

## **Why I support the CSO strike: on gut instinct, and also after deep thought.**

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Many musicians and music lovers are expressing their support for the CSO musicians during this strike. Some dissenters are disgruntled because the musicians are paid what they view as an extremely high salary. Meanwhile the organisation (the CSOA) is declaring that the contract being offered is "fair" and indeed generous, despite it being worse than previous contracts. Their argument involves a comparison with other major US orchestras, particularly the LA Philharmonic and the San Francisco Symphony.

My instinct is that although the musicians are paid far more than me, I still support them, because I object to musicians being under-valued by music institutions. This addresses a nuanced notion fairness that emerges if you can see past some more crude notions of fairness.

I always look for more nuance when an argument has become rather black-and-white, as it has here. In this case I would like to begin with a general question that I hope will remain relevant even after this particular dispute is resolved (which I hope it will be very soon): what does it mean for a contract to be "fair"? This could be judged in many ways, and here are some that I have thought of, starting with the most basic, and becoming gradually more nuanced.

1. Is everyone being paid a living wage? In this case obviously yes.
2. Is everyone being paid "well" for the work they're doing? In this case probably yes. I will address the complaint that they are paid "too much" later on.
3. Is everyone being paid comparably to other people in the field? In this case probably yes. I will address the CSOA's claim that the CSO musicians are "much better off than [their] colleagues in California" later on.
4. Is everyone being paid comparably to people in comparable other fields? Probably also yes, inasmuch as other fields can be compared. Later on I will attempt a comparison with university professors.

Here are some more nuanced questions that I would hope intelligent people would consider.

5. Why are the finances in a state that means someone needs to take a hit? Whose fault is that? In this case, almost certainly the management. They seem to have very poorly managed things in recent years, despite ticket revenue apparently going up. The \$100 million unfunded renovation seems to be a major issue.
6. Are these particular people being asked to take a hit because the finances are their fault? In this case it seems awfully like the musicians are bearing the consequences of the bad management decisions. This is arguably unfair.
7. Are these particular people being asked to take a hit to benefit some worse-off people? It doesn't appear so in this case. It might be different if they were taking a hit so that ticket prices could go down, or so that more outreach and educational projects could happen, or so that the chorus could be paid decently, or so that the money could somehow miraculously be used to pay public school teachers and nurses... but I see no sign of that.

8. Are the people in charge taking a bigger hit? I see no sign of that. I imagine that if Jeff Alexander were taking a huge pay cut to set a good example, he would be publicising it.

9. Are these people taking a hit because they're not really central to the business of the organisation? This is clearly absurd. The musicians are the whole point of this organisation. They are the whole point of all music organisations. I think real music lovers would agree that the musicians should be the very last people to take a hit for the organisation. Sometimes I think the people running these organisations just don't love music very much.

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Here are the two main points I want to refute in some detail:

1. People saying the CSO is extremely well paid already, ticket prices are too expensive, they're paid way more than blue collar workers, and so on.

2. CSOA claiming that the CSO musicians are much better off than those in LA, SF and NYC because of the lower cost of living in Chicago, and so this is all fair.

1. People saying the CSO is extremely well paid already, ticket prices are too expensive, they're paid way more than blue collar workers, and so on.

a) What is a fair comparison to make? Musicians train from the age of 5 or maybe 3, practice maybe 5-10 hours per day throughout their childhood, and have to buy expensive instruments that might cost \$100,000 or more. They work antisocial hours (frequently Thursday, Friday and Saturday night until 10pm). Performing is stressful - ok, not like heart surgery or firefighting, but very stressful. Consider how stressful most people find public speaking. I find performing a concert a thousand times more stressful, basically because you have to play the right notes at the right times *and* with artistry, whereas when public speaking you can just make it up if necessary, and you're not letting anyone down.

b) I think a comparison with university professors is not a bad one (and is a field I know). The University of Chicago is comparable with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in its international standing, the associated competitiveness of getting a job there, and the competitive nature of the industry in wanting to attract the best people there. Professors work 9 months per year (comparable to the CSO musicians' 12 weeks paid time off) and require similar levels of training and sustained study, if you count the fact that people who can become U of C professors probably spent much of their childhood studying. According to [www.insidehighered.com](http://www.insidehighered.com), U of C professors have an average salary of \$234,300 (1). I can't tell what the average is for CSO musicians (and averages are a very crude measure anyway) but according to (2) the CSOA says "more than a third of veteran musicians earn \$187,000". I would guess from this that the U of C professors average slightly more than the CSO musicians, but I might be off.

c) Some people say they think the high salaries mean tickets are expensive and they want tickets to be cheaper. I also want tickets to be cheaper. However, these measures are not being put in place to make tickets cheaper.

2. The CSOA claims that this is all fair. They argue that the CSO musicians are much better off than those of the LA Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony and New York Philharmonic because of the lower cost of living in Chicago. They write "In reality, it is clear that you are much better off than your colleagues in California." (3)

The CSOA has produced a chart (4) claiming to show that although the LA Phil and SF Symphony are paid more absolute dollars, it counts as less because of the greater expense of living in those cities. They have produced a scaling factor of 0.86 for LA and 0.67 for SF. I will not address the validity of those figures (CSOA cites coli.org but using this requires payment) but will address the validity of the conclusion.

