



WOMEN IN
CHORAL CONDUCTING:

A Level Playing Field?

Men vastly outnumber women in orchestral conducting, but choruses tell a different story

BY VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

“**T**he gender issue is insidious and omnipresent,” says Marin Alsop, who began her tenure as music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in 2007, becoming the first female to head a major American orchestra.

American women have also made significant strides elsewhere, such as JoAnn Falletta at the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra. Anne Manson was music director of the Kansas City Symphony from 1999-2003 and in 2004 became the first female to lead an opera at the Salzburg Festival, conducting the all-male Vienna Philharmonic three years before it hired its first female player. Women such as France’s Emmanuelle Haïm

have also enjoyed considerable success in the early music field. But in orchestral conducting, women are still vastly outnumbered by men: Since its creation in 1842, 483 conductors have led the New York Philharmonic, of which only 11 have been women, including Alsop and Xian Zhang, NYP’s associate conductor.

Their predecessors had an even tougher time. Antonia Brico, who in 1930 became the first woman to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic and at the Metropolitan Opera House, battled for each podium appearance. Paul Steindorff, with whom she worked as an assistant while studying liberal arts at the University of California, told her women couldn’t conduct.



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—Betsy Burleigh

But female conductors have always been welcome in the choral world. Fritz Reiner invited Margaret Hillis to create a chorus for the Chicago Symphony in 1957, and she became the first woman to conduct the Chicago Symphony itself. Hillis, who began her career in the 1950s, said that orchestral conducting was actually her first love but she devoted herself to leading choruses largely due to scant orchestral opportunities for women.

Betsy Burleigh—director of the Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh, assistant director of choruses for the Cleveland Orchestra, and coordinator of choral and vocal music at Cleveland State University, where she also directs the University Chorale and University Chorus—speculates that women have always been welcomed in the choral world because generations of musicians grew up with female music teachers. “Therefore, the model of a female leading music at least on some level was already there in society,” she says.

Alsop agrees that there is an “inherent leaning towards women” leading choruses. “I think it’s all about societal comfort levels,” she says. “As a society we are really still not comfortable with women in the highest roles of power. We as human beings are very slow to change. I try to think about watching the news at night; it used to be weird if you saw women anchors but now if you don’t see a woman it’s weird.”

“And that’s what we are conditioned to as far as choruses and singing,” she continues, adding that it’s okay for women to do certain things—“a horrible holdover probably from Victorian times if not earlier”—but in other areas of music, women are much rarer. “There are very few women in bigger brass sections as we are not quite comfortable with it,” Alsop points out.

That conditioning even takes hold in those who fight it. In a 2005 article in *The Guardian*, Alsop recalled boarding a plane and seeing three women inside the cockpit. “My first reaction was ‘Uh-oh,’” she told the

paper, adding that her “reaction was very thought-provoking. I guess I’m as much a victim of societal programming as the next person.”

Opportunities for Entrepreneurs

Greater acceptance of women in choral conducting doesn’t mean equal pay, however: According to a 2005 survey conducted by Chorus America, female choral directors earn on average only 74 percent of their male counterparts, possibly due to the fact many conduct children’s choruses, where the pay is sometimes less. Women choral conductors also reported a slightly higher workload than male respondents.

In the world of choral music there have always been opportunities for entrepreneurs to found their own organizations, points out Amy Kaiser, who in the mid-1990s left a peripatetic life in New York City (where she worked as music director of the Desoff Choirs and the Mannes Chamber Singers) to become director of the Saint Louis Symphony Chorus.

“The conductor-founder is a noble tradition in choral music,” she says. “Some of the best ensembles we have were started by a music director who has gotten the resources together and manages to keep it going for years. If you’re not an entrepreneur it gets harder, because then you have to get hired.” Women conductors in the orchestral field have also created ensembles to launch their careers: Alsop founded Concordia, a chamber group, in 1984; Eve Queler created the Opera Orchestra of New York in 1971; and Alondra de la Parra founded the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas in 2004, for example.

“Academia is a wonderful place with lots of good opportunities,” continues Kaiser, “but unfortunately they [the singers] tend to go out the doors in four years, so if you want something more stable and professional there are few options. The independent choirs are one option, but those positions are highly competitive because there are fewer of them.”

For women hoping to establish careers as choral conductors finding a mentor is crucial, says Elizabeth Shapovalov, who is currently in her last year of a graduate degree in choral conducting at Northwestern University in Chicago, where she leads the University Women’s Chorus. She was lucky to “have wonderful mentors” and urges her colleagues to “get a good mentor you look up to.” It is hard to get advice, she says, adding that it can be a mystery how to get your foot in the door.

Paths to conducting (whether orchestral or choral) vary widely for women and men. Some, such as Alsop (a former violinist) began as instrumentalists. Others specialize in education before focusing on conducting. Many choral conducting doctoral students go straight into teaching. Whatever the chosen path, says Marguerite McCormick, director of the Children’s Chorus of San Antonio, mentoring and networking “are very important, probably more so for women than men.”

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To facilitate networking and mentorships, Joan Catoni Conlon, director of graduate choral research at the University of Colorado at Boulder and Rachel Samet, who conducts the CU Collegiate Chorale, are launching an international database of women choral conductors at www.womeninchoralmusic.org. The League of American Orchestras, meanwhile, recently launched new programs to support women conductors—including grants, mentoring opportunities, and leadership seminars—open to individual members of the League or those who hold staff positions with League member orchestras.

When Children Are Involved

Within the choral conducting arena, women have always been particularly welcomed at children’s choruses, which McCormick says have “kind of become a place for us in the conducting field.” Indeed, Chorus ►

America's 2005 survey revealed that 71 percent of children's choruses are led by women, while 81 percent of professional choruses and 71 percent of volunteer and community choruses have male conductors. Both men and women often conduct several choirs to make ends meet.

