

Perspectives on Gender in Conducting

by
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Halldis Rønning is a Norwegian conductor, composer and improviser specialising in modern music and art collaborations. As a guest conductor she has appeared in all of the Norwegian orchestras, professional wind bands and the big contemporary music ensembles as well as being music director of several theatre productions and musical TV productions. She has also worked with major orchestras and ensembles abroad such as the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra and the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra. From 2011 to 2013 she was assistant conductor of the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, a position never before appointed to a woman.

Rønning is especially known for her commitment to new music. She has in recent years gradually moved towards a more creative platform, exploring improvisation with orchestras, composition and collaborative art projects across disciplines. She is interested in expanding the conductor's movements into a more performative role in relation to other art forms.

*The views and opinions expressed in this text are those of the authors.
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The conductor and the composer are perhaps the two most prominent and influential artistic roles in the world of classical music. Our musical cannon, the astonishing musical pieces of art we have selected through history, serve as our very definition of high artistic quality. That cannon is also the foundation of classical music education today.

The historic figures in conducting are the fantastic performers of that cannon, whom we admire and cherish, the artists who shaped our conducting tradition. Such as Toscanini, Furtwängler, Kleiber, Solti, Abbado, Bernstein, Mengelberg, Janson...

This is our tradition.

There is only one problem... They are all white men.

We relate to our tradition at all times, through recordings, music history books and live concert programs. It is only natural that tradition is also a part of our mindset.

If we take a moment to picture the image of a “great” conductor in our minds:

How is that image?

What personal qualities does that conductor have?

What style and appearance?

In what way is that conductor engaging with the orchestra?

In other words; what kind of leadership does that conductor model?

Take a moment to consider how much of what you've imagined has been influenced by our tradition.

The compositional forms of our tradition were mainly developed by white male composers. One could also say that the symphony rules on top as the ultimate form and proof of compositional strength. Could it be that our very definition of a great composition is also coloured by the patriarchal tradition?

Norwegian composer Synne Skouen writes in one of her essays about her profound love of our musical tradition across the entire cannon, yet at the same time she could not help but feel alienated. She describes the feeling of “not being invited in” and of “standing outside the door peering in.” Reading her essay, I was struck by how her personal artistic experiences highlight the extreme gender imbalances throughout our history.

While there have been prominent women composers throughout history who definitely had an important impact on the cultural scene at their time, we know that they also faced extraordinary challenges when compared to their male counterparts. Challenges and limitations that to some extent restricted their space for artistic development and expression. Some of these great composers such as Nadia Boulanger, Ethel Smyth and Clara Schumann (who occasionally substituted for her husband) were also conductors. These artists are to a large extent omitted from history, and the result is that their music is not well known to audiences and performers today.

Positive change towards equality has begun to happen in several parts of our tradition, but this change is happening at different rates in different geographical locations.

We will explore some of the aspects related to gender disparities in conducting which by virtue of artistic connection must include some aspects of composers.

As supplementary to this text, you will find video interviews with Peter Meanwell (Artistic Director of the Borealis Festival for Experimental Music in Bergen, Norway) and Trond Madsen (Artistic Director of the BIT20 Ensemble) at ConductIT's pages.

Referenced in this text is an interview with Alex Taylor (Head of Artistic Planning at the Oslo Philharmonic), with additional material from Sten Cranner, (General Manager and Artistic Director of the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra).

Role Models and Diversity

When I started conducting in the early 1990s there were very few female conductors on the classical orchestral scene. It is important to make this distinction of "orchestral" as there has traditionally been a significantly greater number of female conductors of choirs.

For a young artist, finding one's identity and direction forward is an important process and in this process, role models play an important part. In my experience, there were almost only male role models, and this made me search deeply for certain aspects of the profession. From what to wear, to more substantial matters such as: how do I find a natural power, both physically and in presence in front of the orchestra. How does my natural body language correspond with the conducting technique I am learning?

These matters are important to all conductors regardless of gender. However, how we communicate through body language, words, and presence is also closely linked to our gender and personality. Role models play a significant role in education and recruitment, and since our profession has such a long patriarchal tradition, the increase in prominent female role models is essential on our path towards equality.

It makes the whole difference for a young girl to go to a concert and see a woman conduct the symphony orchestra. She will immediately perceive that this is a possibility! It will encourage many more female music students to take the chance and try to conduct.

When studying conducting in the early 2000s, I was one of two women in the conducting class. At the time we thought we were the beginning of a revolution! But that revolution was yet to happen. After many years of status quo, it was only in the last five to six years that there has been a substantial shift in the paradigm.

