

Women on the Podium: Issues and Strategies of Women Orchestral Conductors

Mujeres en la tarima
problemas y estrategias de las directoras de orquesta

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Abstract

This article considers the gender-specific issues which women conductors face, which make it difficult for them to succeed on the podium. Attention is focused upon the difficulties they face in being taken seriously, the persistent societal belief that conducting is an unsuitable job for a woman, the fact that conducting remains a male-dominated field, gendered criticism, discipline issues from male musicians, the conflicting demands of family and career, and an apparent lack of role models. It is also considers the various strategies which women conductors have formulated to overcome these, including all-woman orchestras, dress, developing particular niches, and women-only conducting programmes. This article focuses upon orchestral conductors (both historical and contemporary), its premises and conclusions can be extrapolated to the wind-band milieu.

Resumen

En este artículo se abordan los diversos problemas que tienen afrontar las directoras de orquesta y que dificultan su éxito en la tarima. Nuestra atención se centra en las dificultades que encuentran para ser tomadas en serio, en la creencia social persistente de que el oficio de dirección no es apropiado para las mujeres, en el hecho de que es una profesión dominada por hombres, en las críticas de género, en los problemas de disciplina con los músicos, en las dificultades para conciliar la familia con la carrera, y en una aparente falta de modelos femeninos. Además, también trata las distintas estrategias que las directoras han creado para superar estas dificultades, entre las cuales están la creación de orquestas femeninas, el código de vestimenta, el desarrollo de nichos de acción particulares, y la programación de conciertos dirigidos solamente por mujeres. Aunque este artículo se centra únicamente en directoras de orquesta (históricas y contemporáneas), sus premisas y conclusiones son extrapolables a las bandas de música.

Keywords

Women conductors;
Gendered criticism;
Male gaze;
Women orchestras.

Palabras clave

Directoras;
Crítica de género;
Mirada masculina;
Orquestas femeninas.

Introduction

In early 1933, the French conductor Jane Evrard (1893-1984) took her all-woman string orchestra, the *Orchestre féminin de Paris*, on a tour of Spain. Although this tour was a great success, with Spanish audiences welcoming their French guests with enthusiasm, the Spanish critics –although also overwhelmingly positive in their responses to this all-woman orchestra– tended to reveal their surprise at hearing women performing so well, and also to draw upon gendered language in their reviews. For example, after having heard a performance which the *Orchestre féminin de Paris* gave in Madrid in February 1933, Spanish composer and sometime critic Joaquín Turina wrote in *El Debate* that: 'It is charming to hear them play, not only for the vigour and the enthusiasm of their performances, but also for the quality of the young instrumentalists' sound!'¹ Although Turina was clearly impressed by the *Orchestre féminin de Paris*, it is difficult to imagine a male critic describing a male orchestra as 'charming'.

Turina's review fits within a clear and acknowledged tendency for critics simply not to evaluate female musicians on an equal footing with their male colleagues. In the well-known words of Marcia J. Citron, 'women have been subjected to gender-linked evaluation' which has placed 'them in a "separate but not equal" category'.² Gendered criticism is, of course, not the only issue that women conductors face which tends to place them in, what Citron has termed, this 'separate but not equal category' to male conductors. On the difficulties which women conductors often face, J. Michele Edwards has commented that 'the obstacles for women conductors are often concrete – symphony management, boards, donors, artist agents, critics, and teachers – but the reasons are often cultural or ideological'.³ It is these issues (or obstacles as Edwards terms them), and also the various strategies which women conductors have devised to combat them, which form the focus of this article. Although attention is concentrated upon orchestral conductors (both historical and contemporary), with

¹ «[...] es una delicia oírlos tocar, no solamente por el vigor y entusiasmo de sus interpretaciones, sino por la calidad del sonido de las juveniles instrumentistas». TURINA, Joaquín. «Orquesta femenina». *El Debate*, Madrid, 04-02-1933.

² CITRON, Marcia J. «Gender, Professionalism and the Musical Canon». *Journal of Musicology*, 8, 1 (1990), p. 108. Citron's comments were originally made in relation to women composers, but can usefully be extended to women conductors.

³ EDWARDS, J. Michele. «Women on the Podium». *The Cambridge Companion to Conducting*. José Bowen (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 233.

some reference also made to female dance-band leaders,⁴ its premises and conclusions can be extrapolated to the wind-band milieu.

Issues Commonly faced by Women Conductors

Failure to be Taken Seriously

An anonymous critic writing about the British-born, American conductor Ethel Leginska (1886-1970) directing the inaugural concert of her Boston Women's Symphony Orchestra in December 1927 commented that:

Those whose sense of the congruous is disturbed by the sight of Ethel Leginska leading an orchestra of men or presiding over a performance of opera must admit that, when she conducts the Boston Women's Symphony Orchestra, as she did last evening in Jordan Hall, she is wholly within the picture, a pleasing as well as an effective figure. In their Leginskan black and whites its players make a seemly array.⁵

Again, this critic very much places Leginska – an established and celebrated musician who had already enjoyed one

career as an internationally-acclaimed concert pianist before turning her attention to conducting, and who had also achieved not inconsiderable success as a composer – in a 'separate but not equal category'. This (presumably male) critic makes it very clear that, in his view, Leginska's true place on the podium lay firmly with women's ensembles. Before forming her Boston Women's Symphony Orchestra, Leginska had appeared as a guest conductor with a number of leading male orchestras throughout both the United States and Europe, including the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (1924), London Symphony Orchestra (1924), New York Symphony Orchestra (1925), and Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra (1925); thus making her not only a true female pioneer on the podium, but a hugely successful conductor of any gender. For this critic, however, she is still not to be taken seriously as a conductor on an equal footing with her male peers. The reviewer's gendered – indeed sexualised – language is equally obvious, with his comments on Leginska's 'pleasing figure' and the 'seemly array' of the female orchestral musicians.⁶

⁴ Within the context of this article, bands refer to the dance, jazz, and swing bands which focused upon popular music and dance genres which flourished throughout America, Europe, and further afield from the period immediately following the First World War to the mid twentieth century.

