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Martin Fischer-Dieskau was popular with the symphony musicians for his efforts to improve standards and to solidify the symphony as a pillar of serious culture in the region. However, his plans for a European tour were strongly opposed by the board of directors and he was removed from his post in a blatant move by the board to assert its primacy over the musicians.

In 2006, the KWS board announced that they would face insolvency if they did not raise \$2.5 million. A “Save Our Symphony” campaign was mounted and \$2.3 million was raised in short order.

Throughout the 2010s the symphony sought to “broaden” its appeal. This, however, failed to reach new subscribers. The symphony closed its doors as part of the public health measures implemented in the spring of 2020 with the onset of the pandemic. But unlike the hundreds of billions of dollars handed over to the banks and big business by the Trudeau Liberal and provincial Tory Ford governments with no strings attached, cultural organizations received a pittance in pandemic assistance by comparison.

The KWS is one of many arts organizations across North America impacted by the gutting of funds by the ruling elite for music and cultural institutions more broadly. Similar situations have confronted other symphony orchestras across Canada in recent years. A brief list of symphony orchestras in Canada that have faced insolvency includes: Orchestra London in 2014; the Calgary Philharmonic in 2001 after management initiated a lockout; the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra in 1996; and the Toronto symphony orchestra, which faced massive pay cuts that resulted in an 11-week strike in 1999.

Conditions south of the border are much the same. Major symphonies in the US that have experienced serious troubles include the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 2016, the Minnesota Orchestra in Minneapolis in 2012-14, and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 2010-11. All of these struggles ended with sweeping concessions for the musicians. And this list is by no means exhaustive. Countless regional symphonies in the US have floundered in recent years, including San Antonio in 2022, and Albuquerque and Syracuse in 2011.

In the face of current challenges, the KWS musicians have been forced to take action into their own hands. A GoFundMe campaign was set up to help raise funds for the musicians. Underscoring the strong support enjoyed by the orchestra in the population, the fund raised over \$420,000 in two weeks. A series of benefit concerts were organized by the symphony musicians in conjunction with local musicians, and other workers and supporters in the community. Benefit concerts have taken place in several local churches and more are planned for the future.

Looking at the donations, one is struck by the fact that many of the 2,000 plus donations are small contributions from workers and musicians, both in Kitchener-Waterloo and across the country. This fact has gone entirely unreported in the “authoritative” corporate media. It is this social basis that can and must be mobilized more broadly in the defence of the symphony musicians and culture as a whole.

The financial bankruptcy of the KWS expresses the political bankruptcy of the perspective that there can be an accommodation within the capitalist system that will respect the rights and needs of

musicians in particular and the right of the working class to access culture more generally.

A glance at the board of directors gives one a very clear picture of the class interests they represent. They include the director of a wealth management fund who helps wealthy individuals “navigate the complexity that comes along with wealth accumulation,” tech sector head hunters, and various individuals who act as consultants for major corporations. They represent a class whose interests are bound up with the continued existence of the profit system.

Music and the arts are not viewed as something worth supporting by the financial elite because they represent a drain on resources that could be, from the point of view of the capitalists, better spent on investing in the stock market or waging war. This includes the transferring of the wealth produced by the workers to the heights of society and the pursuit of increased military expenditure for the great power conflicts they are waging against Russia and China.

Indeed, the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau has increased military spending drastically. Figures from the PBO put official defence spending at \$36.3 billion for 2022-23. This is projected to rise to \$51 billion by 2026-27. Spending by the Canadian government on military equipment and other forms of assistance for the US-led NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens to spiral out of control into a larger world war, totals nearly \$9 billion. The \$2 million required to keep the KWS going is less than 0.025 percent of this sum.

The musicians of the former Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony are being forced to come to the conclusion that they face the same assault on their living conditions as workers in other industries. Whatever the immediate outcome of the events in Kitchener-Waterloo, one thing is clear: the arts cannot flourish under capitalism.

The endless cuts at the hands of politicians of all stripes, the eradication of any form of serious music education, and the diversion of all of society’s resources for war abroad and war on the working class at home are proof of this. The defence of arts and culture is ultimately a political question. They can only be defended on the basis of the socialist reorganization of society to place the satisfaction of social need—not private profit—at the center of all human activity.



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