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Hartford Symphony Orchestra approves new contract for musicians. Here's what it includes.



Hartford Symphony Orchestra

The Hartford Symphony Orchestra performing in June. Negotiations for a new contract with the musicians has just ended, and will result in a new fellowship program to diversify the orchestra. (Courtesy Hartford Symphony Orchestra)



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After 17 months of negotiations, the [Hartford Symphony Orchestra](#) reached a collective bargaining agreement with the [American Federation of Musicians Local 400](#), which represents the [orchestra's musicians](#), on Wednesday.

Among the provisions of the new contract are a 20% pay increase for the musicians and increased annual bonuses for those with seniority. Some clauses that diminished the size of the orchestra in certain circumstances were eliminated. There are also changes in how educational and outreach programs are structured so they are easier to produce.

There's also a bold new progressive element to the agreement. The symphony, which just began its [80th season](#), is creating a fellowship program to enable more BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) musicians.

The musicians' previous contract expired in August 2022. The new agreement is retroactive to Sept. 1, 2023, and will last through Aug. 31, 2027.

Eighty-six musicians are affected by the contract. The orchestra has a three-tiered system: The "core orchestra" of 31 players, to which 23 more players are added to make up the "basic orchestra" tier, then another 25 for the "full orchestra." A few musicians who are not regular members of the orchestra are also brought in. The members all receive the same basic pay scale, which is a set fee per "service" (a term that means either a rehearsal or a performance), with the higher-tiered performers guaranteed more services.

Eighteen of the musicians are new to the orchestra, having just passed the auditions this fall.

The BIPOC fellowships, funded by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, are a way of bringing artists from diverse cultures and backgrounds into the orchestra as regular members for the two-year duration of their fellowships, with the opportunity to audition for permanent positions after that.

The orchestra is already benefiting from the Joyce C. Willis grants, which bring Black artists to the Hartford Symphony Orchestra as artists-in-residence, one per season. This year's Willis grant recipient is violinist Melissa White. But where White is featured as a soloist in two Masterworks concerts and will teach and do outreach in the community, the fellowship program is intended to bring musicians into the year-

Since it is introducing new members to an already full and unionized orchestra, the fellowship program became an important part of the contract negotiations.

“With the fellowships, everyone was excited to make this happen,” Hartford Symphony Orchestra president/CEO Steve Collins said. “We just needed to flesh out the details.”

Collins said the program, which has not been announced until now, may begin with a couple of fellows in place at the beginning of next year. “The supply of diverse orchestra musicians does meet the demand for them,” he said.

Collins added that there is a national trend of finding ways to diversify symphonies, and mentions the Detroit Symphony Orchestra as one of the leaders in the movement. “This fits a number of goals for us,” Collins said, suggesting that it could lead to a broader audience base and wider community support. “It’s really important.”

The Hartford Symphony Orchestra’s board chair Bob Bausmith credited both sides with bringing the negotiations to a close. Bausmith became chair a year ago but began actively involving himself in the negotiating meetings in July. “I got involved in the last three or four sessions,” he said. “This was not an atypical situation, but people were not as focused as they could be. There had to be give and take on both sides.”

Bausmith said last year the orchestra had a deficit of over \$600,000 after six straight years of breaking even.

“All hands are on deck in terms of audience development,” he said. “My goal is for the orchestra to serve the whole Hartford community. But this is not a growing industry. If we are looking to develop a BIPOC fellowship, we have to assure the musicians that it’s possible.

“We have had a lot of support from the Hartford community to launch DEI (Diversity Equity and Inclusion) programs. The community is behind us. But we need to sustain this.”

“It’s a very intricate thing to try to work out a contract,” said Steve Wade, the Hartford Symphony Orchestra’s principal oboist and the co-chair of the Orchestra Committee involved in negotiations. “We managed to get what I think are very reasonable pay raises. Mainly we were interested in regaining some ground and affirming some of the working conditions. Some of that stuff is really not obvious but

The long negotiation process had led some orchestra members to voice their concerns before some concerts, leafletting outside The Bushnell at a few performances and at least once speaking from the Belding Theater stage before a concert.

The symphony announced earlier this month that it had renewed Hartford Symphony Orchestra music director Carolyn Kuan's contract for another three years, through the spring of 2027. Collins said the timing of that announcement was unrelated to the ending of the negotiation with the musicians.

The next Hartford Symphony Orchestra Masterworks concert is Nov. 10-12 at The Bushnell, with the orchestra playing Claude Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun," Maurice Ravel's "Mother Goose," Huang Ruo's "Folk Songs for Orchestra" and Michael Spivakovsky Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra, with guest harmonica soloist Cy Leo.

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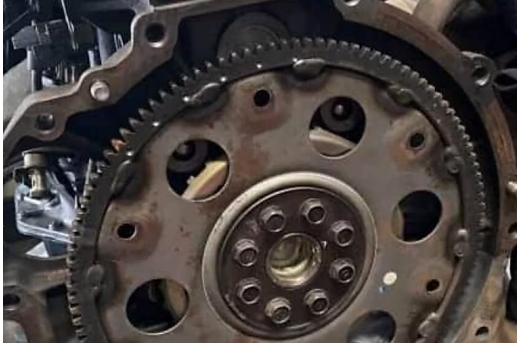
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