⁵ «Review of Ethel Leginska conducting the inaugural concert of her Boston Women's Symphony Orchestra», *Boston Post*, 13 December 1927; cited from BROADBENT, Marguerite and Terry. *Leginska: Forgotten Genius of Music. The Story of a Great Musician*. Wilmslow, The North West Player Piano Association, 2002, p. 192.

⁶ The critic's description of the players' 'Leginskan black and white' refers to a fashion-trend which Leginska sparked in the US in the early 1920s. As will be discussed in greater depth below, as early

Deeply misogynistic though this review may be, at least we might be able to place it within a historical context. After all, where things not considerably worse for women in the past? However, a number of recent unfortunate comments from high-profile male conductors – which definitely suggest a reluctance to take women conductors seriously – are deeply disturbing.

In 2013, Russian conductor Vasily Petrenko (b.1976) – whose own wife, Evgenia Chernysheva-Petrenko, is a choral conductor – provoked outrage when he claimed, in comments first published in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*, but then widely reproduced throughout the international media, that orchestras ‘react better when they have a man in front of them’ and that ‘a cute girl on a podium means that musicians think about other things.’⁷ Such an outrageously outdated view of women

conductors – which also appears to imply a universal male for orchestral musicians too – coming from such a senior figure is truly shocking. At the time of making these remarks, Petrenko was principal conductor of not only the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and the Oslo Philharmonic, but also principal conductor of the British National Youth Orchestra; thus making him an important role model for young musicians. It is particularly disturbing, therefore, to consider what a sexist message was being given to young musicians from somebody who was in an important position of influence⁸.

These toxic comments were followed by similar ones in November 2017 from Latvian conductor Mariss Jansons (1943-2019), who commented, in an interview given to the British newspaper *The Telegraph*, that he just couldn’t get used

as 1915 Leginska had adopted her signature look of a dark suit (jacket and skirt) and a white shirt with white collar and cuffs. She was also an early adopter of ‘the bob’ hairstyle. As a musical celebrity, her look was widely copied by her many female fans, who were sometimes – as in this description of the members of her Boston Women’s Symphony Orchestra – referred to as ‘Leginskans’.

⁷ HIGGINS, Charlotte. «Male conductors are better for orchestras, says Vasily Petrenko». *The Guardian*, London, 02-09-2013, [online], [accessed: 24-05-2019]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com>.

⁸ Amidst wide-scale condemnation and loud calls for his resignation, Petrenko attempted to excuse himself, on the grounds that his comments had been misinterpreted, and claimed that he did in fact support women conductors. As the interview for *Aftenposten* was conducted in English, then translated into Norwegian (which Petrenko does not speak) for the newspaper, and then back into English when they sparked such an outcry, he claimed that his true meaning had been lost in translation. In an article published in *The Telegraph* on 8 May 2014, Petrenko insisted that ‘this is an example of misquotation and actually quite a grotesque distortion from what I was saying’ and accounted it to ‘translation between several languages’. He also defended himself by claiming that ‘I was never against women conductors at all – I think it needs to be decided by the talent question, not the gender question’. SWEETING, Adam. «Petrenko: I Don’t Believe that Women Conductors are a Distraction». *The Telegraph*, London, 08-05-2014, [online], [accessed: 27-06-2019]. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk>.

to seeing women on the podium: 'It's a question of what one is used to [...] I grew up in a different world, and for me seeing a woman on the podium [...] well, let's just say it's not my cup of tea.'⁹ Again, these outmoded comments, appear to suggest that women are either an oddity on the podium or, viewed in a worse light, that they don't belong there at all.

As Jansons' remarks also drew widespread condemnation, he issued an apology a few days later:

I come from a generation in which the conducting profession was almost exclusively reserved to men. Even today, many more men than women pursue conducting professionally. But it was undiplomatic, unnecessary and counterproductive for me to point out that I'm not yet accustomed to seeing women on the conducting platform.

Every one of my female colleagues and every young woman wishing to become a conductor can be assured of my support, for we all work in pursuit of a common goal: to excite people for the art form we love so dearly – music.¹⁰

Although perhaps well intentioned, Jansons's apology appears to enforce the male-dominated nature of the conducting profession as the norm. It also erases the historical presence of many women conductors throughout the twentieth century.¹¹ Finally, Jansons appears to end his apology by drawing upon the age-old ploy of attempting to diffuse music's gendered politics by evoking the conductor's higher purpose as the music's servant. All of these comments – both historical and contemporary – highlight the grim reality that women conductors often continue to struggle to be taken seriously.

An Unsuitable Job for a Woman

This difficulty in being taken seriously – which has affected many women conductors – seems to be largely driven by a lingering assumption that conducting is simply not a suitable job for a woman. This persistent belief that conducting just isn't appropriate for women is clearly reflected

⁹ HEWETT, Ivan. «Mariss Jansons: "Women on the podium are not my cup of tea». *The Telegraph*, London, 23-11-2017, [online], [accessed: 24-05-2019]. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk>.

¹⁰ SAWER, Patrick. «Leading conductor apologises for "sexist" remarks». *The Telegraph*, London, 25-11-2017, [online], [accessed: 24-05-2019]. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk>.

¹¹ Intriguingly, Petrenko also attempted to historicise his comments by claiming that 'because a woman conductor is still quite a rarity at the moment, their appearance at the podium, because of the historical background, always has some emotions reflected in the orchestra'. Further insisting that 'he was referring to Russia, where female conductors are still virtually unknown'. Petrenko's insistence that in Russia women conductors are practically unknown are somewhat undermined by the fact that Veronika Dudarova (1916-2009) – principal conductor of the Moscow State Symphony Orchestra from 1960-1989 and founder and leader of the Symphony Orchestra of Russia from 1991-2003 – was one of the most revered Russian conductors of the twentieth century. SWEETING, A. «Petrenko: I Don't Believe...

in both Petrenko's and Jansons's recent comments about women being either a distracting or a disturbing sight on the podium.