The number of female role models internationally has increased drastically with several recent appointments to major roles in the world-leading orchestras being women. This has had a big impact on the world of classical music.

I would like to highlight some of these great female conductors that are important role models today so as to widen our perspectives of conducting and conductors. I urge you to check them out.

[Marin Alsop](#) has had an international conducting career since the 1980s and has been a great inspiration for female conductors all over the world. She was one of the first female conductors to enjoy international recognition, and has also encouraged female conductors through masterclasses, taught courses and established a learning network exclusively for women at the beginning of their conducting career.

[Alondra de la Parra](#) has enjoyed great success in the last decade. As an alumnus of Venezuela's *El Sistema* training program, she has contributed to enrich the orchestral cannon by introducing symphonic works from her Latin American and Mexican heritage.

[Mirga Gražinyte-Tyla](#), is the charismatic, Lithuanian, Osborn Music Director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. She was previously the Music Director of the Salzburger Landestheater from 2015 until 2017 and enjoys an exciting international career.

[Susanna Mälki](#) heralds from Finland and has a long career that engages with a broad range of repertoire. She has done important work on the contemporary music scene and was appointed as Chief Conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra in 2016.

[Karina Canellakis](#), a brilliant interpreter and musical leader, is Chief Conductor of the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra (2019/20).

The above represents a selection of exciting appointments that represents a much-needed change in the attitude towards women conductors.

Alex Taylor (Head of Artistic Planning at the Oslo Philharmonic) emphasises the importance of these new appointments because these are orchestras that the classical music field looks to. He even claims that "we are now at a point where we barely speak of gender when it comes to conductors, we just speak of conductors."

But even if there has been a positive development, the starting point was so uneven that inequality is still the status quo as we speak. Furthermore, in order to achieve inclusiveness and diversity in our field, we need role models of people belonging to other cultural backgrounds, races, as well as representatives from the LGBTQ+ community. With a diverse group of role models, the space for artistic expression will widen and the next generation will be enriched by it.

Quotas

Gender quotas are used to address inequalities and to make progress towards equality. It has already been successfully used by a number of organisations, including within arts and music organisations to ensure a certain balance and inclusiveness. In Norwegian law, the use of “moderate quotas” is used in the case of severe imbalance. This allows an organisation to select a minority representative when there are two candidates with equal qualifications. In my home country of Norway, this is the only legal use of quotas.

At international conferences on gender inequality that I have attended, I have heard prominent female musicians talk about the dreadful feeling of being selected based on their gender. This implies that the selection had not been based on equal qualifications but on gender. In Norway, this process of selection is considered “radical quotas” and is illegal. This feeling might have arisen from our preconceptions of how quota is being executed. However, when carried out in the right way, it is fully legal; it should not lower the quality and should not feel like an insult.

Female conductors have enjoyed a markedly increased amount of popularity in recent years and many male conductors feel threatened by this. One might sometimes hear, “It's not enough to be a good conductor in order to make a career, you must also be a woman!” However, we must remember that the gender imbalance has favoured men throughout classical music's entire history, and opportunities that favour or encourage female conductors only seek to redress that balance. The effect of quotas will eventually lead to more women in the profession, which will mean more conductors and competition, which will, in turn, lead to higher standards of conductors overall.

But why use such a radical tool to create change? There is already progress in addressing these issues in high profile professions such as conducting and composition and there are now in some education institutions more women than men studying to become classical musicians. In time, the conducting scene will even out and there will be a natural equilibrium without the need to engineer this. So why should we be encouraging this natural change to happen quicker?

People of all genders and those in the LGBTQ+ community have certain differences in how we experience living in and perceiving this world, which also extends to how we communicate and express ourselves. The presence of women in conducting and composition enriches the artistic palette. It will give us new perspectives on how art is created and performed. Our perspectives of power and authority might be challenged and it could potentially influence the communication between conductor and orchestra and even conducting technique. Gender balance and inclusiveness is a powerful tool for change.

An additional benefit of quotas is that it forces us to acknowledge and examine the structural mechanics behind this discrimination; structures from a patriarchal tradition that has been

deep-rooted in all areas of our field. For change to happen these issues must be addressed directly. If things continue in the same way progress will be too slow. For real change to happen, everyone in a position of power must have this topic at the front of their mind. Our audience consists of a mix of genders, nationalities, and age groups. Therefore, inclusiveness and diversity with regards to programming and musical leadership are vital in order to engage them all.

