

The President's Message

Support and Understanding in the Opera Orchestra Crisis

By Ray Hair

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Hard bargaining in our ongoing negotiations with The Dallas Opera led to the withdrawal on September 28 of many of the regressive contract terms the opera company sought to impose upon its orchestra. In the remainder of the proposal, however, we can clearly discern the unacceptable goals the opera company and partner Dallas Center for the Performing Arts (DCPA) have in mind for professional musicians, and for this Union.

The company's proposed 5-year contract now aims toward reducing a seasonal 17-week salary (now \$14,861) for 57 opera orchestra musicians to a 12-week salary (\$11,132) for a smaller ensemble of 48 musicians in the fall of 2009, just in time to celebrate the grand opening of the \$275 million Center. After only 12 salaried weeks, musicians would be engaged "as needed" and paid on a per-service basis. No benefit increases were offered over the proposed contract term.

To understand what the company is trying to do to the opera orchestra and why, we must look at what the opera company and the DCPA are saying to the public today, during the home stretch of the campaign to build the Center.

The current assault upon the livelihood of opera orchestra musicians, I believe, is a part of that campaign.

"The campaign's final phase, the construction phase, began on August 1 and will continue until the Center's grand opening in 2009," said Bill Lively, DCPA President and CEO. "The campaign to build the center is the largest and most ambitious cultural project in Dallas' 150-year history."

Ninety families and organizations have made gifts of \$1 million or more to the campaign to build the Center, now being promoted as an urban park destination.

Here is an excerpt from DCPA's recent newsletter that reveals its ambitious plan for the Dallas Arts District:

"Landscape architects Michel Desvigne and JJR are finalizing plans to create a lush, urban oasis surrounding the Dallas Center for the Performing Arts. The 10-acre Performance Park will weave together the newly designed Margot and Bill Winspear Opera House, Dee and Charles Wylie Theatre, Annette Strauss Artist Square, and eventually, City

Performance Hall, establishing the most significant new performing arts center since New York's Lincoln Center."

Yes, that's right, you heard right – they're building Lincoln Center – right here in the old hometown. And it'll be just like Big Apple, won't it? Featuring the DSO as the New York Phil on one hand and The Dallas Opera as the Met on the other – *the whole enchilada* – except when it comes to professional musicians.

Why, then, does the opera company say it will need a smaller orchestra for just 12 weeks per year to play *Lincoln Center Lone Star*?

The answer, I believe, lies in the DCPA's business plan, now being implemented as part of the final phase of its "campaign".

The DCPA and its opera company partner are seeking more efficiency in the opera pit by assailing the wages and benefits of the professional musicians who will work there – first by converting a seasonally salaried orchestra to a smaller, cheaper per-service ensemble, engaged "as needed", and secondly, by inviting other organizations to compete against them for pit work at a lower wage.

As Jennifer Garner noted in her report to RSO musicians, such an agenda, if realized now, could eventually affect every musician in the area. If it is allowed to infect the magnificent new DCPA, it could spread next door to the Meyerson, to Bass Hall in Fort Worth, and everywhere else.

After our last bargaining session, Forest Aten, a clarinetist and member of the bargaining team said, "In 2001, we had no pension contributions and no health and welfare benefits. We had to strike to get those and we won three new positions for the orchestra. I'm not willing to give any of that up."

Indeed, the final chapter of the DCPA's campaign to build its remarkable venue may actually be the beginning of a concerted effort to destroy the labor-economic standards we have fought for and won across Dallas, Fort Worth and throughout the region.

Why does \$275 million buy more glory for the wealthy but more pain for professional musicians? That is a question that only the heads at the top of the sumptuous DCPA food chain can answer.

You can bet that the annual salaries of Lively (\$260,000), opera company Music Director Graeme Jenkins (\$251,000) and General Director Karen Stone (\$200,000) will soar over the next five years. If they stand to gain, then why shouldn't the orchestra?

These same benevolent millions are now being used to force concessions and exert more “productivity” and control over the men and women of the opera orchestra, as if they were slaves.

For more than 15 years, the perfect performances from their hands, bodies and minds brought nothing but happiness to thousands of concertgoers who were moved to give such vast sums of money.

How can the opera company and DCPA officers and directors reconcile the irreparable harm that their plans will have upon our musician’s lives?

Are not our lives, our dreams, our goals and our talents as important as theirs?

While we will continue to bargain hard with the opera company and hope for the best, we are preparing for the worst. Elsewhere in this edition of *The Dallas Fort Worth Musician*, you will find Karen Schnackenberg’s column, “Fighting the good Fight.” You’ll read the updates that Matt Good, Dennis Bubert and Jennifer Garner have provided to their respective orchestras.

We are strengthening our internal network of support to sustain those affected in the event we are not able to resolve our differences with the opera company. In the event of a work stoppage, opera musicians will need to replace wages lost from struck work with other gainful employment or with additional income from related family businesses.

As a special insert to this edition of *The Dallas Fort Worth Musician*, I have included a roster of the Dallas Opera Orchestra and regular substitutes with instrument listings and information about any other occupation they have. Please keep it handy.

If we are provoked to strike, please keep the opera orchestra musicians uppermost in mind when filling engagements. Patronize their businesses. Contribute to their Strike Fund at Musicians Federal Credit Union. Communicate with them. They are your neighbors and your friends. They are laying it on the line not only for themselves but also for each of our 1700 members. The ability to weather an attack upon their interests is of interest to us all.

Please bookmark our web address, www.musiciansdfw.org and click the special opera crisis button for news updates as we approach the season opening performance of *Nabucco* on November 10.