This belief that women just don't belong at the head of orchestras – whether deeply-held or unconscious – is often reflected in shock, by both critics and audience members, when they do see women doing it. For example, when the French composer Armande de Polignac (1876-1962) decided to replace Gabriel Pierné (1863-1937) as the conductor of her own ballet *Les Mille et une nuits* at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris in May 1914 the critic Henri Quittard recorded the audience's astonishment at seeing a woman in front of the orchestra in *Le Figaro*:

In front of the bright gleam of lights that corresponded so well to the coloured harmonies of the orchestration, the frail silhouette of a woman stood out above the musicians. The eyes of the entire hall were drawn to her: Madame Armande de Polignac was replacing M. Gabriel Pierné

at the podium. With great modesty, wearing a black dress, her neck and fingers bare of any jewellery, the young woman conducted with an ease, a sureness, and an energy that enthused the audience.¹²

To give just one further historical example, in April 1935 André Picquet recounted the initial shock, which was then, as he explains, overcome, felt by an audience at the sight of seeing Evrard leading her Orchestre féminin de Paris:

Distinction contains and expresses the first-class quality of the talent of Mme Jane Evrard. It was a surprising evening of peaks bathed in sunshine, freshened by a breeze and a vivacity of spirit, finally a picturesque sparkle welcomed with great fervour by a public at first surprised, then conquered.¹³

As with the issue which many women conductors continue to face with not being taken seriously discussed above, this view that conducting just simply is not an appropriate job for a woman persists in the

¹² QUITTARD, Henri. «Courrier des théâtres: Les Concerts». *Le Figaro*, 09-05-1914, p. 5; cited from KAHAN, Sylvia. *Music's Modern Muse: A Life of Winnaretta Singer, Princesse de Polignac*. Rochester, New York, University of Rochester Press, 2009, p. 189 [translation by Kahan]. On Polignac as a conductor, see HAMER, Laura. «Armande de Polignac: An Aristocratic Compositrice in fin-de-siècle Paris». *Women in the Arts in the Belle Époque*. Paul Fryer (ed.). Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland, 2012, pp. 165-185.

¹³ 'La distinction contient et exprime la qualité première du talent de Mme Jane Evrard. Ce fut une soirée étonnante sur des culminances ensoleillées, allégées d'air frais, de vivacités d'esprit, enfin un chatoiement pittoresque accueillie avec une grande faveur par un public d'abord surprise, puis conquis.' PICQUET, André Review of Jane Evrard and her Orchestre féminin de Paris, *Le Journal de Douai* 12 -04-1935, n.p.; Evrard-Poulet Archives. My own English translation from the French. For a detailed study of Jane Evrard and her Orchestre féminin de Paris, see HAMER, Laura. «On The Conductor's Podium: Jane Evrard and the Orchestre féminin de Paris». *The Musical Times*, 152, 1916 (Autumn 2011), pp. 81-100. See also, HAMER, Laura. *Female Composers, Conductors, Performers: Musiciennes of Interwar France, 1919-1939*. Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2018, pp. 168-173.

current day. For instance, leading British conductor Alice Farnham has spoken of the casual assumption that many people make when she turns up at rehearsals that she cannot possibly be the conductor:

I've turned up to rehearsals with a baton in hand and a score under my arm, only to be asked if I work for the publisher, or, with no instrument in sight, which one I play. This is sometimes followed by a metaphorical pat on the head.¹⁴

The view that conducting isn't a suitable job for a woman, and the intertwined sense of shock that women can in fact do it, which many people feel when they first see a woman on the podium,¹⁵ fit within a much broader set of discourses concerning women in traditionally male-dominated leadership roles. Many traditional leadership qualities – including the ability to be authoritative, commanding, assertive, assured – are much more strongly associated with men, than with women. In almost direct contrast, women are usually raised to be gentle, kind, nurturing, supportive, and maternal. Due to this deep cultural encoding of

appropriate gender roles and behaviours – which most of us are steeped in from early childhood – many people (including large numbers of women) struggle to accept women in traditional leadership roles, such as conducting. Reflecting on the conscious efforts which she has had to make to overcome her natural tendency to apologise to orchestral musicians for making appropriate musical demands on them, JoAnn Falletta has commented that: 'The more I got into conducting the more I had to come to terms with how I was raised as a young Catholic girl. We were taught to be supportive, nurturing, gentle, kind.'¹⁶ Such widespread and deeply-entrenched beliefs about appropriate gender roles have both strongly contributed to and helped to normalise the fact that conducting remains so male dominated. This represents a very serious issue for women conductors.

A Male-Dominated Field

Although there is now a significant number of high-profile women conductors active – names such as Jane Glover

¹⁴ FARNHAM, Alice. «Not just a cute girl on the podium: how to get more women conducting». *The Guardian*, London, 10-09-2015, [online], [accessed: 29-05-2019]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com>. The title of Farnham's article, 'Not just a cute girl on the podium', directly references – and boldly contradicts – Petrenko's notorious comments about a 'cute girl on the podium' being a distraction.

¹⁵ Anecdotally, I have myself personally witnessed on several occasions audience shock at the sight of seeing a woman on the podium. This has ranged from gasps of surprise, through exclamations of 'look, it's a woman', to people snatching out cameras and phones to photograph this (one would assume rare!) spectacle.

¹⁶ BUCHAU, Stephanie von. «JoAnn Falletta at the Podium of the Women's Philharmonic». *San Francisco Magazine*, November 1987, p. 58; cited from J. Michele Edwards, 'Women on the Podium', 234.

(b.1949), JoAnn Falletta (b.1954), Marin Alsop (b.1956), Sian Edwards (b.1959), Simone Young (b.1961), Xian Zhang (b.1973), and Ariane Matiakh (b.1980) come readily to mind – male conductors continue to outnumber female. In 2007, Marin Alsop became the first woman to hold a position as musical director of a major American orchestra when she was appointed to this position with the Baltimore Symphony. Alongside this role (confirmed until 2021), Alsop has also been principal conductor and music director of the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra since 2012 and has been confirmed as incoming chief conductor of the ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra from September 2019.¹⁷ Men, however, significantly continue to outnumber women at the top of the profession. None of the ‘Big Five’ American orchestras,¹⁸ for instance, has had a woman music director or chief conductor. This gender imbalance is also often reflected in the boards and executive committees which manage and appoint conductors. Edwards has observed that, ‘as long as orchestras and management remain dominated by men, cultural

conditioning about leadership will pose liabilities for women on the podium.’¹⁹ This is not only a simple matter of gender bias (whether conscious or otherwise), but risks both perpetuating the situation of male conductors vastly out-numbering female and the cultural myth that leadership is naturally a male role.

