

For Immediate Release

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**Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra Musicians Reject Contract Offer
No Performance Assurance by Musicians Forces Concert Cancellation**

MADISON, WI — Earlier this week the musicians of the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra (WCO) communicated their refusal to accept the latest contract offer and demanded further provisions to be added. After 12 months of negotiations, musicians threatened to continue their strike and have walked away from an offer that includes increased wages, increased flexibility and other significant concessions.

Since February 2008, the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra has attempted to negotiate a contract with its musicians. During those discussions, the WCO has agreed to requests for increased wages, the addition of a pension plan, creation of a peer review committee, increased mileage allowances, increased per diem, increased work opportunities, addition of electronic media clauses, increased number of excused absences and decreased attendance requirements for its thirty-four part-time contract musicians.

“We are completely dismayed by these most recent developments,” said Doug Gerhart, executive director of the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra. “We believe our proposal was more than fair and remarkably generous, especially in this current economic climate.” Gerhart added, “Once again we were met with additional demands and threats of strike. I believe the musicians’ continued escalation of demands threatens both the quality and musical integrity of the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra.”

Last August, a federal mediator was brought in at the request of the musicians to help facilitate an agreement between the two parties and a new mediator took over this January. Despite the mediator’s presence, last fall the musicians walked away from contract negotiations and instituted a strike on October 1, 2008, two days before the beginning of the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra’s indoor season, forcing the cancellation of the October 3rd concert, and subsequently, the popular Halloween concert.

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Since then, performances have been negotiated on a concert by concert basis, and the musicians agreed to perform the Holiday Pops, Nutcracker and the January Masterworks concerts while talks continued. This week, the WCO had asked the musicians for an unqualified assurance that they would play the February 27th Masterworks concert, but they gave no assurance. Without the musicians' assurance, the WCO has no alternative but to cancel the concert. The WCO is receiving many phone calls from audience members concerned about whether the concert will go on as scheduled. "People should feel free to purchase a ticket and be confident that there will be a performance," says Gerhart. "Our audience is foremost in our minds, and it is with great regret that we need to cancel another concert. We also feel an obligation to our guest artists, who must make travel plans in advance. We have already witnessed our October guest artist make an expensive and grueling trip from Japan for a concert we were forced to cancel due to the musicians' strike.

After the musicians' rejection of its last contract proposal, the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra withdrew its most recent offer from further consideration and invited the musicians back to the bargaining table. "We have repeatedly tried to work with the musicians' negotiating team and have encouraged them to consider the plight of our donors and audience members who are all cutting back where possible in this economy," Gerhart said. "Despite this personal message in advance, I received word of the union's rejection from a different mediator who has never been at one of our sessions. He was following the union's directive to deliver the rejection message and to also pass along the threat that the February 27 Masterworks concert performance was at risk of a strike."

"The current economic conditions are extraordinary" said Tom Grantham, President of the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra. "We have the highest regard for our musicians; however, it is unfathomable to me that these musicians would reject this generous offer, especially when you consider that our chamber orchestra already has one of the highest rates of pay in the nation for an organization of our size."

"Ironically, all of our musicians regularly play for other arts groups that pay significantly less than we do," Gerhart explained, adding, "these challenging economic times have already hit other arts organizations in Madison as we have seen on the news."

The Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra produces twenty four concerts annually, including an indoor Masterworks series, holiday concerts, youth concerts, and the popular Concerts on the Square®.

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