

Where Are The Great Women Conductors?

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Her most recent recording (Centaur CD 2273) was released in late 1996.*

In the spring of 1993 I was fortunate to travel to Russia to participate in the St. Petersburg Spring Music Festival. Concluding the ten-day blitz of concerts and scholarly papers was a program of orchestral music by Prigozhin, Rachmaninoff, Banchikov and Ravel performed by the St. Petersburg Philharmonia. The conductor was a woman, Victoria Zhadiko, a young Ukrainian who had been a winner of the Tchaikovsky Competition and who conducted this difficult program with stunning skill and panache. She was the only woman conductor on stage during the ten-day festival. Her evident mastery made me wonder why such gifted women have so little visibility and why there are no women conducting the major orchestras of the world. Perhaps Ethel Smyth's very British retort to those who wonder why there aren't great women composers applies to conductors as well. "There are no great women composers," she said, "for the same reason that there are no female Nelsons!"ⁱ

As a woman composer, I have experienced the dearth of opportunities that Smyth implies is the lot of women in the male-dominated field of composition. Perhaps the only other field in music that seems comparably difficult for women is conducting. Admittedly, women conductors are beginning to overcome the prejudices against them; one needs only to glance at the list of women conductors in *Women in Music: An Encyclopedic Biobibliography* by Hixon and Hennesseeⁱⁱ to notice that there are many more women finding opportunities in this difficult field in the twentieth century than in the preceding ones. Only a handful are listed for the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries; more show up in the nineteenth century; thereafter, women conductors are sufficiently numerous to be listed by country. But there are still only a precious few who ever have the opportunity to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic or Paris Opera, let alone aspire to becoming music director of such organizations.

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If anyone qualifies as a "female Nelson" it is surely conductor, composer, feminist and author Ethel Smyth (1858-1944), the outspoken source quoted above. She is a nineteenth century-born woman who beat the odds, making a significant impact on the world of music, especially in her native England where she defied stereotypes of the ladylike amateur musician both in her life and in her work. Smyth was sufficiently daring and privileged to seize opportunities for training and experience. As a student at the Leipzig Conservatory, she moved in musical circles that included Brahms, Clara and Robert Schumann, and fellow students Grieg, Dvorak and Tchaikovsky. In 1902 she had her first chance to conduct when her opera, *Der Wald*, was being performed in Berlin and the regular conductor became ill. By 1910 she was well known, particularly for her operas, which were praised as "in masculine style, broad and virile," and for her *Mass in D* that was discussed by Tovey in his famous *Essays in Musical Analysis*. However, at the peak of her career, Smyth abandoned music for two years to devote her considerable energies to women's suffrage, writing the *March of the Women* that was sung at rallies and meetings, befriending suffrage leader Emmeline Pankhurst, and even serving two months in prison where she is said to have conducted the *March* with a toothbrush. Famous in her own

time for the ten books she wrote late in life, we read her essays advocating equal rights for women musicians with special interest in our time.ⁱⁱⁱ

Although Venezuelan pianist and composer Teresa Carreño (1853-1917) also conducted as did French composer Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944), no women born in the nineteenth century have made their way into the history books principally as conductors. Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979) is no exception in this regard, since she is primarily known as an extraordinary teacher. However, her appearance in 1937 conducting an entire performance of the Royal Philharmonic Society in London was a first for a woman. Also a first was her leading of the English premiere of the Fauré *Requiem*, a work she conducted many times. Other significant conducting appearances followed in New York and elsewhere. In 1937 she also conducted the first recordings ever made of the music of Monteverdi and conducted the Paris Philharmonic Orchestra and chorus in a recording of the Brahms *Liebeslieder* waltzes.^{iv} Perhaps Aaron Copland reveals more of himself than of Boulanger when he reminisces: "Curiously enough I have no memory of discussing the role of women in music with Mademoiselle."^v Nonetheless, Mademoiselle made her presence felt well beyond the circle of young composers she trained so thoroughly.

Just as many male composers have conducted their own music, many twentieth century women conduct their own works too. Scottish composer Thea Musgrave (b. 1928) has conducted the Scottish National Orchestra and Barry Tuckwell in a recording of her *Horn Concerto*, and French composer Betsy Jolas (b. 1926) has likewise conducted her music on occasion as have Cuban composer Odaline de la Martinez (b. 1949), and the English composers Ruth Gipps (b. 1921) and Nicola LeFanu (b. 1947). Others, such as Cuban composer Tania León (b. 1943), and Canadian composer Linda Bouchard (b. 1957), have managed active careers conducting both their own and other music.^{vi}

In the twentieth century, just as specialization has come to other fields, so conducting has become the province of musicians who may not be active as either instrumental performers or as composers. Antonia Brico (1902-1989) was born in the Netherlands and made a glittering debut conducting the Berlin Philharmonic in 1920. Like many conductors, both male and female, who lacked an "instrument," she later founded and conducted the New York Women's Orchestra in 1935 (later called the Brico Symphony Orchestra), one of the many women's orchestras established to give women instrumentalists and conductors the opportunities denied them by other orchestras.^{vii} In 1968 Eve Queler (b. 1936) founded the Opera Orchestra of New York, a group which specialized in concert versions of operas. She was also the first woman (1977) to conduct a recording of a complete opera, Massenet's *Le Cid*.^{viii} 1977 must have been a good year; in that year Swiss-born conductor Sylvia Caduff (b. 1938), a protégée of Herbert von Karajan, became the first woman to be a general music director in Europe when she was appointed to that post by the Orchestra of the City of Solingen in Germany.^{ix}