On 7 September 2013 Alsop achieved another significant first for women conductors, when she became the first woman to conduct the Last Night of the BBC Proms. In her speech (a traditional part of the Last-Night concert), Alsop commented that:

Quite a lot has been made of me being the first woman to conduct the Last Night of the Proms. I’m incredibly honoured and proud to have this title, but I have to say I’m still quite shocked that it can be 2013 and there can be firsts for women. Here’s to the seconds, thirds, fourths, fifths, hundredths to come.²⁰

It is easy to concur with Alsop that it is truly shocking that in the second decade of the twenty-first century there could still be significant firsts for women. Although Alsop attracted significant media attention

¹⁷ On Marin Alsop, see her official website: <https://www.marinalsop.com> [Accessed 27-06-2019].

¹⁸ The ‘Big Five’ refers to the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, and Cleveland Orchestra.

¹⁹ EDWARDS, J. M. «Women on the...», p. 234.

²⁰ ALSOP, Marin. «Last Night of the Proms, Royal Albert Hall», *BBC*, 07-09-2013, [online], [Accessed 28-06-2019]. Full speech available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk>. Later in her speech Alsop appeared to take aim at Petrenko’s toxic comments on women conductors (which had very recently broken in the international press) by commenting that ‘even last week [...] people said “girls can’t do that”.’

for this achievement, it is important not to let this obscure the fact that of the total of 58 conductors who appeared at the 2013 Proms, only five were women. Of these five, only two (Alsop and Xian Zhang), as British music critic Fiona Maddocks has commented 'conducted on the main stage at early-evening Proms (the others being late-night and lunchtime).'²¹ Maddocks has also noted that Odaline de la Martínez became the first woman to conduct at the Proms in 1984. She was followed in 1985 by Jane Glover and Sian Edwards, with Glover directing Proms concerts for five years in succession and on several subsequent occasions. Maddocks has opined that 'these examples should have opened the floodgates.'²² They did not. It would take nearly another three decades, indeed, before Alsop would become the first woman to conduct the iconic Last-Night concert.

A notable exception to this trend for gender imbalance in conducting is the number of women who have excelled as opera and choral conductors. Well-known names of women who have succeeded in choral and opera conducting include Yvonne Gouverné (1890-1982), Margaret Hillis (1921-1998), Sarah Caldwell (1924-2006), Judith Somogi (1937-1988), Jane

Glover, Sian Edwards, Simone Young, and Laurence Equilbey (b.1962). Although this is obviously a positive, two gendered reasons for the relative success of women conductors in the world of opera and choral direction – as opposed to symphony-orchestra conducting – suggest themselves. Firstly, in the world of opera, the conductor is hidden in the pit; so it is not immediately obvious to the audience that the music is being directed by a woman. Edwards has gone so far as to speculate that because in opera 'the conductor works in the pit rather than in the spotlight [...] this may have been more acceptable to audiences, orchestras, and even conductors.'²³ She quotes Jane Glover revealing that 'maybe that's why I like it because I'm out sight.'²⁴

Secondly, many opera and choral conductors begin their careers as piano répétiteurs. The supportive nature of this role could be seen as reinforcing nurturing roles for women, and preserving women's musical leadership within a supposedly naturally female musical sphere. Maddocks has suggested, moreover, that women conductors have made particular progress in choral music because it 'requires the kind of collegiate powers at which women excel.'²⁵

²¹ MADDOCKS, F. «Marin Alsop, Conductor...

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ EDWARDS, J. M. «Women on the..., p. 234.

²⁴ Jane Glover cited in EDWARDS, J. M. «Women on the..., p. 234.

²⁵ MADDOCKS, F. «Marin Alsop, Conductor...

The Male Gaze: Gendered Criticism and Sexualisation

As noted at the outset, unequal criticism (when compared to their male colleagues) is an issue which has particularly strongly affected women conductors. When reviewing women musicians in general – and conductors are no exception – critics have tended to rely upon a set of gendered tropes. Firstly, critics tend to focus upon the performing female body, either to sexualise (in the case of glamorous artists) or to ridicule (in the case that the woman does not conform to the usual societal norms of beauty).²⁶ Secondly, they often rely upon gendered language and stereotypes. Thirdly, they are inclined to patronise. As, until fairly recently, the majority of music critics were male, this situation has been exacerbated by the fact that women conductors have been subjected to the gaze of the empowered male critic. For some women conductors this has resulted in markedly gendered and sexualised reviews.²⁷ Examples of this, especially

historically, are practically commonplace. For instance, markedly sexualised critical comments particularly affected the reception of Evrard. To give just one example, writing in *Marianne* in November 1934, Jacques Ibert commented that:

Mme Jane Evrard, delicate and blonde amazon, watches them [her Orchestre féminin de Paris] and directs the beats with a supple and attentive baton. No pretention, no showing off in her gestures. Just a suspicion of coquettishness, when, with a delicate finger placed to her mouth, she tempers the sforzato [sic] or prepares an ethereal pianissimo.²⁸

Even when critics manage to look beyond the physical appearance of women conductors, they often still incline to take a condescending stance. As Edwards has commented:

Praise of women conductors often uses patronizing vocabulary. Rave reviews and articles about men frequently use terms such as 'virile' and 'muscular' – words that tend to exclude women – while women are described as 'enthusiastic' – not a comparable term. Even the frequent use

²⁶ For a detailed study of women musicians and criticism, see HAMER, Laura. «The Gender Paradox: Criticism of Women and Women as Critics». *The Cambridge History of Music Criticism*. Christopher Dingle (ed.). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 272-290.

