

On September 29, 2021, Kathleen Vale, the board chair of the Symphony Society of San Antonio, published an op-ed in the San Antonio Express-News, titled “For symphony to stabilize, cuts necessary.”

This article is as astonishing for what it does not say as for what it does. Missing is any mention of the musicians’ voluntary 80% pay cut agreed to for the 20-21 season. By any measure, the musicians’ agreement to accept a base salary of just over \$6,500 during the pandemic season was sacrificial in the extreme. If Ms. Vale is going to list the gifts and sacrifices made by board members and community donors to keep the Symphony on stage, the musicians belong at the very top of that list.

Missing also is any acknowledgement of the human cost of the cuts contained in the board’s plan. Twenty-six musicians would see their pay slashed from just under \$36,000 a year to approximately \$11,000 a year and, in the middle of a pandemic, would lose their health insurance. These musicians, every one of them highly accomplished with degrees from top music schools, went through the same grueling, expensive, nationally competitive audition process that the 42 “core” musicians did, moved to San Antonio with the promise that the Symphony would be their full-time job just as the 42 “core” musicians did (some bringing families with them), and are an equal and essential part of our artistic success.

The remaining musicians in the envisioned “core” would also see their pay reduced significantly to \$24,000, would be asked to produce an artistic product without 40% of the orchestra, and would be expected to continue performing their jobs in the full knowledge that their positions were retained at the expense of so many of their colleagues.

Since \$24,000 a year is not a living wage, and \$11,000 a year without health insurance is poverty level, it should be obvious that any musician staying here would be obligated to seek as much outside work as possible, musical or otherwise, just to pay bills. Outside employment is complicated, however, by the combination of an irregular Symphony rehearsal schedule with the necessity for many hours of practicing in solitude to prepare one’s parts and maintain a professional level of playing. Musicians would face a choice between their artistic integrity on the one hand and paying their bills on the other.

Bizarrely, the Symphony board and management seem to think that it’s possible to impose such draconian cuts on both musicians and their salaries without doing any harm to ticket sales or donations. The truth is that the Symphony would not survive the surgery. Any musician whether “core” or “B contract” that could leave, would leave, and attracting replacement musicians of equivalent caliber would be impossible. What highly accomplished musician would move to San Antonio for a \$24,000 job in a small-town orchestra? Or worse, an \$11,000 job? Even those musicians already living within driving distance (Austin, Houston) would be turning down low-paying SAS work in favor of the higher paying per-service jobs where they are. The quality of the orchestra would be certain to drop. By our board and management’s own plans, the number

of performances would drop. Fewer performances of a lesser quality mean fewer ticket sales and lower donations.

Up to this point, the Symphony, like our beloved Spurs, has been a major-league team in a city that itself strives to be recognized nationally and internationally as major league. We have won numerous nationwide awards, have given premieres of major works, have made major-label recordings that remain in the catalogs, have been pioneers in innovative programming, have served all corners and strata of our community, and have been an integral part of the educational ecosystem of San Antonio and Bexar County.

The question to ask Ms. Vale and the rest of the Symphony board and management is, why are you so certain that San Antonio, a metropolitan area of two and a half million people with a growth rate of nearly 20%, numerous major corporations, and a thriving classical music community demonstrated by the success of several chamber ensembles and classical presenters, cannot support such a modestly compensated orchestra when smaller cities do so much better by their musicians? Why are you projecting only \$90,000 in corporate donations when other orchestras in Texas receive much more generous support and even the San Antonio Symphony has done better in recent years? And why won't you partner with the musicians, who after all have the strongest incentive to expand Symphony fundraising?