There are differences in how far the journey towards equality has advanced in different parts of the world. Sweden is perhaps at the forefront of addressing the issues of gender balance and inclusiveness in their cultural life. Classical music institutions in Sweden have used quotas as a tool to create a better balance for a number of years. Sten Cranner (General Manager and Artistic Director of Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra) speaks of gender balance, equality and inclusiveness as a hot topic in Sweden, particularly in politics and the media. Inclusiveness, equality, and openness is part of their national identity and pride which naturally influence their artistic institutions. Cranner mentions that there is a strong commitment to mirror their society through the orchestra's programming and that the orchestra's benefactors, board and management have a close communication on this topic.

Editions and Recordings

When we consider works by female composers of the past, we find that not only has the composer been neglected, but their manuscripts are poorly maintained. Even the available printed material is, very often, in poor condition, with mistakes and errors that are left uncorrected (unlike the critical editions of their male counterparts).

Consider for a moment the impact of this when trying to rehearse and perform this music. If the score and parts are full of errors and inconsistencies, it would make the rehearsal process a negative experience for all, which might result in the music being perceived as inferior in quality. This is an issue that I have experienced personally when working on the outstanding music of Lili Boulanger.

Alex Taylor (Head of Artistic Planning at Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra) also remarks upon the challenges of obtaining music by female composers. They are not available through the same means as other works. So there is a whole promoting issue as well. He points out that since these pieces have not been performed many times, there has also been little opportunity to revise and correct material through practical experiences.

We still have important work ahead when it comes to producing printed editions of historic works by female composers. Production of critical editions will be an important contribution to the promotion of gender balance in classical music programming.

In Sweden, there is an ongoing project by the Swedish Musical Heritage Society (which can be found at www.levandemusikarv.se). The society aims to produce critical editions of all Swedish composers; female composers are included in this project which means that one will be able to find well-produced critical editions by Swedish female composers that are easily accessible to musicians and orchestras. Taylor also points out that there are very few recordings of pieces by female composers of the past. Leading orchestras and performers need to record these pieces so that there are high-quality reference recordings of these women's works. In response to this issue, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra with conductor Johannes Gustavsson will soon release a recording featuring music by Swedish female composers.

Programming

When it comes to repertoire there is a large gap between men and women that get programmed in concerts. Here are some statistics which serve to demonstrate this point:

- In Denmark, 3,6 % of the music performed by orchestras in the concert seasons that ran from 2014 to 2017 was composed by women (Dansk Komponistforening, 2018).
- In Norway, 5 % of the music performed during the concert seasons that ran from 2015 to 2019 was composed by women (Norsk komponistforening, 2019)
- In Sweden, 6,22 % of the music performed during the concert seasons that ran from 2015 to 2018 was composed by women (FST, KVASt, 2019).

All genders can be considered equally creative. Since the classical music scene has been dominated by white men for centuries, it means that women's creativity has found other channels of expression. This could be other genres, other fora or instrumentations than the traditional symphony orchestra.

If one wants to include those female voices in the orchestral world of today, the research process will be different and more demanding. One might have to look other places than the most conventional ones to find these women and one would potentially have to adjust the conventional platforms to meet their art and music.

Equality in repertoire is linked to how we relate to music history and to who has the power to define the context of the artistic works. A key point in this process will be how inviting and open the institutions are to alternative artistic ideas and means of expression. Variety in expressions and cross-genre collaborations seem to be a value in itself for several festival and ensemble leaders in the contemporary scene. That was made very clear when I conducted interviews with Peter Meanwell from the Borealis Festival and Trond Madsen from the BIT20 Ensemble, both in

Bergen, Norway. They both talk about the artistic variety they get from a good gender balance which makes the programmes better and more interesting. You can find the video interviews on ConductIT's pages.

In my conversation with Taylor, I asked him where he thought we will be with regards to repertoire planning for symphony orchestras 20 years from now. He hopes that by then our concerts will feature about 60% male and 40% female composers, but fears that this might still be too hopeful of that expectation.

Since the old tradition is such an important part of the classical music scene, the inequalities of the past might still join us in the future. Unless;

- We play more contemporary music on the big stages. We have to trust our audience and pay attention to how we present contemporary music to them.
- We need to look outside the traditional mediums of composition to make variation in creative expressions possible. That can mean countless interesting artistic contributions from women from the past and of today.
- We must not only maintain a strong focus on the recruitment of new female voices in the composition field but also perform pieces that have been written by female composers throughout history.

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