Twenty years earlier, Sarah Caldwell (b. 1924) had defied all the odds by founding a full-fledged opera company in Boston, a truly dramatic case of instrument building. She had the musical experience for such a venture since she trained under Koussevitsky and apprenticed for eleven years under Boris Goldovsky with the New England Opera Company. Caldwell is best known for conducting highly acclaimed performances of rarely performed operas, often serving as stage designer and director as well as conductor. Among her many achievements are conducting her company in the American premieres of both Arnold Schönberg's *Moses and Aron* and Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, and conducting a performance in Beijing in 1981 of *La Traviata* in Chinese.^x

Like Brico and Caldwell, Margaret Hillis (b. 1921) had to build her own instrument by founding her own performing groups, at least initially, in order to create conducting

opportunities for herself and gain experience. She chose the more readily accepted female career-path of choral conducting on the advice of a mentor who suggested that as a woman, she might never break into the world of symphonic conducting. Hillis, who studied with Robert Shaw at the Juilliard School of Music in New York, founded the Tanglewood Alumni Chorus and then—in 1951—established the Concert Choir and Orchestra of New York. In 1954 Fritz Reiner asked her to recruit a chorus to sing with the Chicago Symphony, which she did, becoming founder and director of the Chicago Symphony Chorus for many years. During this period she won three Grammy Awards for Best Choral Performance: for the 1977 recording of the Verdi *Requiem*, the 1978 recording of Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, and the 1979 recording of the Brahms *Requiem*.^{xi} Her choice of choral conducting over symphonic conducting was a practical one based on the greater possibility of breaking through the "glass ceiling" in choral work than in symphonic music. Nonetheless, Hillis continued with orchestral performances as a guest conductor throughout her career.

Some of the women conducting today combine career paths, creating new ensembles, conducting women's groups or organizations devoted to the performance of women's music, and directing mixed choruses and orchestras. Israeli conductor Dalia Atlas (b. 1935) is founder and conductor of the Israel Pro Musica Soloists Orchestra and the Symphony Orchestra and Choir of the Technion University where she is on the faculty.^{xii} Even before earning her doctorate in conducting from Juilliard, JoAnn Falletta (b. 1954) won the Stokowski Conducting Competition of the American Symphony Orchestra in 1985. In addition she founded the Queen's Philharmonic, was artistic director of the Women's Philharmonic in San Francisco from 1986-1996, is conductor of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra and the Long Beach Symphony, and guest conducts in the U.S., Europe, China and Mexico.^{xiii} She says that women "are not permitted the stereotypical conductor's role, throwing tantrums and screaming...[but] are expected to be more nurturing..."^{xiv} Other women making successful conducting careers in the U.S. include Victoria Bond, Kate Tamarkin, Gisele Ben-Dor, and Catherine Comet, a former student of Nadia Boulanger. In Europe, Judith Somogi was First Kapellmeister at the Frankfurt Opera from 1981-1987, and in the far east, Moscow-trained conductor, Zheng Xilaoying, has directed the Central Opera Theater in Beijing.^{xv}

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The women who have transcended prejudice and forged careers in conducting have had considerable grit and stamina: they are truly musical pioneers. Among them we have found women like Ethel Smyth who conducted as part of a wide-ranging career in music, principally in composition. A few were primarily instrumentalists such as Teresa Carreño. Many others were teachers like Nadia Boulanger or more recently Dalia Atlas. The smallest and perhaps most remarkable group is the one of single-minded women determined to have careers solely in conducting. These women have trained with the best, collected degrees from prestigious institutions, won international competitions, enjoyed brilliant reviews, yet received few enough invitations to guest conduct and even fewer as principal conductor. Still they have persevered, founding choruses, orchestras, and even opera companies like Caldwell in order to have an "instrument." In terms of soldiering on in difficult circumstances, surely they are "female Nelsons."

End notes

ⁱThe Nelson that Smyth refers to is the Lord Nelson of Haydn's famous mass and the British admiral who defeated Napoleon at Trafalgar in 1805.

Ethel Smyth, "Female Pipings in Eden" in *Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Carol Neuls-Bates, ed. ((Boston; Northeastern University Press, 1996), p. 280.

ⁱⁱDonald L. Hixon and Don Hennessee, comps., *Women in Music: A Bio-Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975), vol. 2, pp. 1321-27.

ⁱⁱⁱJane A. Bernstein, "'Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song!': Dame Ethel Smyth and the Changing Role of the British Woman Composer" in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* by Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 304-324.

^{iv}John L. Holmes, *Conductors on Record* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 82.

^vAaron Copland, "Nadia Boulanger: An Affectionate Portrait," in *Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Carol Neuls-Bates, ed., p. 242.

^{vi}Hixon and Hennessee, vol. 2, pp. 1321-27.

^{vii}Holmes, p. 84.

^{viii}Kay Lawson, "Women Conductors" in *The Musical Woman: An International Perspective* ed. by Judith Lang Zaimont (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983-), vol. 3, p. 212.

^{ix}Jane Weiner Le Page, *Women Composers, Conductors, and Musicians of the Twentieth Century* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), vol. 3, pp. 56-66.

^x*Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 39-57.

^{xi}Lawson, vol. 3, pp. 199-202.

^{xii}Le Page, vol. 2, pp. 23-38.

^{xiii}Program notes for the 1994-95 Season of the Women's Philharmonic.

^{xiv}Marion S. Jacobson, "JoAnn Falletta: Leading Orchestras Across the Country with a Commitment to Contemporary Music" in *AWC News/Forum*, vol. 8, Nos. 1 & 2, pp. 3-4.

^{xv}Lawson, vol. 3, p. 214.