

Musicians stage silent protest as their strike continues

BY MEGAN RODRIGUEZ STAFF WRITER



Jerry Lara / Staff photographer

Musicians in concert attire rally in front of the home of Kathleen Weir Vale, chair of the San Antonio Symphony's board.



Jerry Lara / Staff photographer

The silent protest in Monte Vista by some members of the San Antonio Symphony lasted about an hour.

Eighteen musicians dressed in concert attire silently marched back and forth Thursday afternoon in front of the home of the San Antonio symphony board

chairwoman, continuing efforts to encourage symphony leadership to negotiate fair labor contracts.

The silent picket comes after the 72 musicians went on strike in late September amid a labor dispute with the Symphony Society of San Antonio, the nonprofit board that runs the orchestra. The musicians and the board had been renegotiating the contract for the 2021-22 season. The musicians unanimously rejected a proposal that would reduce pay and eliminate 30 full-time positions. Musicians who lost their full-time jobs would be offered part-time contracts with no health insurance.

The picket lasted about an hour by the East Hollywood Avenue home. A couple of passers-by expressed support either by shouting or honking.

After the board imposed the contract in September, the musicians went on strike. Since then, the board has canceled the musicians' health insurance and other benefits, and both sides have filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board. Six concerts have been postponed or canceled.

Far more musicians wanted to attend the Thursday event, according to Mary Ellen Goree, chair of the San Antonio Symphony musicians' negotiating committee and principal second violin, but many have been working out of town to make ends meet during the strike.

"We have been silenced by our board and our management, who basically forced the strike by imposing conditions which were intolerable and which they knew we would find intolerable," Goree said ahead of the picket. "So we will be there dressed in our concert clothing, and silent just as we are silenced on the stage."

The board and the musicians last met Nov. 23. The board proposed going to arbitration, which the musicians turned down.

The symphony base pay — the minimum amount a musician earns — already was low. The contract negotiated in 2019 called for \$35,775 a year, well below the national average for symphony musicians, which is \$47,706, according to job site ZipRecruiter.

“If we were to accede to the board’s demands, we would be signing the death warrant of the San Antonio symphony,” Goree said.

Though the musicians have picketed in other places, such as in front of the Navarro Street symphony offices, Goree said this was the first silent event and the first in front of someone’s home.

“I think it is safe to say that” the symphony board chairwoman, Kathleen Weir Vale, “has not been present or anywhere in the vicinity when we have been picketing on Navarro Street,” Goree said. “So, if she is working at home, we will take it to where she is.”

Bassoonist Brian Petkovich has been with the symphony for 26 years. He is a musician representative on the symphony board.

“Cuts aren’t a solution,” he said. “They’re a symptom. We really have to have the economic engine of the symphony fixed before we can talk about going forward and partnering with a management that doesn’t seem to know where they’re going.

“We’ve been suffering for decades without an endowment,” he continued. “The community has gotten behind the performing arts by building the Tobin Center and renovating the Majestic Theater before that, and we need to see an investment in people.”

Vale didn’t respond to a phone call for comment. Her husband opened the door to the Express-News a few minutes after the picket ended, saying that he just got home and that his wife was out on an errand.

Anamaria Suescun-Fast, CEO and managing partner at talkStrategy, sent a comment from Executive Director of San Antonio Symphony Corey Cowart via email.

“As of today, the musicians’ union has not responded to our December 10th request to continue negotiations, nor have they returned to the bargaining table with a counteroffer,” his comment reads. “They have also rejected the Symphony’s request for mediation and binding arbitration. We hope to hear

from the musicians' union soon so we can pursue productive efforts to return to negotiations and a resolution of the strike.”

Daniel Wang, a violist, has been with the symphony for almost six years. He said he marched alongside his colleagues Thursday to fight for his profession.

Wang said had envisioned himself staying in San Antonio for life but has been looking for employment elsewhere due to the dispute.

“It pains me to say this,” Wang said, “but it’s hard for me to see a long-term future here as long as our management doesn’t share the same desire to have an artistically excellent organization here.”

Deborah Martin contributed to this report.