²⁷ This is not, of course, unique to women, though they do tend to suffer from it more. Petrenko has, in fact, particularly experienced this. For example, in discussing his comments on women conductors as distraction, Maddocks describes him as 'the handsome Petrenko' who 'is quite a distraction himself.' MADDOCKS, F. «Marin Alsop, Conductor...

²⁸ 'Mme Jane Evrard, délicate et blonde amazon, en surveillance et dirige les ébats d'une baguette souple et attentive. Aucune prétention, aucun cabotinage dans ses gestes. Juste un soupçon de coquetterie, quand, d'un doigt discret posé sur la bouche, elle tempère l'éclat d'un sforzato [sic] ou prépare un immatériel pianissimo.' IBERT, Jacques. «Musique: L'Orchestre féminin de Paris» *Marianne* (28 November 1934), 5. My English translation from the French.

of 'rare' or 'unusual', even in women's own publications, reinforces the notion that women conductors are outside the mainstream.²⁹

This trend is well exemplified in the patronising – indeed chauvinistic – reviews which appeared in the New York press following Leginska's conducting début with the New York Symphony Orchestra on 9 January 1925. Leginska appeared at this concert as both conductor and pianist, leading the orchestra in performances of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and Bach's Concerto in F (from the keyboard).³⁰ The critic from the *New York Herald Tribune* sneered that it was 'to Leginska's credit that nothing serious occurred to mar the performance.'³¹ The review which appeared in the *New York American*, meanwhile, commented that Leginska's appearance 'occasioned curiosity, scepticism and even some hardly suppressed merriment', yet condescended to admit that 'she displayed a thorough knowledge of the scores and got the effects she wanted from the orchestra.'³²

Discipline Issues from Male Musicians

The belief that conducting is not a suitable job for a woman, discussed above, is not confined to critics and audience members, but is also sometimes encountered in male orchestral musicians, who sometimes fail to respect a woman conductor's authority. Indeed, the fear that a woman conductor might not be able to command the orchestra's respect has even affected their chances of being appointed to top jobs. As Edwards has noted, 'orchestra boards [...] often question a woman's ability to maintain discipline.'³³ Nadia Boulanger, for example, encountered issues from male musicians who were 'disruptive, inconsiderate, inattentive',³⁴ whilst rehearsing the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1938. Boulanger's strategy for dealing with this was to admonish them to pay greater attention to the music:

This [Fauré's *Requiem*] may be boring for some of you experienced men, but please, do not take this music for granted. The difficulty is that most of you think the music

²⁹ EDWARDS, J. M. «Women on the..., p. 234.

³⁰ Conducting from the keyboard was very unusual in the earlier twentieth century. In this, Leginska was also a pioneer.

³¹ Anonymous review of Leginska conducting the New York Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall (New York) on 9 January 1925, *New York Herald Tribune*; cited from BROADBENT, M. and T. *Leginska: Forgotten Genius...*, p. 161.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ EDWARDS, J. M. «Women on the..., p. 233.

³⁴ ROSENSTIEL, Léonie. *Nadia Boulanger: A Life in Music*. New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1982, p. 292.

too simple. You must relax and watch for its depth of feeling. If you play music with an open mind, you will find great beauty and depth behind its simplicity.³⁵

Intriguingly, Boulanger's appeal to the male orchestral musicians to look beyond the conductor's gender by evoking the higher purpose of the music curiously foreshadows Janson's apology for his misogynistic comments about women conductors discussed above.

Evrard's son, Manuel Poulet, has recollected that she experienced similar problems with male musicians whilst conducting ballet performances throughout France (this time working with a series of male orchestras, rather than her own all-woman Orchestra féminin de Paris) after the Second World War:

There were problems when she directed the ballets of Janine Solane [...] In Paris, with a Parisian orchestra, there weren't any problems, but when they toured the provinces they always worked with the local town orchestras and every time that she rehearsed with these she experienced problems because she was a woman conducting men. One time, in Marseille, things with the double-bass player became very complicated.³⁶

Unfortunately, these problems still occur in the twenty-first century. Reflecting on the issues that she has encountered as a female conductor, Farnham has commented that: 'One particularly tiresome comment came 10 years ago, when a male colleague told me: "Women can't conduct because their breasts get in the way"'.³⁷ Alsop has also spoken of the prejudice which she has experienced from male orchestral players:

One of my early conducting experiences was a step-in – the conductor didn't show and someone said: 'Go on Marin, you want to be a conductor', and I ran up on stage. As I stepped on to the podium one of the guys in the brass section said, 'Oh man, it's a girl'. At the end of the week he said to me: 'You're really good. I never really noticed you were a girl'.³⁸

Such comments and attitudes would be 'tiresome' (to borrow Farnham's adjective) for anyone. For less confident women – especially if encountered frequently – they could well be sufficiently off-putting to stop any further forays onto the podium entirely.

³⁵ ROSENSTIEL, L. *Nadia Boulanger...*, p. 292.

³⁶ Personal Interview with Manuel Poulet (Paris, 24 February 2007). Janine Solane (1912-2006) 'was leading French dancer and choreographer, and dance teacher'.

³⁷ FARNHAM, Alice. «Not just a cute girl on the podium: how to get more women conducting». *The Guardian*, London, 10-09-2015, [online], [accessed: 29-05-2019]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com>.

³⁸ MADDOCKS, F. «Marin Alsop, Conductor...

Career vs Family

Juggling a career and a family can pose particular challenges for women conductors. It takes many years of hard and persistent study to train as a conductor. Followed by many further years of dedication and perseverance, and – in all honesty – a certain amount of luck to break into the profession. Then, as Alsop, has observed:

Just at the moment when your career needs a push, you need to figure out, “Am I going to have a family?” That’s a huge issue for so many women of course, and I have many friends who left it until their 40s – too late.³⁹

Fear of a potentially massively damaging career break has influenced many women conductors to remain childless. A notable exception to this is Simone Young, who has two daughters, and who is well known for having continued to conduct whilst pregnant, including directing the Vienna State Opera in 1997 one month before giving birth. Although Young prefers not to discuss gender, claiming that ‘it’s a topic I try not to think about very much because it’s essentially

irrelevant to my work.’⁴⁰ In an interview given to the Australian newspaper *The Sunday Morning Herald* in 2015, she conceded that, as a woman at the top of the conducting profession, ‘unfortunately yes, I’m still one of the odd ones out. There are a couple of us now but we’re really few and far between.’⁴¹ High-flying women conductors who are also mothers are even fewer and further between.

