

San Francisco Symphony Chorus holds three-day strike, forcing cancellation of season opener

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By going on strike for three days last week, San Francisco Symphony Chorus musicians forced the cancellation of the orchestra's season opening concert series. The strike announcement came just a few hours before the scheduled start time of the September 19 event.

The chorus consists primarily of unpaid volunteers. Out of over 150 members, only 32 are paid for their work. The latter minority with paid positions are organized within the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA). They voted unanimously to strike after rejecting an offer which would maintain Symphony management's general plan to cut the chorus's budget by 80 percent, while freezing all contract terms for choristers for one year.

An AGMA statement explains that the union had offered to take an 8.9 percent pay cut during the 2024-25 season. Symphony management had refused "this reasonable settlement offer," which triggered the strike.

The choristers, including the overwhelming majority of volunteers, picketed outside Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco during the scheduled performance time last Thursday. They were joined by dozens of orchestra players, members of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) Local 6, as well as other supporters and classical music fans.

Symphony management's latest proposed contract terms include annual pay of scarcely over \$22,000, including 26 performances, 53 rehearsals and 26 warm-up hours. While these numbers may appear to indicate a relatively light time commitment, it bears emphasis that every hour of performance must be preceded by many hours of individual and informal group practice hours, for which musicians go uncompensated.

It also bears emphasis that \$22,000 per year is a small fraction of a living wage in San Francisco, estimated by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Living Wage Calculator to be \$59,770 for a single adult with no children, and \$169,582 for two working adults with two children.

An open letter published on the AGMA website on July 11

argued:

San Francisco Symphony management has proposed slashing the San Francisco Symphony Chorus budget by 80%. You read that correctly. 80%. The chorus accounts for a little over 1% of the overall budget and is vital in attracting audiences and donors. Simply put, ticket sales are higher when we are singing. The financial rationale for such severe cuts simply doesn't add up. The Symphony has informed us that it projects a \$12.5 million budget deficit for the next fiscal year. Putting aside the assumption that this deficit must be solved only through cuts rather than improved fundraising or patron development, cutting \$800,000 of the Chorus's roughly \$1 million cost won't cover this. Cutting 80% of their approximately \$75 million in expenses across the board would save nearly \$60 million, indicating these cuts unreasonably target the Chorus.

The orchestra's website, perhaps inadvertently, reinforces a sense that chorus members are to be seen as a "second tier" among orchestra musicians. The website features an individual photograph and separate profile page for each instrumentalist, while the names of chorus members are simply listed all on one page, with no individual biographical information, which is kept separate from the primary "Meet the Musicians" page.

Chung-Wai Soong, a bass singer who has been in the chorus for over 30 years, told CBS News, "To be consistently ... so underappreciated, undervalued and insulted is absolutely heartbreaking."

In another open letter published September 4, San Francisco Symphony Chorus Director Emeritus Vance

George writes:

The Symphony management's intention to make a drastic cut in the Chorus budget is simply awful. It's a shockingly poor sign for the Chorus's future, and deeply insulting to those who have given their time and talent to the Symphony, from the Chorus's founding to its celebrated half century.

The truly *insulting* nature of the proposed cuts to the chorus budget is underscored by the plans of the orchestra management to renovate Davies Symphony Hall at a cost of \$100 million, even while it insists on cutting the chorus's budget by 80 percent to around \$200,000.

Moreover, the San Francisco Symphony's endowment is worth over \$325 million and one of the largest in the country—enough to cover the chorus's current budget for hundreds of years.

A Reddit post from September 18, written by a user claiming to be one of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus's volunteer members, credibly explained:

Basically, Symphony management seems hellbent on destroying the paid singer positions within the chorus, and if they are successful, many of the (very highly talented) unpaid singers will also leave since they're there because of the level of musicianship of the professional singers. This would be devastating to one of the best large choruses in the US.

The canceled concerts were to be performances of Giuseppe Verdi's *Requiem*. Picketing choristers went on to perform parts of the *Requiem* on the street outside Davies Symphony Hall.

In March this year, conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen, who has led the orchestra since 2020, announced his plans to resign. In a statement, he explained, "I do not share the same goals for the future of the institution as the board of governors does."

At the time, the *San Francisco Chronicle* noted that the Symphony was clearly "no longer a serious contender for top conducting talent."

As the WSWS reported in July,

It is widely understood that Salonen came into conflict with the board over budget cuts and other

cost-cutting measures, which the music director perceived as dangerous to the artistic health and well-being of the orchestra.

An online petition demanding that the orchestra retain Salonen has collected over 8,600 signatures as of this writing.

Musicians cannot afford to rely for their livelihood on hopes that classical music, under the current conditions of a profound and deepening cultural, social, economic and political crisis, will experience a historically unprecedented resurgence in ticket sales and charitable contributions. They must recognize that appeals to orchestra management, firmly in the grip of the financial oligarchy, are doomed to failure.

Classical musicians' just demands for a living wage must become linked to a demand for a general social right of access to culture. The basis for a fight for these rights is a political movement of the working class.

There is a way for choristers and other orchestra members to undertake a real fight for social and cultural rights today. They can and must reach out for support to musicians in other ensembles and other unions, as well as other cultural workers and the working class.

These conditions are widespread. On September 23, members of the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) announced they had unanimously voted to strike against the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C.

In November, the current contract of the San Francisco Symphony instrumentalists in AFM Local 6 is set to expire.

The San Francisco Symphony Chorus's next scheduled performance is Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem* on November 15-17.



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