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Sydney orchestra agreement shows the value of co-operation during COVID crisis

The union for orchestral musicians has finalised a new agreement with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra which could provide a template for how arts organisations manage and maintain staff employment during the COVID-19 crisis.

The agreement has been approved by the Fair Work Commission after several weeks of negotiation between the Symphony Orchestra Musician Association and SSO management.

Under the deal, orchestra musicians have accepted a reduction in pay while protecting the wages of the lowest paid staff, ensuring all musicians remain in employment and are ready to spring into action when public health restrictions are lifted.

The director of SOMA*, Paul Davies, said the positive approach taken SSO management was in sharp contrast with the actions of some other orchestras, who moved to stand down musicians without pay as soon as the crisis began.

“We are very pleased to have reached an agreement that protects musicians during the immediate crisis and into the recovery phase,” Mr Davies said.

“SSO management has played a constructive role in these negotiations by consulting in good faith with musicians from day one. There has never been any doubt that SSO management has had the welfare of its musicians uppermost in mind at all stages.

“This agreement gives musicians control over their contribution to maintaining the orchestras during the lockdown and gives them confidence that the artistic and employment strategy of the company will see them returning to a full programs of concerts and performances as soon as possible.

“MEAA/SOMA members offered to partner with all companies as the COVID crisis hit, but unfortunately some other companies failed to have the maturity and good governance to deal with these issues in the same manner as the SSO.

“SSO management has led from the front to ensure that the burden of cuts is shared across the organisation, and we commend chief executive officer Emma Dunch and her executive team for reducing their own salaries by up to 40%.

“While it is not easy to cut wages and conditions, the SSO agreement represents a very constructive achievement for musicians and orchestras companies at a very difficult time.”

Under the agreement, musicians and administrative staff will work reduced hours and take salary cuts ranging from 10%-30%, depending on workload. This is an acknowledgement that while the orchestra is unable to perform the SSO is earning no revenue, and workloads are lower.

A salary floor was also agreed to protect the lowest paid staff, and the SSO will receive JobKeeper support for its eligible permanent and casual musicians and staff.

**SOMA is a section within the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance.*

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