For those women conductors who are also mothers, there is also the difficult reality that conducting, of course, is very far from being the world’s most family-friendly profession! Conductors have to work long hours, with a lot of work taking place at night; the job also often demands a lot of travel, with lots of time being spent away from home. It is also an advantage for conductors to be able to move in order to take up a better position elsewhere (including possibly another country), even if this means disrupting children’s schooling and/or a partner’s career. Given that in the vast majority of countries throughout the world the majority of childcare still falls to women, these are not inconsiderable challenges for women conductors who also have families.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ TAYLOR, Andrew. «Conductor Simone Young: Still The Odd One Out». *The Sunday Morning Herald*, Glasgow, 14-08-2015, [online], [accessed: 30-06-2019]. Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au>. Despite claiming that gender is irrelevant to her work, Young has achieved a number of significant firsts for women conductors including becoming the first to conduct the Vienna State Opera in 1993, the first to conduct the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in 2005, and the first to conduct Wagner’s Ring cycle in its entirety.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

This has, in fact, led to plenty of people assuming that women conductors who have families just won't be able to combine the two. As Petrenko expounded upon in his now notorious comments on women conductors given to *Aftenposten* in 2013: 'When women have families, it becomes difficult to be as dedicated as is demanded in the business.'⁴² The real problem here is Petrenko's casual assumption that having a family necessarily means that women conductors will become less dedicated. The issue is often not one of sufficient dedication, but actually often one of being able to muster sufficient support to continue to pursue a conducting career when faced with what we might refer to as considerable 'practical' or 'domestic' issues.

Leading female dance band leader Mary Hamer (1904-1992) – who led one of the UK's most successful dance bands active in interwar Britain, Mrs Wilf Hamer and her Band⁴³ – highlighted these domestic issues in particular in an interview which she gave about her career to the BBC in the 1980s. She was in an especially apt position to be able to comment on this, as, when she became band leader, she was recently widowed and mother to three young boys:

All three boys were under four. The baby was only two weeks old when they took his dad away. I must admit I enjoyed the job. It was hard, it was very hard – late nights. The domestic side of my life was very difficult. It was very awkward having three children under five.⁴⁴

Mary Hamer solved this problem by hiring a nanny. Her solution further highlights the domestic issues for women conductors with families, however, as the ability to pursue fully a career often rests on an individual woman's access to sufficient child care and home support, and also the financial means to be able to underpin this.

An Apparent Lack of Role Models

As we've already considered, although there are – and always have been – lots of women conductors, the fact that the top levels of the profession remain very much male dominated can be very off-putting for women considering pursuing conducting professionally, as it can appear – when confronted by an array of men in suits standing on the podiums of the majority of the world's leading orchestras – that there is a lack of female role models. As Edwards

⁴² HIGGINS, Charlotte. «Male conductors are...

⁴³ Mary Hamer was a dance band leader, pianist, and ballroom dancer. Her band (Mrs Wilf Hamer and her Band) was the resident house band of the Grafton Rooms in Liverpool, one of the most successful and well-known ballrooms of interwar Britain.

⁴⁴ Mary Hamer, Interview with BBC Radio Merseyside (1980s); cited from JENKINS, Tricia. *'Let's Go Dancing': Dance Band Memories of 1930s Liverpool*. Liverpool, Institute of Popular Music/University of Liverpool Press, 1994, p. 41.

has observed, 'A mentor is an essential ingredient for a conductor's success and while some women (Comet, Young, Alsop, and Manson, for example)⁴⁵ have had male mentors (Slatkin, Barenboim, Bernstein, and Abbado respectively), the lack of active women role models has been a liability.⁴⁶

This apparent lack of female role models was a particular issue for the older generation of women conductors who were training in the second half of the twentieth century. As is well known, throughout the later nineteenth century and up until the time of the Second World War there were many all-woman orchestras. These created opportunities for women conductors, as most of these all-woman orchestras were led (and often, indeed, founded) by women conductors. The majority of these all-woman orchestras, which flourished across Europe and North America disbanded, however, around the time of the Second World War, when the compulsory military conscription of men opened up positions for women in the previously all-male orchestras. The loss of so many members, whether to the male orchestras or to war work, meant that most of the all-woman orchestras disbanded. Very few re-grouped after the war. Although the opening up of desks in prestigious previously all-male orchestras provided opportunities for female orchestral musicians, this ironically

also led to the withdrawal of them for women conductors, who lost the possibility of working with all-woman orchestras. This meant that, until a new generation of women conductors – such as Jane Glover, Marin Alsop, and JoAnn Faletta – began to emerge on the podium in the final decades of the twentieth century, young women lacked visible female role models.

Although this might appear a very grim picture of the issues which women conductors face that make it difficult for them to succeed on the podium on an equal footing to their male peers, it is undeniable that many women – both now and in the past – have succeeded as professional conductors. The remainder of this article considers the various strategies which women conductors have adopted to overcome the issues which they face in the profession.

Strategies

All-Woman Orchestras

Firstly, women conductors – and also women instrumentalists – have created both performance platforms and safe spaces for themselves by creating their own all-woman ensembles. The expansion of music conservatoire education throughout both Europe and North America in the later nineteenth century led to a subsequent

⁴⁵ Catherine Comet (b.1944) and Anne Manson (b.1961).

