

The orchestra is dead! Long live the orchestra!

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra finally overcomes its crisis. Now what?

By Clemens Matuschek

It was certainly one of the longest intermissions in the history of symphonic music. The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (SLSO), the nation's second oldest, finally removed its collective mutes after two months of silence on stage and a heated debate about salaries off stage. But despite the fact that everybody – management, musicians, and certainly the audience – is relieved to be able to appreciate at least the coda of the season, two major questions remain. How will the future of SLSO look? And what is the significance of this disturbing minor-key intermezzo for the entire world of symphonic music?

The crisis started January 2, when Symphony President Randy Adams presented next season's contract to the orchestra's negotiating committee and its chairman, Jan Gippo, proposing a yearly salary base of about \$72,000 – almost \$1,900 less than the current one. The musicians, having in mind the average salaries of other top orchestras which range between \$90,000 and \$100,000, were not euphoric. They put down their instruments – not only for their own reasons but because Adams had changed the locks of Powell Symphony Hall, literally locking the musicians out and leaving them in the rain, where they immediately started to form a picket line.

What came next was a staring contest; no one seemed about to blink. This continued for two months, until, finally, the lockout / strike (depending on whom you ask) was ended by federal mediator Charles Fuchs and the decision by the St. Louis Office of the National Labor Relations Board that the strike could be considered illegal.

Although everybody was relieved to resume the season, a lot of wounds remain that will take some time to heal. The musicians will hardly forgive President Adams not only for literally locking them out, but for also silently canceling their health benefits even before they officially rejected the new contract. A cellist was shocked to learn that she had no health insurance when her son had to be taken to hospital.

A collateral damage that could severely influence the orchestra's future was the cancellation of auditions for new horn and double-bass players. 33 young musicians (one even came from Milan) were left stranded and are not too likely to travel to St. Louis again in the near future. Even worse, several of the current players auditioned for new ensembles. What if they succeed and leave an orchestra that just hired David Robertson, a rising star and darling of the critics, as music director?

There have been forced 'intermissions' – strikes, lockouts, and alike – before, but the severity of this latest one is unique in a scary way. The fact that the St. Louis *marcia funebre* almost led to a disaster expresses the minor role that the arts play in the minds of nowadays politicians. Neither the Mayor nor Governor nor any of Missouri's members of Congress felt the need to intervene, probably because they were busy raising money for bigger football stadiums, cynical voices say. The importance of the arts is obviously not as self-evident as decades ago. So what to do?

First, it is gratifying to see that the musicians not only play but stick and stand together in *unisono*. They are also supported by large parts of the St. Louis community and beyond. Numerous people donated to the musicians' relief fund; others wrote letters on the musicians' behalf. Throughout the country, professional musicians took a stand. This cumulated in a benefit concert during which the players were joined by colleagues from 14 other major orchestras, including those in Cleveland, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. They performed under the internationally famed conductor of the Boston Philharmonic, Benjamin Zander. Such solidarity is needed and will help to heal.

The arts have to redefine their position within society. Some orchestras and museums already have responded to that task by inventing new concepts of funding and attracting visitors. Still, I believe that the inherent concept of the arts is not to generate revenues. In fact, some will always exist on deficits that must be made up by donators or governments. In today's society, where everything is to be measured in economic terms, this is hard to proclaim. But just as medieval peasants accommodated the village singer with bread, we have to subsidize institutions that make us human beings. Those institutions should not exceed in burning money; in fact, they might very well adapt "capitalistic" concepts to stand at least on one foot of their own. But in the end, money should enable art to be generated and not the other way around.