I decided to continue the comparison with university professors and see how their salaries compare if we scale them relative to the cost of living in those cities (using the scaling factors quoted by the CSOA info sheet). Are professors in Chicago paid less because it's cheaper to live in Chicago? Again from www.insidehighered.com (1) I found these average salaries for professors:

Chicago - University of Chicago, \$234,300

SF - UC Berkeley \$191,200, scales to \$128,104

SF - Stanford: \$246,000, scales to \$164,820

LA - UCLA \$204,000, scales to \$175,440

LA - Caltech (less reliable source (5)) \$211,000, scales to \$183,570

NB While UC Berkeley and UCLA are very prestigious, they are public universities and so I'd expect their salaries to be lower, as they are.

Out of interest I tried it for New York as well, where CSOA lists a scaling factor of 0.48 for Manhattan/0.63 for Brooklyn:

Columbia - \$251,300, scales to \$120,624 for Manhattan/\$158,319 for Brooklyn

In fact I checked a few other professions to see if any are paid substantially more in New York and I found that public school teachers and even CEOs seem to be paid about the same in both places. It's almost as if there's some other draw to living in New York.

Interestingly, the only job I found that really did pay a great deal more in LA was...president of a symphony orchestra. Jeff Alexander, the president of the CSO, is paid around \$500,000 (6), whereas Deborah Borda, when she was president of the LA Phil, was paid over \$1.5 million. She is now president of the NY Phil and I haven't been able to find out how much she's paid there, but her predecessor was paid around \$700,000.

Perhaps Jeff Alexander is salty about "cost of living adjustments" because his counterpart in LA was paid so much more than him. But is it possible her work is \*worth\* more than his? I decided to investigate.

I was interested to read about Deborah Borda's achievements with the LA Phil. Apparently she balanced the budget there every year since 2004, the annual budget grew from \$46 million to \$120 million, the base pay of musicians rose to the highest in the country, and the endowment quintupled, from \$50 million to \$276 million (7). And she seems to be very highly regarded as an orchestra manager, not just for financial reasons. The new music director of the NY Phil, Jaap van Zweden, flew to LA to persuade her to move. The same article (7) quotes him as saying "if there is anybody in the world who knows how to manage an orchestra, it is her — and more important, how to reach the public, how to make a connection with the city." The article also interviews Borda, and says this:

Many orchestras have dealt with recent fiscal pressures by trying to cut expenses, often leading to labor strife. But Ms. Borda suggested that she would seek a different path. "When an institution is in trouble, you cannot cut your way to health," she said, adding that she would develop a plan to balance the budget in two or three years.

I wish the CSOA would take note. There were no strikes at the LA Phil while Borda was in charge (8).

When Borda arrived at the (troubled) NY Phil she immediately improved its finances: she had proved herself to be a prolific fundraiser in LA and immediately raised \$50 million in New York (9). She also put the brakes on a costly renovation project. This is in contrast with the \$100 million renovation project that the CSOA undertook, apparently without having a way to fund it. (10)

--- end of investigation of Deborah Borda ---

I was enraged just a few months ago by the Lyric's treatment of its orchestral musicians, and its claims that the shaky financial situation of the company was the fault of the financial climate, the death of classical music, the behaviour of the audiences, in short, anything except their own running of the company. This appears to be happening again with the CSO. It is, I think, happening with music institutions around the country and will continue to happen unless musicians and music lovers reject this approach somehow.

The point of a strike, as I see it (and I am far from an expert) is to use collective power to prevent employees from being exploited by the people in charge. If managers damage the financial standing of the company and serve the financial consequences onto their employees then I think that counts as exploitation. Yes, there are far, far worse forms of exploitation of much more vulnerable people in the world. But I still think it's a form of exploitation.

It is particularly insulting in the case of a music institution doing this to musicians, because musicians aren't "just" employees: they're actually the product, the worth, the entire *raison d'être* of the organisation. This is why I supported the CSO musicians' strike on gut instinct, and why I still support it after some deep thought.

But I'd like to conclude by remembering that when this strike is resolved there will still remain the broader issue of music institutions not valuing musicians enough. I hope that music lovers will not be complacent about this just because the concerts at Symphony Center resume.

Eugenia Cheng, CSO Patron

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- (1) <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/04/11/aaups-annual-report-faculty-compensation-takes-salary-compression-and-more>
- (2) <https://news.wttw.com/2019/03/12/striking-cso-musicians-riccardo-muti-support>
- (3) <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/chicago-symphony-orchestra-cso-musicians-picket-strike-contract-pensions/>
- (4) <https://cso.org/globalassets/pdfshared/190313-cso-charts.pdf>
- (5) [https://www.glassdoor.com/Salary/Caltech-California-Professor-Salaries-E22139\\_D\\_KO19,28.htm](https://www.glassdoor.com/Salary/Caltech-California-Professor-Salaries-E22139_D_KO19,28.htm)
- (6) <https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=search.summary&orgid=3471>
- (7) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/arts/music/new-york-philharmonic-deborah-borda.html>
- (8) <https://allislar.com/2017/03/15/deborah-borda-leaving-la-phil-to-go-back-to-ny-phil/>
- (9) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/arts/music/new-york-philharmonic-deborah-borda.html>
- (10) [http://www.chicagosymphonymusicians.com/uploads/5/3/3/5/53356921/cso\\_fact\\_sheet\\_-\\_march\\_1\\_2019\\_.pdf](http://www.chicagosymphonymusicians.com/uploads/5/3/3/5/53356921/cso_fact_sheet_-_march_1_2019_.pdf)