⁴⁶ EDWARDS, J. M. «Women on the...», p. 234.

increase in the number of professionally trained female instrumentalists. The vast majority of contemporary professional orchestras, with few exceptions, however, excluded women players. The first all-woman orchestras were formed as a direct reaction to this, and to provide highly talented female instrumentalists with their own ensembles. Josephine Amann-Weinlich's Wiener Damenorchester, which was formed in Vienna in 1867, was the first all-woman orchestra active in Europe. The Los Angeles Women's Orchestra, founded in 1893, meanwhile, became the first North American all-woman orchestra. In common with the Wiener Damenorchester, the majority of the all-woman orchestras of the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries were founded and led by female conductors. Between the later nineteenth century and the Second World War dozens of all-woman orchestras functioned all over Europe (particularly in the German-speaking parts of Europe) and Northern America. These ensembles not only afforded opportunities to both women instrumentalists and conductors, but also

created safe spaces for them to perform within.⁴⁷

Dress

Dress has become a key strategy for many women conductors. As women on the podium (unless they are hidden in the pit, as in the case of opera conductors) very much become a visual display to their audience – literally making spectacles of themselves – choices around dress become urgent and conscious. Evrard's autobiography, *Regards sur mon passé*, provides a fascinating insight into just how charged this decision around dress can be for a woman conductor:

Masculine clothes would only increase the mocking hostility from the representatives of the strong sex. I remember a question posed by the press at the time of my début. What should be the dress of a woman on the conductor's podium? Will she have a slightly more masculine outfit? Or will she have her back bare? Questions quickly resolved by me, having no need to equip myself with masculine attributes, trying only to conserve femininity, within simplicity.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Founded in 2014, Ensemble Zohra, the Afghan Women's Orchestra represents a modern-day example of women coming together to form their own all-woman orchestra and safe performance space. On Ensemble Zohra, see «Ensemble Zohra Afghan Women's Orchestra». Afghanistan National Institute of Music [online], [accessed 01-07-2019]. Available at: <https://www.anim-music.org>.

⁴⁸ *'Un vêtement de tendance masculine ne ferait qu'accroître moqueuse des représentants du sexe fort. Et je me souviens d'une question posée par la presse lors de mes débuts. Quelle doit être la tenue d'une femme au pupitre? Serait-elle en un costume un peu plus masculine? Ou aurait-elle le dos nu? Questions vite résolues pour moi, n'ayant nullement éprouvé le besoin de me munir d'attributs masculins, essayent seulement de conserver la féminité, dans la simplicité.'* EVRARD, Jane. «Regards sur mon passé». Unpublished Autobiography. Paris, 1975, p. 4. Evrard-Poulet Archives. My own English translation from the French.

Evrard's reference to the press here directly evokes the male gaze of empowered critics, which, as we have already considered, can be a particular issue for women conductors. Her comment on the 'mocking hostility' from the 'strong sex', meanwhile, suggests that she was well aware that, as a women conductor directing a group of other women in front of male critics, she was running the gauntlet before them. As I have commented elsewhere, 'Her [Evrard's] reflections [...] appear to suggest that she consciously embraced the position as a sexual Other on the podium, actually seeking to emphasise her own difference from male conductors through a markedly feminine style of dress.'⁴⁹ Evrard, who was a very beautiful and glamorous woman, choose to appear on the podium in a series of long, elegant evening dresses, with her hair styled and full make-up.

I have previously labelled Evrard's image as 'hyper-feminine', asserting that 'it fully capitalises on and manipulates both physical and artificial characteristics perceived as desirable amongst members of the female sex – beauty, style, and grace'.⁵⁰ This type of hyperfeminine image was very much in vogue amongst female jazz and dance band leaders during the interwar period, who were, of course, active at the same time as Evrard. The American

dance-band leader Ina Ray Hutton, director of the well-known all-woman American dance band the Melodears, who regularly appeared to conduct her band in chic evening dresses with elegant hair and make-up, was an important trend-setter in this respect. These glamorous images were clearly very much influenced by the movie-stars of the age.

Not all women conductors, however, wish to present such a consciously feminised image on the podium. A number, in fact, are well known for adopting a more masculine style of dress. Leginska was an early adopter of this trend. An outspoken feminist, Leginska believed that traditional women's concert dress (i.e. restrictive, bare-shouldered evening dresses) inhibited women artists from fulfilling their full artistic potential as they were very cold and also restricted their natural movements and breathing. As noted above, she had adopted her signature look of a dark suit (jacket and skirt) with white blouse, collar, and cuffs, and 'bobbed' hair for her appearances as a concert pianist as early as 1915. At a time when concert halls were often very cold, this ensemble kept her warm whilst allowing her plenty of arm movement. Leginska declared that this practical attire was 'always the same and always comfortable, so that I can forget my appearance and concentrate on my

⁴⁹ HAMER, L. *Female Composers, Conductors...*, p. 173.

⁵⁰ HAMER, L. «On the Conductor's Podium...», p. 97.

art.⁵¹ She retained this distinctive look for her later work as a conductor in the 1920s. Edwards has asserted that Leginska's concert dress was 'modelled on men's formal wear.'⁵² Appearing on the podium thus allowed Leginska to underline the fact that, not only had she taken what was traditionally a man's place upon the conductor's podium, but that she had also taken his clothes in which to do it.

Apart from possibly increasing a woman conductor's sense of authority on the podium, trouser suits are also very practical and very comfortable. So it is perhaps not surprising that many women conductors choose to conduct in trousers these days. For Alsop, indeed, a black trouser suit – often coupled with a red shirt – has become her signature look. Maddocks, in fact, commented on this when reviewing Alsop's performance as first woman to conduct the BBC's Last Night of the Proms concert in 2013: 'Alsop showed who was wearing the trousers, in this case her usual discreet black suit with a flash of scarlet at the collar and cuffs.'⁵³

Carving Out A Niche/A Unique Selling Point

A number of women conductors – and also bandleaders – have found success through carving out a particular niche for themselves or through exploiting a unique selling point. Evrard's *Orchestre féminin de Paris*, for example, was the only string orchestra active in interwar Paris. Although it was the difficulties which women faced at the time when trying to learn wind and brass instruments (as French women were vigorously discouraged from learning these until well into the twentieth century) which had meant that the orchestra had had to be strings only,⁵⁴ they turned it to their advantage by specialising in the early and modern music repertoires which exist just for string orchestra. The orchestra routinely programmed Baroque string compositions, especially works by Jean-Baptiste Lully, Claude Gervaise, Michel Blavet, André Grétry, and François Couperin. They also premiered new transcriptions of Baroque string works made by the Belgian musicologist Arthur Hoérée, including

⁵¹ BROADBENT, M. and T. *Leginska: Forgotten Genius...*, p. 161. 89.

