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Hartford Symphony Must Be Saved



Hartford Symphony Orchestra (Steven Laschever photography /)

By **Editorial** · **Contact Reporter**

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The loss of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, one of the best regional orchestras in the country, would be terrible — almost unthinkable.

The HSO is a joy in itself and essential to a region that prides itself — and competes with other regions — on its cultural offerings and quality of life.

This marvelous institution, which dates to the 1930s, is running out of money. It could meet the same fate as the late and lamented Hartford Ballet and Connecticut Opera.

A requiem for the orchestra could be played by the end of next month, unless management and the musicians can reach a labor agreement.

The parties have been negotiating for more than a year — thus far to no avail — to replace the contract that ran out in 2014. As negotiations have dragged on, the HSO has also struggled with challenges facing legacy arts groups throughout the country — aging audiences, changing tastes, high

costs, a philanthropic shift to social needs, etc. The recession and Connecticut's slow recovery haven't helped.

With no agreement forthcoming, major donors are sitting on their wallets. The HSO has reduced its annual budget from \$6.5 million in 2008 to \$4.8 million today, but still runs a deficit that averages more than \$1 million. In recent years, a handful of remarkably generous angel donors have written large checks to make up the difference. No more, they say, until the orchestra finds a business model that doesn't generate deficits.

Urgency

Time is of the essence. There's only about \$1 million of usable endowment left. At the current burn rate, the rest of the 2015-16 season is a question mark. This past week, Stephen Collins, director of artistic operations and administration for the HSO, informed the union by letter that "the current season is in jeopardy and we are simply unable to commit to producing the 2016-17 HSO season at this time."

A key issue is how the musicians, who are all part time, are compensated.

The HSO says they are paid per "service," a service being a concert, rehearsal, school appearance or other use of a musician's time. The 31 "core" musicians, the orchestra's nucleus, are guaranteed 180 services a year. The problem, says management, is that the market doesn't support 180 services a year — which the union disputes — so the musicians end up getting paid for services they don't perform.

Management estimates that it could save \$400,000 a year by not paying for unperformed services, and so wants to align the number of services with what the market can bear.

Cuts Both Ways

This means a cut in what is already far from lavish pay for the musicians.

Michael Pollard, a violinist in the HSO's core orchestra and a member of the union's negotiating team, said the musicians "are willing to be part of the solution," but believes, not unreasonably, that management should share in the sacrifice and that there must be an immediate push to increase the orchestra's endowment.

Both goals are achievable. The HSO entered into an alliance with The Bushnell in early 2014 to streamline costs. By renegotiating that agreement, as is scheduled in early 2016, the \$325,000 fee

that the symphony pays to The Bushnell can be reduced. Or perhaps the alliance should be reconsidered.

Also, HSO board chairman Jeff Verney, a health insurance executive, said the board has been raising \$2 million to \$3 million a year for operating expenses, and is poised to go to donors as soon as the labor issues are settled to build the endowment.

That, or something like it, could save the symphony and move it forward. But the musicians and management have to put aside the bad feelings and mistrust that emerged from the contentious negotiations and reach a workable agreement.

Let us hope for good faith on both sides. The symphony is really important to this community.

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