McCormick has never experienced any overt discrimination. But she points out that the children's choral field is relatively new in the United States and she sometimes struggles to make sure "that the people we collaborate with realize that these children are capable of artistry and not to be treated with a pat on head."

For aspiring women conductors, she says, "the best advice I would give is to find the best preparation and education that you can, and continue studying and practicing throughout your life. I still go to institutes to learn and improve; the wonderful thing about being in music is that you are never so perfect you can't learn from someone!"

Deborah DeSantis, director of the Colorado Children's Chorale, believes there is "a level playing field for men and women in the choral conducting world." She came from a music education background, teaching elementary school music before taking up the baton at a children's chorus, which, she says is "probably not as common a path for a man as a woman." Many of the larger children's choruses now have male conductors, she adds, stemming from the "feeling that if you want to keep boys in the program you need a male conductor," which she doesn't agree is necessary.

She urges women to take advantage of all opportunities, regardless of the level of their chorus. "It's tempting for a children's choral conductor to think that 'I am just a children's choir director so I can't take advantage of that workshop.' But the art of conducting remains the same. The music



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might be at a different level, but the bottom line is that your job as a conductor is to make the best music that you can, with the instruments you have.

"The one danger that we as women have, which is then confounded if you are director of a children's choir," she continues, "is to underestimate the importance of what you do."

Pearl Shangkuan—a professor of music at Calvin College in Michigan (where she directs the Calvin Alumni Choir and the Calvin Women's Chorale) and chorus-master of the Grand Rapids Symphony—urges young women to take advantage of student discounts and attend conferences and short-term opportunities even if they are in school. "Networking is so important. When one is younger, it's easier to think you know more; when you become older, you realize how much growth you needed to get to where you are."

Shangkuan agrees that the playing field is more level for choral conductors than orchestral conductors, both in terms of training and building a career. There are many opportunities, she says, from working with school-age choirs to volunteer, church, and professional choruses.

Shangkuan, who is the first woman in her current position at Grand Rapids, has encountered what she perceives as sexism, however. She was music director of the Calvin Oratorio Society (a community chorus) for five years until 2003. She recounts that it was difficult for some of the long-time male members of the ensemble to accept her, and adds that she had similar experiences with men when she first began working with the Calvin College Alumni Choir.

"When I said 'here's what we are going to do,' they thought there was some negotiating space. It took time for at least two of my choirs here to get used to singing for a demanding woman conductor." With a male conductor, she adds, they probably wouldn't have tried to negotiate "and would have taken his word." She says being a diminutive Asian American woman may also have affected how they viewed her.

It's Not Just About Gender

Amy Kaiser's diminutive stature (she describes herself as "really short") has also influenced perceptions of her as a conductor. People have sometimes assumed she must lead a children's chorus. "They see children's choruses as a women's field, like teaching kindergarten." It's a very important field, she adds, and an area where women have more opportunities. But Kaiser says she "really always wanted to work with adult professional singers and always kept that in my sight. Those are the harder jobs to find, no question."

She points out that there are many issues apart from gender that enter the conductorial equation: "We are still grappling with the issue of conductors being American versus foreign born, so that's a struggle in addition to being male or female. I do believe that quality is rewarded and musicians want solid technical and musical leadership; they want the confidence of that experience and so do audiences." ►



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As in many professions, women may have a harder time balancing motherhood and conducting. Shangkuan, who has two children (one a special needs child) says that having a family “adds a whole set of complications, but my life is enriched because I have both, although it makes for hairy times. Having children helps me know how to deal with people and how to organize! Time management is the biggest thing I have learned from doing both.”

Those time management skills have proven vital in guiding rehearsals, in which she runs a “tight ship...when dealing with a community or volunteer chorus you only see them once a week. Most of my choirs I inherited and had to really instill discipline in rehearsal time. When dealing with volunteer choruses, one has to motivate the singers, knowing when to push hard and when to dangle a carrot and even when to back off a little. The real fun comes from having a sense of accomplishment in the artistic product and building wonderful musical memories.”

Alsop, who has a son, notes that at a recent press conference in Milan, where she became the first woman to conduct the Filarmonica della Scala during the symphonic season, she was asked whether she likes to cook and what she wears while conducting.

But there was something “oddly refreshing about sitting in a room with a dozen obviously un-politically correct journalists,” she adds. “In America it’s a topic no one will talk about—so it’s repressed. People are not even aware it’s an issue. The women journalists [in Milan] said I can’t be a woman doing these masculine pieces. I felt like saying ‘Put up your dukes lady!’ We really got into talking about it. It’s better to know what you’re dealing with. Then you can have more open conversations.”



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Kaiser says, “of course, sexism is everywhere! Yet it’s hard to pin down.” In the U.K., however, where Alsop has been principal conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra since 2002, she says her gender is a nonissue—perhaps stemming from the fact the country has been run by tough women from Queen Victoria to Margaret Thatcher. “They have a healthy disregard for prejudice; they just want good conductors, they just want you to be the music. Consequently I love working in England. Strong women don’t threaten them at all; it’s not about gender, but whether you’re capable. They are able to assess you as an artist.”

Alsop has always maintained that she never perceived any rejections encountered on her road to success as a result of sexism. “But it’s good to go into it with eyes wide open. For any conductor it’s a tough road and women have to be prepared to accept a high level of scrutiny and questioning... But I am of the belief that if you have the skill set you’ll make it.” ■

Vivien Schweitzer is a Manhattan-based music critic, reporter, and pianist. She regularly contributes classical music reviews and features to The New York Times and also writes about music for The Economist and The Gramophone.



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