⁵² EDWARDS, J. M. «Women on the...», p. 223.

⁵³ MADDOCKS, F. «Marin Alsop, Conductor...

⁵⁴ French women were discouraged from learning wind and brass instruments until the mid-twentieth century, as the visible physical effort and the puffing out of the cheeks required to play such instruments was socially considered to be unsightly. They were also discouraged from learning the double bass (due to the instrument's size) and percussion (which was considered masculine). On Adolphe Sax's controversial attempts to encourage women to play his wind and brass instruments in mid-nineteenth-century Paris, see ELLIS, K. «The Fair Sax: Women, Brass-Playing and the Musical Instrument Trade in 1860s Paris». *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 124, 2 (1999), pp. 65-98.

Grétry's *Concerto pour flûte*, Gervaise's *Quatre Danceries*, and François Couperin's *Troisième leçon de ténèbres*. Evrard's Orchestre féminin de Paris also actively programmed modern works for string ensemble, including Albert Roussel's *Sinfonietta* (which was dedicated to Evrard), Marguerite Røesgen-Champion's *Les Danceries* and *Suite pour cordes*, Yvonne Desportes's *Suite de danses*, and Joanquin Rodrigo's *Sarabane lointaine*.⁵⁵

Women-Only Conducting Training Programmes

In recent years, a number of leading, senior female conductors have led or contributed to women-only conducting training programmes, aimed at training and supporting the up-coming generation of young female conductors. A trail-blazer in this, as in so many areas, Alsop set up her Taki Concordia Conducting Fellowship specifically for women in 2002. Currently worth \$7,500 for Fellows and \$5,000 for Associate Fellows, the awards offer talented young women conductors two years of intensive coaching and mentoring

from Alsop.⁵⁶ In 2014, Farnham and Andrea Brown launched a training programme for aspiring women conductors aimed at addressing the lack of women on the podium at Morley College. Since 2016, the Women Conductors programme has found a home at the Royal Philharmonic Society. The programme provides dedicated workshops for emerging and student women conductors throughout the UK.⁵⁷ Now in its fifth year, the programme has inspired aspiring women conductors up and down the UK, and many leading senior, female conductors have contributed workshops to the programme.⁵⁸ Reflecting on the programme's importance, Farnham herself has commented in *The Guardian* newspaper that: 'If we are to encourage more women to become conductors they need both hands-on experience and inspirational role models.'⁵⁹ Beyond enabling young women conductors to meet and be trained by senior, female role models, these training workshops are essential for creating safe places within which student women conductors can practise and refine their skills. As Farnham has further commented:

⁵⁵ HAMER, L. «On the Conductor's Podium...», pp. 86-88.

⁵⁶ On the Taki Concordia Conducting Fellowship, see <https://takiconcordia.org>.

⁵⁷ «Women Conductors». *Alice Farnham - Conductor*, [online], [accessed: 29-05-2019]. Available at: <http://www.alicefarnham.com>.

⁵⁸ «The Story so far». *Royal Philharmonic Society*, [online], [accessed: 03-07-2019]. Available at: <https://royalphilharmonicsociety.org.uk>.

⁵⁹ FARNHAM, A. «Not just a cute girl...

Training to be a conductor is tough, because the real practical experience is so public. Conductors have to spend hours learning scores in private, and a certain amount of work can be done on baton technique. But actually practising your "instrument" (the orchestra) has to be done in front of lots of people. When it goes wrong – which it will – there's no hiding. Are women more reluctant to make mistakes in public than men are? Do they judge themselves, and are they judged by others more harshly? These may be generalisations, but perhaps there's some truth there [...] These workshops offer a safe place to have a go.⁶⁰

A number of similar training programmes – aimed at addressing the persistent gender imbalance evident in conducting by encouraging more women to enter the profession – have emerged in recent years. Prominent examples include the Sorrell Women's Conducting Programme at the Royal Academy of Music (also based in the UK); the Female Conductor Programme at the National Concert Hall, Dublin (in the Republic of Ireland); Dirigent Musik i Väst (in Sweden); and the Hart Institute for Women Conductors at the Dallas Opera (in the USA).

Conclusion

In conclusion, although it is undeniable both that women continue to be under-represented on the conductor's

podium, particularly at the highest level of the profession, and that those who do reach it there continue to face considerable gender-specific issues, not least including a persistent failure to be taken seriously, gendered criticism and sexualisation, and difficulties with balancing the vying demands of family and career. As we have considered, however, there are now leading women conductors active throughout the world. The women-only conducting training programmes which have sprung up in recent years give us particular grounds for hope. Not only do these allow aspiring young women conductors the opportunity to meet and be trained by inspirational role models, but they also provide female conducting students with safe spaces within which to practise and hone their skills. It is very much to be hoped that these women-only conducting training programmes will contribute to, what Alsop referred to in her Last-Night speech at the 2013 BBC Proms as 'a natural progression towards more inclusion in classical music.'⁶¹

The recent wave of appointments of women to positions as music directors or principal conductors of important European and American orchestras also appears to point in this direction. 2016 marked three women conductors taking up principal conductor posts with major

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ ALSOP, Marin. «Last Night...

American and European orchestras: Chinese-American conductor Xian Zhang became musical director of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra; Lithuanian conductor Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla (b.1986) was appointed music director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra; and Finnish conductor Susanna Mälkki (b.1969) became chief conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra. Mexican conductor Alondra de la Parra (b.1980) became music director of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra in 2017 meanwhile. It is to be hoped that these recent appointments signal a profound change.

Also concluded her 2013 Last Night of the Proms speech by appealing to young women to 'believe in yourselves, follow your passion, and never give up, because you will create a future filled with possibility.'⁶² It is to be greatly hoped that the growth in training and mentoring opportunities for aspiring women conductors, and the recent spate of appointments of women to high-profile conducting positions, hint that such a future is within grasp. Although this article has focussed upon women as orchestral conductors, its arguments and conclusions may also be extended to apply to female wind-band leaders.

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⁶² *Ibidem*.