



## 50 Years of Negotiations at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra

by Joseph Goldman, Benefits Analyst, AFM Symphonic Services

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) was granted the right of ratification by Local 5 on October 15, 1961. Previously, “All of the negotiations were done in private and the men in the

orchestra were just informed of the great things that had been accomplished by the union president,” says Hugh Cooper, DSO bassoonist and chair of the first DSO committee to participate in negotiations, in 1963. Not only had there previously been no musician input into collective bargaining, but orchestra meetings were banned, and the members of the orchestra were not even permitted to see a copy of the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA).

I have a copy of the formerly top secret 1960 CBA—all six pages. Scale in 1960 was \$130 per week for 27 weeks (\$3,510 annual scale). The contract was for 90 musicians performing eight services a week and included per diem and travel overtime, and an addendum promising to initiate a pension in the 2nd year of the contract. Most of the things that we now take for granted, such as nonrenewal review and grievance procedures, medical, dental, life, disability, and instrument insurances, paid vacation, touring and run out provisions, working conditions, seniority, doubling, and move-up pay did not exist. Once, when Cooper asked for a raise, he was informed: “A family man with children has no place being in an orchestra.”

Gradually, contract terms improved after DSO musicians attained the right of ratification. The progress afforded all American orchestra musicians by the formation of the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM) in 1962, the dedication of many orchestra members serving on committees, inspired negotiating counsel, and most

importantly, the unquestionable unity of DSO musicians have all led to a meteoric rise in the living standard and working conditions of the Detroit Symphony musicians.

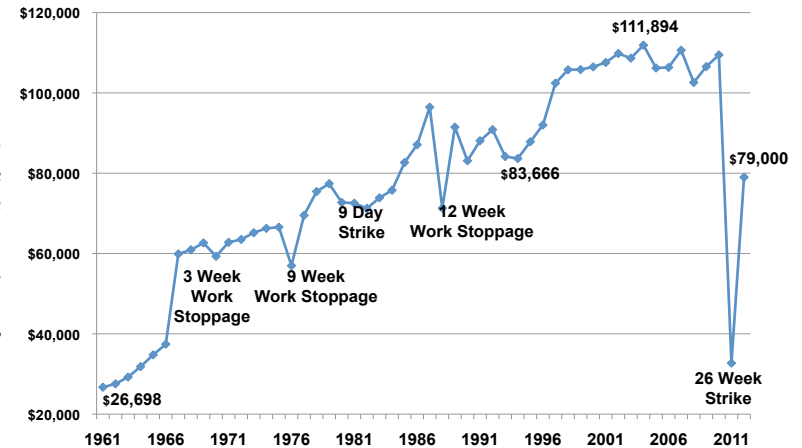
By 1976, our real inflation adjusted wages had increased by more than 250%, and the formerly absent job security, insurance benefits, working and touring provisions, paid vacation, seniority pay, and a defined benefit pension plan were integral parts of our contract.

There were lengthy work stoppages in 1975 and 1987; however, as can be seen in the attached wage table, these short-term sacrifices were followed by extended periods of labor peace and substantial contract improvements.

Beginning in 1989, even though we were repeatedly compelled to reopen our CBA, progress continued by strictly adhering to Leonard Leibowitz’s principles of concessionary bargaining: 1) verifiable need; 2) equal sacrifice; 3) noneconomic improvements; 4) commitment to recovery. In every case, the final year of the agreement, not only restored the concessions made at the beginning, but returned us to our traditional place among the top 10 American orchestras.

In 2010 we faced our greatest challenge. Management made proposals that, in addition to slashing our wages, cutting medical insurance, abolishing our pension, eliminating nonrenewal provisions, also redefined our job description to include nonorchestral work. Attempts to reach a compromise were fruitless, and we were faced with two alternatives—agree to grossly unacceptable terms, or go on strike. Leibowitz cautioned us, “Don’t go on strike unless you intend to stay out as long as it takes.” After 26 weeks, management agreed to drop

### Detroit Symphony Annual Scale in 2012 Dollars



their most onerous proposals. While the resulting settlement does not include a wage recovery, it does retain our pension, medical insurance, job security, job description—and thus preserves a modicum of our dignity.

Despite management’s repeated attempts to divide us, the musicians of the Detroit Symphony remained unconditionally unified the entire time. We could not have achieved a settlement without the unfailing moral and economic support of our local, the AFM, ICSOM, Organization of Canadian Symphony Musicians (OCSOM), Recording Musicians Association (RMA), Regional Orchestra Players Association (ROPA), and Save Our Symphony (SOS), a group of local symphony supporters.

American orchestras are being threatened—our very way of life is in jeopardy. While nationally unions have lost much of their clout because of outsourcing and replacement workers, the AFM is largely immune to these forces. We must educate our younger colleagues about the hard work, sacrifice, dedication, and unity that got us where we are today. As Benjamin Franklin so aptly said, “We must hang together, [ladies and] gentlemen ... else, we shall most assuredly hang separately.”